

Empowering Actors Through Viewpoints

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Take a deep breath. And let it go. And another. And let it go.

Now turn to the person next to you, and - if you're comfortable - shake hands. Make some eye contact. Smile if you like, or don't.

Great.

In that last 20 seconds, we just had a play across no fewer than 9 of Anne Bogart & Tina Landau's "Viewpoints of Time and Space." No walking on a grid, no robotic gestures, just humans behaving truthfully under truthful given circumstances.

When you breathed deeply, your breath had a duration. The breath entered your lungs quickly or slowly, tempo. And we repeated it twice! Your intake of breath was likely a kinesthetic response to my instruction to do so.

When you turned to your partner, the shape of your body changed. The extension of your hand towards your partner was a kind of gesture, with a beginning, middle, and end. As you engaged in this friendly handshake, your spatial relationship, as manifest here by the distance between you and your partner either grew closer, farther, or stayed the same. And if someone were to take a picture of our floor pattern, the space we occupy in two dimensions, it would show an interesting pointillistic picture of you, the audience, and me, the presenter. And if we wanted to go for just a bit of a stretch we could say that the texture and color of your partner's hand constitutes a kind of architecture, which you either did or didn't notice and towards which did or

didn't respond. Likewise, the lighting, another aspect of architecture caused your eyes to squint or to open or to dilate just so.

Today, I'd like us to examine how The Viewpoints, can be applied as a form of movement analysis to enhance performance across all genres, and through its application as a means of analysis rather than training, empower actors to become partners with teachers or directors in the learning and creative process.

Literature/Lineage Review

Since, I'll be talking about Viewpoint it's interesting to note my particular background with it. I should say upfront that I have *not* taken dedicated workshops or classes in the Viewpoints from anyone substantially involved in the Bogart or SITI Company lineage. However, - as Tony Perucci notes in his 2015 paper "Dog Sniff Dog: Materialistic poetics and the politics of 'The Viewpoints'", "Over just the last twenty years, Viewpoints had gone ... to being a hallmark of theatrical training and practice" (106). I have, therefore, encountered numerous Viewpoints exercises, principles, and language in countless classes and workshops over the past dozen years. For this research, I have furthermore read *The Viewpoints Book* multiple times and tried to make as thorough a review of the existing scholarship on the subject as I can.

My main critique of contemporary Viewpoints practice is that, by my estimation as a movement teacher and director of physical theatre, many more actors I've met have come away from university training programs with vague memories of running in a circle and jumping together than those who come out with a comprehensive and practical knowledge of the Viewpoints as *concepts* or as a framework for creating and analyzing movement. This, I believe,

is a missed opportunity to raise the next generation of actors to also be creators of their own work and to be empowered partners with their teachers and directors in the co-development of their own expressive capacities across the Viewpoints of time and space.

Tony Perucci says that “Viewpoints fuses the aesthetic horizontality of theatrical elements with the horizontality of creation, governance, and process”(108). In this way “Viewpoints becomes a means for prefigurative politics to become not only imagined but also enacted”(107). Horizontality in theatrical aesthetics is also widely associated with what Hans Thies-Liehman calls the post-dramatic, which is arguably just a more discrete and specific category of the contemporary theatrical avante-garde.

While Viewpoints and the avant-garde, may therefore seem inextricably linked, the Viewpoints also has tremendous potential across genres, including Realism and other commercial or popular forms of theatre. In fact, actors and dancers in Broadway musicals are moving and resonating across the Viewpoints of Time and Space every day whether they know it or not.

Joan Herrington, in her 2000 essay “Directing with Viewpoints” said:

"It is wrong to assume that Bogart's work and practice of the Viewpoints stands in opposition to realism. ... Bogart opposes the school of American realism that attempts to codify realistic effects; Bogart's emphasis on stage movement creates a new dynamic of realism." (Herrington 159)

Further support for my idea that we must teach the Viewpoints as a set of concepts, just as much as a perceptual playground or technique of ensemble training comes from Ofer Ravid's 2009, Mid-America Theatre Conference presentation, "Movement, Perception, Concept: Experiential Interplay in Viewpoints Practice." He says:

"We cannot comprehend the *concept* that pertains to a specific *movement* without *perceiving* that *movement* as falling under the *concept's* definition. At the same time, our *perceptual awareness* of that *movement* is shaped by the *concepts* that are constructed in and by the specific words we use." (6)

He continues:

"...the naming of each Viewpoint prompts us to *consciously* direct our awareness to perceive what was, and is, already there. As we train the Viewpoints are continuously (re)defined and, end, re-conceptualized through our experience of them." (8)

MY EXPERIENCES

I'll give three examples of how I use the Viewpoints from my current research, both practice-based and practice-led as an informal leader in actor-driven, ensemble-based generative processes and as a researcher into Viewpoints/Butoh pedagogy. The three examples are devising Citizens of Nowhere, and Visions of A Crying Girl, and my research study "Butoh Dance as Intervention for Viewpoints Analysis".

Citizens of Nowhere. In 2018, as part of our second-year studies at Dell’Arte International, my MFA cohort devised an original tragedy, with facilitation and provocation by faculty member Sayda Trujillo.¹ The play was called *Citizens of Nowhere*, and inspired by the Syrian refugee crisis and the ongoing conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. Early in our creative process, I proposed we employ a Composition process much like that described in *The Viewpoints Book* (Bogart 137-197) which I already had extensive practice facilitating in my role as Producing Artistic Director of the New York-based physical theatre ensemble The Ume Group from 2011 to 2016. With the ensemble’s consent I undertook the task of creating lists of compositional ingredients for those early Compositional work-ups.

Here are a few I created...

Ingredient List A (to be incorporated, or not, in any order)	Ingredient List B (to be incorporated, or not, in any order)	Ingredient List C (to be incorporated, or not, in any order)	Ingredient List D (to be incorporated, or not, in any order)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 seconds of lamentation • 10 seconds of stillness • A rhymed couplet • Natural Forces • A moment of recognition • A unison movement • A change of rhythm • A dramatic entrance • A significant use of color • A floor pattern that spirals • A moment of decision • A misunderstanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cries, whoops, and yips • Charged space • Repetition of movement • A surprise • A tragic mistake • Overlapping dialogue • A change of levels in space • A dramatic exit • A skip in time • An eccentric dance • A vivid tableau • Rising from a fall 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reversal • Animal noises • An everyday object • 20 seconds of laughter • 20 seconds of non-stop movement • A sharp intake of breath • A closing of space • A song • A false entrance • A close-up • A change in the weather • 3 ineffectual gestures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A tragic deed • An interruption • Babbling • A gesture which decomposes • Audible breath • A moment of accelerated time • A triangular spatial relationship • Shared weight • A significant prop • 10 tiny steps • A joke • The literal disappearance of something or someone

As you may be able to see, these ingredient lists contain elements borrowed from or inspired by our stylistic territory of tragedy, ie “10 seconds of lamentation”, “a unison movement”, “a tragic

mistake”, but also a list of seemingly random elements that may or may not seem to fit on first glance. One of the ways I try to find diversity and a sense of surprise in constructing these lists is specifically by using the Viewpoints as a kind of check-mark. Do I have ingredients which relate in some way to each of the viewpoints? “Significant use of color”, “cries, whoops, and yips”, “an everyday object”, and “a significant prop” might be thought of as relating to the Viewpoint of Architecture. “A floor pattern that spirals”, “a vivid tableau”, “closing of space”, “a triangular spatial relationship” all resonate across the viewpoints of Spatial Relationship, Shape, and Topography.

In my experience as a director or teacher, providing specific and seemingly random suggestions is more helpful for expanding students’ conception of a given Viewpoint than merely listing the Viewpoints as ingredients in and of themselves. Listing or referencing the Viewpoints may help more experienced actor-creators find freedom, and especially constraining a particular Viewpoint as Joan Herrington describes being part of Leon Ingulsrud’s practice (166) may also be productive, but as people are first learning and to really stimulate students’ creativity, I find that making specific suggestions (which they can use, or not!) is incredibly helpful.

Visions of A Crying Girl. In another example, this year for my MFA thesis, my classmate Cleo DeOrio and I devised an original dance-theatre work called *Visions of A Crying Girl*, the point of which was to explore the intersection between Theatrical Clown and Melodrama. As with *Citizens of Nowhere*, I created lists of ingredients for compositional work-ups, inspired by the 9 Viewpoints.

<u>Ingredient List 1</u>	<u>Ingredient List 2</u>	<u>Ingredient List 3</u>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A quick succession of 3 contrasting shapes, repeated 3 times. • A sustained sound. • A use of a body part, not for its intended purpose. • Counting out loud. • A spiraling floor pattern. • A build to an explosion. • An audible sigh of relief. • A magic trick. • A shape with seven 90° angles. • Found text. • Significant use of shadow. • A gestural joke. • Three curved journeys through space. • A misunderstanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each actor visits all four corners of a defined space. • Isolated gestures which build to whole-body movements. • A build to a reversal. • 30 seconds of non-stop grammatot. • A moment of stolen focus. • A significant prop. • 10 seconds of slow motion. • An unexpectedly pointed foot. • A patriotic song, whistled or hummed. • A significant use of a solid color. • A piece of architecture as partner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying to laughing. • Appreciate / depreciate. • An invisible ceiling which continuously lowers over the course of 1 minute. • A pronouncement of love. • Slowly collapsing to the floor over a period of at least 10 seconds. • Seven repetitions of an 'X' shape. • Significant use of the shape 'Y' • A lullaby. • A body part or object as metaphor for a smell. • A surprise. • Something itchy, scratchy, or sharp. • A behavioral gesture which becomes expressive. • Revelation of lanes as floor pattern, if only for a moment.
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Again, it should be noted that the ingredients reference both the styles of Melodrama and Clown (ie. “30 seconds of non-stop grammatot”, “a gestural joke”, “crying to laughing”, “a pronouncement of love”). But this list also contains a variety of resonances across a variety of Viewpoints. “Each actor visits all four corners of a defined space”, “spiraling floor pattern”, and “Three curved journeys through space” relate to Topography and Repetition. “Significant use of shadow” and “A piece of architecture as partner” relate to Architecture. “A shape with seven 90° angles”, “Significant use of the shape ‘Y’”, and an “Unexpectedly pointed foot” relate to Shape.

For this project, closer to the midpoint in our devising process, I also created a visual mapping tool for tracking our use of the Viewpoints.

describe movement or its elements but, rather, to open up our perception of movement to new and fresh experiences” (Ravid 10). In this light too zealous an attempt to map your movement through Viewpoints would doubtless result in either a helplessly messy chart or an incomplete one. Nonetheless, the visual may be helpful for realizing one’s habits. Realizing habits is a key part of my approach to Viewpoints which I’ve inherited from simultaneous training in the F.M. Alexander Technique, where Awareness and Inhibition of habits are the first two pillars in a lifelong journey towards using yourself well by unlocking more sustainable and expressive ways of moving.

Research Study: Butoh Dance as Intervention for Viewpoints Analysis. For a final example, I’ll discuss my research study “Butoh Dance as Intervention for Viewpoints Analysis.” During the creative process for *Visions of A Crying Girl*, I began to develop a theory that cross-training in other disciplines such as dance, martial arts, yoga could be just as effective, if not more, for expanding students’ conceptions of the Nine Viewpoints as the exercises in Bogart & Landau’s book.² To test this hypothesis, I used the mechanism of a repeated measure in constructing a research study wherein trained theatre-makers came to participate in surveying, open viewpoints improvisation, and a video analysis activity as a pre-intervention assessment, followed by training in 4 classic exercises from Butoh Dance, followed by a repeat of the assessment measures performed at the beginning of the session. Though participation in the study was not what I had hoped it might be (6 total participants in all) and only partially fit my target demographic in terms of graduate or undergraduate theatre students with a pre-existing knowledge of the Viewpoints, the findings were nonetheless compelling.

In the pre and post-intervention surveys, participants were asked to self-assess their Expressive Capacity across all nine Viewpoints on a scale of 1-5, 1 being “Not very expressive (Infrequently or never aware of, deliberate, varied in use of Viewpoints”); and 5 being Very expressive (ie Frequently aware of, deliberate, or varied in use of Viewpoints).

6 out of 6 Research Participants *reduced* at least one of their self-assessed scores after the Butoh Dance intervention. 3 out of 6 participants specifically reduced their self-assessed mastery of “Duration” after the Butoh Dance practice.

This is most likely explained, not by an actual diminishment in the performers’ skill, but by an expansion of the performers’ concept of the Viewpoint of Duration, specifically from working with the discipline of Butoh Dance. In this way, the findings seem to support my theory that the extremity and rigor of disciplines like Butoh have much to offer the practitioner of Viewpoints, including some of that self-centering / grounding virtue which Ofer Ravid admits can sometimes be a pitfall of Viewpoints training, and for which purpose, practice in the Suzuki Technique is also likewise useful and quite customary (Ravid 13-14).

In addition, participant surveys showed that 3 out of 6 Research Participants “Strongly Agreed” that Viewpoints has cross-genre potential for actor training and 2 out of 6 Research Participants cited “talking about the Viewpoints” or hearing them clearly explained as the biggest cause of their growth with regards the Viewpoints throughout the study.

In conclusion, inspired by my reading and the three examples from my personal experience, here are my six best practices for teaching and directing with the Viewpoints in a way that empowers actors:

1. *Contribute / Lead by Example.* As a director or teacher, help to re-conceptualizing the Viewpoints through your composition practice. Rather than just giving ingredients such as “the Viewpoint of Duration”, “the Viewpoint of Tempo”, use your own creativity to provide specific examples and make tangible the various materials of our theatrical medium which naturally resonate across the Viewpoints of Time & Space.
2. *Diversify.* Cross-train in other disciplines. Catch the students off-guard and point to how the Viewpoints are in play in an exercise or moment they weren’t expecting.
3. *Notice & Reflect.* Identify helpful and unhelpful habits and limitations. The Alexander Technique is a great inspiration in this regard. It’s also important to understand that our limitations may be set, and yet far from being a hindrance, that fact may inspire further creativity about how we make compensations for those limitations. For a performer with a limited range of tempos, for example, can you use the *relativity* of tempo to begin slow and then surprise an audience by taking focus with something relatively fast?
4. *Drill.* If you have identified an area of weakness, or habit, or limitation, work like an athletic coach to construct exercises and drills which intentionally work to expand your students’ expressive capacity.
5. *Integrate.* Remember that although Anne has given the Viewpoints discrete names all Viewpoints co-exist all the time. Don’t get fooled into thinking that you can only learn x from y or that there’s one way to skin a cat. The constant co-existence of all the Viewpoints means that there is an infinite way to understand and develop each.
6. *Play.* Delight! Stakes! Intention! (We don’t always have to walk like robots on a grid.)
Something I borrow from my study of Clown is a spirit of play which I believe can help

transfer this work to Realism. Through the pursuit of intention and an awareness of the Viewpoints we begin to understand how everyday action can unfold in a physically dynamic way. Without objectives, however, we are unlikely to stretch our expressive limits or understand how a dynamic is *just* within the medium of theatre.

Notes

1. For more information on the unique pedagogy of devising and actor-training at Dell'Arte International, see Schirle 91-102, and Canavan 49-61.
2. This represents a new development in my ongoing research comparing ensemble-building and actor-training methodologies. For earlier work see Rosin 16-19.

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