

"Empty Vessel: The Bridge Between Viewpoints and Action Theater"

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In this paper I propose that both the Viewpoints and Action Theater techniques provide structures which effectively enable the performer to free her/himself from habitual ways of being, in order to become more conscious and present in performance work, thus increasing versatility and responsiveness on stage. Secondly, I propose that these techniques could be used effectively—side by side—within university curricula for both dance and theatre departments, in order to train students to work effectively with all the tools of mind and body—namely sound, movement and imagination.

History and Context:

The Viewpoints

The Viewpoints were first conceived by Mary Overlie, a dancer/choreographer who was greatly influenced by the Judson Dance Theater. The work of developing the Viewpoints was begun in the 1970's, by Overlie, and then more formally developed at NYU/Tisch School of the Arts'

Department of Drama (Experimental Theatre Wing), and yet further developed by Anne Bogart, Artistic Director of SITI Co.

The Viewpoints "were founded on the idea that there are no systems of art-making," says Wendell Beavers, long time director of ETW, co-creator and master teacher of the Viewpoints (Drukman, 33).

Overlie's original six viewpoints included: *Space, Time, Shape, Movement, Story and Emotion*. According to Overlie:

"The Viewpoints are a horizontal approach...without hierarchy. I refer to the vertical approach as being one in which one Viewpoint takes precedence over another or the others. In theater there has been a traditional vertical idea that story is more important than space, for instance. In reality, we may get the end of a personal story before we get the beginning and an end later. This way of looking at things opens up our ability to see reality more honestly and playfully (Overlie, Vertical History of Viewpoints)."

From Mary Overlie's original six Viewpoints, Anne Bogart (artistic director of SITI company) further developed the Viewpoints for the theatre. Her nine Viewpoints are broken down to include:

Viewpoints of Time: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition.

And

Viewpoints of Space: shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, topography (landscape/ floor pattern, design).

According to Tina Landau, long-time collaborator of Anne Bogart's:

"The Viewpoints are a philosophy of movement translated into a technique for: 1) training performers and 2) creating movement on stage. The Viewpoints are the set of names given to certain basic principles of movement; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens or works on stage. The Viewpoints are points of awareness that a performer or creator has while working (Landau, 20)."

In Bogart's rehearsal process they are used as a:

"structure for practice, for keeping specific 'muscles' in shape, alert, flexible. The actor, in the case of the Viewpoints, exercises awareness (awareness of the different Viewpoints), the ability to listen with the entire body, and a sense of spontaneity and extremity. The actor trains

to take in and use everything that occurs around her, and to not exclude anything because she thinks she knows what is good or bad, useful or not. The Viewpoints enable performers to find possibility larger than what they first imagine- whether it is in creating a shape they didn't know their body was capable of or in discovering a range of unexpected gestures for a character. By using the Viewpoints fully, we eliminate the actor's ability to state, 'my character would never do that.' (Landau, 24)."

Action Theater

While Overlie, Beavers, and others were developing the Viewpoints approach to Time and Space (New York), Ruth Zaporah, was on the opposite coast (Berkeley, California), creating Action Theater. Zaporah's Action Theater, is a form of improvisational work, which considers everything to be movement. Sound, just like the body moving through space, is movement. Sound, movement, and the mind are explored equally, as tools that can set the imagination free. Fundamentally, Action Theater includes all of the Viewpoints, while simultaneously developing relationship between physical movement, sound (vocalization), language (narrative) and content (or imagination).

Of the form, Ruth Zaporah states:

"The Action Theater exercises don't set up life-like 'scenes'. Instead, life-like and non-life-like situations arise through physical explorations within forms and frameworks. The forms are open, contentless, and address how we organize specific aspects of behavior or experience. They invite us to inhabit our bodies, deconstruct our normal behavior and, then, notice the details of what we've got. This process frees us from habitual perceptions and behaviors. We become more conscious of our moment-to-moment thoughts, sensations, emotions, feelings, and fantasies, in addition to the outer world we inhabit. This practice turns the mind inside out. Because we place the activity of the mind into action, we can observe its ways, examine who we are and how we operate. We can consciously redirect our functioning (Zaporah, xxi).

Within and through the Action Theater forms one examines one's own perceptions, and responses to situations, bringing more awareness to the judgmental mind and thereby freeing it. The exercises specifically "isolate the components of action - time, space, shape and energy -- so

they can be examined, experienced, and altered in order to expand the expressive palette." (www.actiontheater.com)."

Intersections/ What do these two forms share?

Viewpoints and Action Theater use much of the same language to break down the elements of theater work, but do it slightly differently. I will state here, that while Bogart has formalized the Viewpoints terminology and clearly categorized the elements of Time and Space, Zaporah is continually evolving the language she uses in Action Theater, so that placing Action Theater in categories is a very difficult thing to do. Below, I list the Viewpoints and then the way that Action Theater orients to these same Viewpoints, from both the way Zaporah has labeled the elements of Action Theater, and my own understanding of how the rest of her terminology would fit in these categories.

Viewpoints: (Elements of Time and Space)

Time: *tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition*

Space: *shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, topography (landscape/ floor pattern, design).*

Action Theater: (Elements of Action)

Time: *tempo, duration, repetition*

Space: *spatial relationship, pause (w/in movement
or sound)*

Shape: *architecture(of space), floor pattern, shape (of
body(s) in space; of sound)*

The following are additional aspects of Action Theater:

Energy: *dynamic or quality (of sound/movement),
relationship (kinesthetic response—is not
referred to in AT, but is called 'relationship')*

Content: *All of the above*

Process: *Shift, Transform, develop (ways of evolving
content/material)*

They both share a focus on the following as well:

Awareness:

*Recognition that the performer's body needs to be an open
channel, available for spontaneous response.*

Relationship:

*between all the elements of Time and Space, and the other
players.*

There was a very clear drive and desire in the voices of the originators of these forms to create presence in the bodies of performers, to understand and capably work with all the elements of Time and Space, and to break habitual patterns of behavior.

Interestingly, both Zaporah and Overlie, began their work as dancers.

Each understood kinesthetic awareness, and the relationship between inner awareness and outer awareness, inner space (space inside the body) and outer space (space outside of the body), which is essential to bodies moving through space.

Each understood the relationship between time and space, and the many layers of possibility there for every performer.

Each was creating within the postmodernist movement, in which every artist was breaking apart form, rather than creating it, and yet each created her own form, which sought to address formlessness.

Zaporah found 'a voice' through dance and appreciated dance's lack of attachment to concept. However, she became bored by dance in the 1970's she began experimenting with

"speech, character, vocalization of feeling", from whence came Action Theater. And though she left 'dance' behind, so to speak, I believe she led all dance and theater makers forward in her connections and understanding that all is movement, including speech and sound:

"I sense the body as no different than the space it is moving in and the sound it is moving to. If I'm improvising with a partner, each of our bodies becomes an extension of the other. I perceive her body as no other than my own; her voice, my voice; her story, mine. If I'm dancing in a public dance hall or a private party, I merge into the larger body of sounds, colors, heat, sweat, motion. I'm not alone in this. Dance has served through time and cultures as a collecting force, a softening of the hard edges that separate one person from another, an activity of communication (Zaporah, MRJ, 29)."

In a distinctly different approach, Mary Overlie, who began experimenting with her formulations of dance and movement in the 1960's and '70's also found the interconnection of all elements of time and space:

"I approach dance from the outside, viewing it as a whole, then separating it into its basic components. I have gone

through a process of isolating the components of dance in order to understand the artistic field that dance encompasses. In creating my work, I hold the view that time, space, the various kinds of body language, linear sequences, emotional content, line and form are intrinsically equal to each other. There is no reason why dances must always be dominated by a time concept or a spatial idea. By giving equal weight to all the elements of dance, I have expanded my possibilities in terms of the material and the subject matter (Overlie, 31)."

Training for the present moment.

Zaporah and Overlie were engaged in this common practice, and simultaneously developing similar structures from which to teach this awareness of the elements of Time and Space in the theater.

While I won't go into details about the actual structures and exercises in each form here, we will demonstrate an exercise from each form in a moment.

Pathways / Where do they diverge?

Movement and Sound; Relationship

At this juncture, Action Theater truly weights sound with movement equally, in it's explorations of both-

simultaneously and separately, while the Viewpoints innovators, are really still developing the 'Vocal Viewpoints', which at this stage, are not really integrated with the physical 'Viewpoints'. Anne Bogart, Tina Landau, and the SITI co, are working with the 'Vocal Viewpoints' by exploring the shape, tempo, gesture, architecture, repetition, duration and kinesthetic response of sound.

So, while the Viewpoints work with Time and Space in relationship to movement, Zaporah's work adds the element of sound. She works with vocalization, and then language, all the while working in the larger container of content (which develops both abstractly and linearly, through the relationship between movement/sound/language).

Also, while the Viewpoints address the relationship between the human players (spatially and perceptually), Action Theater continues to develop the emphasis on relationship. This relationship is not only based on kinesthetic response to the movement of other players in the space, or in relation to space itself, but is also in relation to sound (or vocalization), and later—in the progression of the form—to language/text, and still later, to narrative (the vocal and physical expression of text). Finally, there is also

relationship between the individuals and their their personal material, or whatever archetypal material is being played with in the space (story).

Examples of how Action Theater works with all of these elements: the shape of movement and of sound; the duration, tempo, and dynamics of movement and sound; the dynamics/quality of language; the duration of narrative; linear and non-linear narrative (relationship of line/shape to narrative); the relationship to space inside of sound (ie: pause); and the relationship to others in the playing space, the space itself, and the architecture of the space---and all of this within the larger container of 'content'--- which is being created through the composition of movement, sound, language, and spatial relationship.

Imagination vs. Structure (Improvisation vs. Set work)

Ways of working with the mind

Finally, an interesting point of discussion is the goal or end product of each form. Action Theater is strictly an improvisational form, which is about cultivating multi-layered awareness, creativity and technical skill in the performer. The ultimate goal of the

form is improvisational skill or IMAGINATION, the ability to be creative and have a free mind (Interview, 2005).

“Students increase their ability to hold and express emotion, dance with their own poetry and recover lost personal material. Composition, listening and relationship are deconstructed to be reassembled with greater awareness.

Acting from a sense of play, students are encouraged to venture into transpersonal realms, accessing intelligence more encompassing and boundless than their personal experience (www.actiontheater.com).”

While the originators of the Viewpoints had a similar goal, which was essentially to create awareness and an open mind in the performer, the Viewpoints today are used by the SITI company and many other theater companies for the purposes of first honing skills, and secondly setting choreography. There is a slightly formulaic/ formalistic approach to the use of Viewpoints (at least the SITI company's approach) which are for the purpose of creating set material.

Whereas, Action Theater is held by its originator, to be about freeing the mind and becoming a creative human being. The form can be used to develop material which then becomes set theater work, as Zaporah herself has done many times,

and as many of her students use it in this way. I, personally, find it to be very powerful improvisational work, from which to gather structures for set work. However, the form is never taught in this direction. It is- in and of itself- used rigorously for the training of the individual.

While this difference of approach in the two forms, and the difference in the approach to the Viewpoints from it's originators, to Bogart's approach is another paper, unto itself, it is important to note, this fundamental difference in way the forms are being taught and practiced. I believe this is precisely why the Viewpoints, as known and practiced largely today, and Action Theater can compliment one another so greatly.

What do they have to offer one another?

I find the use of the Viewpoints to be fantastic for ensemble work, and to create choreography quickly. Through using the Viewpoints to source movement, the movement created maintains some abstraction within the context of the script itself, which allows more freedom for the performers to fill movement and use time in interesting ways, that don't mime or chase after the text. However, I

find that the lack of emphasis on expression through the rest of the body (face, eyes, and vocal exploration) in the Viewpoints can create (according to my own aesthetic value) a movement landscape that can become overtly pedestrian, and non-emotional (a bit empty at times).

With Action Theater, because of its vocal exploration along with movement, and the specificity of the exercises which hone in on the articulation of each 'viewpoint' with relation to movement and sound, once I am in an open improvisation (including all aspects of time and space)---I feel that there is a lot more room for variety of expression within these improvisations, because of the on-going connection between the physical and vocal. I believe the difficulty for performers who want to create set work, is how to best use the skills developed with Action Theater, to create improvisations that can then be set.

I feel that Viewpoints can help ground Action Theater, because of the way its creators have been using it to develop set work, and Action Theater brings many levels of expansion to the Viewpoints, through its development of vocal expansion and imagination. As a choreographer,

improviser and performer of both improvised and set work, I find extreme value in both forms.

Containers

Let us compare some of the actual exercises each form uses. The structures/ exercises used are what truly define the forms themselves. In both forms each practitioner/ teacher may take a different approach to how to deliver the exercises, including the order of exercises, depending on what seems needed in the playing space, with the particular players, at the time.

However, in both forms, there is a level of attention to space, always, first.

Viewpoints Structures

The exercises I will refer to here were developed by Mary Overlie and Wendell Beavers, over time, and exist mostly in unpublished writings which I have access to through Mr. Beavers.

Let's begin with a list of exercises, which are essentially a progression of ways to work with Space, Time, Story and the Body. Without giving the details of each exercise

here, (most of them are fairly self-explanatory by their titles), I will summarize them in categories.

Space

Taking a Walk in Space

Working with the Eyes

Walking Running Stopping

*These exercises introduce students to general awareness of Space, the working space, themselves in the space, range of eye focus (wide and soft, narrow/pointed and hard), and different actions which move the body through space.

Time

I move you move - duet

Relaxing the Timing Rule/ playing with duet and multiple timing possibilities

*Now, the student is introduced to the intricacies of timing choices, after becoming perceptually aware and tuned in to the space and the other players.

Return to Space (Beavers, Writings on Space)

Solo- working with Space as partner

-including memory (repetition of past events)

Ariel view

Japanese Rock Garden (walking, standing, sitting, lying
down)

Grids and Corridors

Creating group scores

*Students continue working with space, in a solo
exploration, which introduces/ includes the idea of
repetition, or bringing back movements/shapes/images from
previous improvisations, and then are introduced to yet
another facet of space (the ariel view) which then brings
in relationship to audience, and finally—the last three
scores introduce greater complexities within group
improvisations.

Story / working with Image (Beavers, Excerpt from Viewpoint
writing on Story, 2000)

Creating a Spatial Narrative

Creating a shape narrative

Creating a movement narrative

Creating an image narrative

Teaching Progression for the story viewpoint

Establishing Image work of a non progressive nature

Non progressive images Duet Form

Expanding Imagery to include Interpretation of a given
story

*The Story improvisations work with the idea of imagery as story (gathering the story from internal source, rather than creating a product), and keep the storytelling in the movement, and non-linear.

The Viewpoints are a way of looking at things. They are still a very new approach to making theater, and are being established and investigated by many different sources, companies and artists. How each company, artist or educator works with them and develops their own exercises is unique and distinctive to each individual/groups process, needs and goals. However, all stem from the same fundamental approach of establishing awareness of the space, timing possibilities between the movement and players in the space, and stories that evolve through the movement of the bodies in that space.

Anne Bogart and the SITI co., who are most known for their continued development of the technique (from its originators), are in the process of publishing a manual of exercises, which will be available in September 2005.

Action Theater structures:

Now let us take a look at a progression of Action Theater exercises. These exercises originate from Ruth Zaporah's 'The Improvisation of Presence', a book which was written based on a twenty-day training in the fundamental work of the technique. Ms. Zaporah is in the process of writing a secondary manual of further developed Action Theater exercises.

In a recent interview, Ruth Zaporah explained that there are two types of structures she works with in Action Theater.

The first type of exercise works with form: time, space, shape, content, dynamics, floor plan, etc.

The second type works with process/content, or how to create an improvisation, through actions including: shifting, transforming and developing.

The technique works back and forth between these two, form and process, until in the experienced improviser, the two can merge (Interview, 2005).

Here, again, I will demonstrate lists of exercises, as designated by Zaporah in her book, and then summarize the purpose of each sequence.

Day One: Form /Content

On/Off Clothes

Walk/Run/Freeze in Same Scene

Move Same Time/ Freeze Same Time

Move at Different Times

Performance Score: Autobiographies

*The student is introduced to basic concepts of awareness in space, playing with timing, and group dynamics.

Finally, the student is also introduced to language, through a group score, in which four students take turns speaking autobiographically about themselves, one at a time, until interrupted. All movement exercises play with space, timing and dynamics—form. The introduction of language is the introduction to content.

Day two: The Body's Voice

Breath Circle

Sounder/ Mover

All at Once: Sound and Movement

Sound and Movement Diagonal

Performance Score: Sound and Movement Solo

*All exercises deal with the connecting of sound and movement, without yet having to worry about language (and therefore content). Back to more basic, non-intellectual connectedness.

Day three: A Way to Proceed: Body, Imagination, Memory

Falling Leaves/Rock with Movement, Sound and Dialogue

Shape Alphabet

Shape/Shape/Reshape

Director/Actor: Shift with Movement, Sound and Language

Performance Score: Two Up Two Down

*Now the student is introduced to 'modes of change', and ways of working with the mind and imagination. Shift (stop the action and do something else); Transform (change the

action incrementally until it is something else); Develop (continue the action). Working with the basic containers of movement, sound, time and space, these 'modes of change' help the practitioner make more specific choices.

These are only the first three of twenty chapters in the book, but introduce the essential elements and approach of Action Theater.

What would Viewpoint-Action Theater integrated curricula look like?

From my experience with both forms, I feel these two forms could be a very powerful training combination for dance, theater and any performing arts curricula.

I feel that the structure and level of detail the Viewpoints give to Time and Space, could help ground the Action Theater training, and that the great attention to vocality, language, and imagination in the Action Theater training, would lend a beautiful extension to the already thorough investigation of time and space through movement in the Viewpoints.

Here I will include the model of a workshop combining the two techniques:

(Viewpoints will be referred to as VP, and Action Theater as AT)

VP ex. 1—Take a walk in Space: begin walking in space; working with an empty, consciously created space; students discover pathways in space; cultivating neutrality- and naming it (find the neutral body); recognizing origins of impulses (mind) vs. impulses (kinesthetic)

VP ex. 2—The Space Amongst and Between: duet form;
changing location in relationship to another; add timing
rule (I move/ you move); then 'Relax Timing Rule', and play
with timing based on kinesthetic response and relationship;
introduction to composition.

VP ex. 3 - Working with Eyes: finding different kinds of
focus, wide and soft, narrow and hard, and the range in
between; continue on by following the interest of the eyes.

AT ex. 4—Eyes/ Head/ Go: getting more specific with focus
and timing: Eyes take focus on a specific spot, head turns
directly toward that spot, body goes to it; playing with
timing of these focus shifts and duration of the journey
there and the time staying there.

VP ex. 5—Opening Up the Physical Vocabulary of Response:
Walking/Running/Stopping- playing with space, architecture,
group dynamic, timing.

VP ex. 6 - Japanese Rock Garden: group form; movement:
walking/ sitting/ standing/ lying down; Timing: move and

stop all together; introduction to levels in space; further introduction to composition; honing listening skills.

AT ex. 7—Sounder/ Mover: in duets form, one person sounds, the other moves to and with that sound and reverse; introduction to sound and movement together (without language/ meaning).

AT ex. 8 - All at Once: Sound and Movement: solo form; making movements (start simply) and sounding them simultaneously; keep the duration of movement and sound the same; following—let one sound and movement follow another; finding integration of impulse with sound and movement simultaneously.

VP ex. 9 - Ariel View: group form; returning to our relationship with space, and beginning to recognize our relationship to viewer/audience; each individual is a 'dot' in space; relating to space itself and architecture of space;

****ADD SHAPE-** based on AT exercise shape/ shape/ re-shape: students play with shapes of bodies in rel. to others body shapes- in direct or indirect response.

VP ex. 10 - Establishing Image Work of a non-progressive

nature: working with images which arise from internal sources; movement in space comes from the image; images do not need to make sense in any logical or linear way; following impulse

AT ex. 11 - SHIFT: Students are directed by teacher to 'shift'; each shift is into a new sound and movement 'frame'; simultaneous sound and movement, when not sounding/moving you are silent and still; one kind of sound and movement until directed to 'shift'; note: level changes help when students have difficulty in finding new kinds of movement and sound.

AT ex. 12 - Director/Actor: duet form; one partner directs, other is in a sound and movement frame, until she hears 'shift' and shifts to a new sound and movement frame; reverse roles; playing with duration -how to stay alive in a frame, even if you're left there for a long time; playing with different qualities and dynamics of sound and movement

AT ex. 13 - Performance Score: Two up/ Two down: quartet form; two people sitting, two people behind them; two people sitting introduce phrases (playing with the sound of the language); each phrase introduced should be radically different than the others (in voice quality, volume, pitch, speed, content; up to 3 phrases each; then all four players collaborate on a sound composition using the phrases which have been introduced; Introduction to language (without 'story').

AT ex. 14 - Language and Movement Interruption: trio form; moving and talking one at a time, when you're active it's with language and movement as one action, concordant in time, duration, feeling and dynamic- you can fill space with movement/language or pause, and can play with a word or idea by repeating; go until interrupted by a partner, then stop immediately where you are in space- do not return to neutral; connecting language with movement (without attachment to meaning).

AT ex. 15 - Transform Content, Movement Only: duet form; one is watcher, one is doer; watcher gives doer a simple physical gesture (empty form); doer uses regular timing,

and continually repeats the shape of the gesture given;
after working with the gesture on a regular pulse for some
time, begin to allow the mind/body to change incrementally,
so that you're transforming the 'bones' and the meaning of
the actions step by step.

- add sound to gesture
- add phrase (language) to gesture

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