

THE VIEWPOINTS BOOK

A Practical Guide
to Viewpoints
and Composition

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CHAPTER 2

VIEWPOINTS AND COMPOSITION: WHAT ARE THEY?

Viewpoints, Composition: What do these terms mean? The following definitions reflect *our* understanding and use of them. Even in the context of the work of such pioneers as Mary Overlie and Aileen Passloff, it is impossible to say where these ideas actually originated, because they are timeless and belong to the natural principles of movement, time and space. Over the years, we have simply articulated a set of names for things that already exist, things that we do naturally and have always done, with greater or lesser degrees of consciousness and emphasis.

VIEWPOINTS

- Viewpoints is a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage.

- Viewpoints is a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens onstage.
- Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working.

We work with nine Physical Viewpoints, within Viewpoints of Time and Viewpoints of Space. The bulk of this book focuses on the Physical Viewpoints, though Vocal Viewpoints, which we developed later, are addressed in Chapter 9. The Vocal Viewpoints are specifically related to sound as opposed to movement. Physical and Vocal Viewpoints overlap each other and constantly change in relative value, depending on the artist or teacher and/or the style of the production. The Physical Viewpoints are:

Viewpoints of Time

TEMPO

The rate of speed at which a movement occurs; how fast or slow something happens onstage.

DURATION

How long a movement or sequence of movements continues. Duration, in terms of Viewpoints work, specifically relates to how long a group of people working together stay inside a certain section of movement before it changes.

KINESTHETIC RESPONSE

A spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you; the timing in which you respond to the external events of movement or sound; the impulsive movement that occurs from a stimulation of the senses. An example: someone claps in front of your eyes and you blink in response; or someone slams a door and you impulsively stand up from your chair.

REPETITION

The repeating of something onstage. Repetition includes (1) *Internal Repetition* (repeating a movement within your own body); (2) *External Repetition* (repeating the shape, tempo, gesture, etc., of something outside your own body).

Viewpoints of Space

SHAPE

The contour or outline the body (or bodies) makes in space. All Shape can be broken down into either (1) *lines*; (2) *curves*; (3) a *combination* of lines and curves.

Therefore, in Viewpoints training we create shapes that are round, shapes that are angular, shapes that are a mixture of these two.

In addition, Shape can either be (1) *stationary*; (2) *moving* through space.

Lastly, Shape can be made in one of three forms: (1) the body in space; (2) the body in relationship to architecture making a shape; (3) the body in relationship to other bodies making a shape.

GESTURE

A movement involving a part or parts of the body; Gesture is Shape with a beginning, middle and end. Gestures can be made with the hands, the arms, the legs, the head, the mouth, the eyes, the feet, the stomach, or any other part or combination of parts that can be isolated. Gesture is broken down into:

1. **BEHAVIORAL GESTURE.** Belongs to the concrete, physical world of human behavior as we observe it in our everyday reality. It is the kind of gesture you see in the supermarket or on the subway: scratching, pointing, waving, sniffing, bowing, saluting. A Behavioral Gesture can give informa-

tion about character, time period, physical health, circumstance, weather, clothes, etc. It is usually defined by a person's character or the time and place in which they live. It can also have a thought or intention behind it. A Behavioral Gesture can be further broken down and worked on in terms of *Private Gesture* and *Public Gesture*, distinguishing between actions performed in solitude and those performed with awareness of or proximity to others.

2. EXPRESSIVE GESTURE. Expresses an inner state, an emotion, a desire, an idea or a value. It is abstract and symbolic rather than representational. It is universal and timeless and is not something you would normally see someone do in the supermarket or subway. For instance, an Expressive Gesture might be expressive of, or stand for, such emotions as "joy," "grief" or "anger." Or it might express the inner essence of Hamlet as a given actor feels him. Or, in a production of Chekhov, you might create and work with Expressive Gestures *of* or *for* "time," "memory" or "Moscow."

ARCHITECTURE

The physical environment in which you are working and how awareness of it affects movement. How many times have we seen productions where there is a lavish, intricate set covering the stage and yet the actors remain down center, hardly exploring or using the surrounding architecture? In working on Architecture as a Viewpoint, we learn to dance with the space, to be in dialogue with a room, to let movement (especially Shape and Gesture) evolve out of our surroundings. Architecture is broken down into:

1. SOLID MASS. Walls, floors, ceilings, furniture, windows, doors, etc.
2. TEXTURE. Whether the solid mass is wood or metal or fabric will change the kind of movement we create in relationship to it.
3. LIGHT. The sources of light in the room, the shadows we make in relationship to these sources, etc.

4. COLOR. Creating movement off of colors in the space, e.g., how one red chair among many black ones would affect our choreography in relation to that chair.
5. SOUND. Sound created by and from the architecture, e.g., the sound of feet on the floor, the creak of a door, etc.

Additionally, in working with Architecture, we create *spatial metaphors*, giving form to such feelings as I'm "up against the wall," "caught between the cracks," "trapped," "lost in space," "on the threshold," "high as a kite," etc.

SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP

The distance between things onstage, especially (1) one body to another; (2) one body (or bodies) to a group of bodies; (3) the body to the architecture.

What is the full range of possible distances between things onstage? What kinds of groupings allow us to see a stage picture more clearly? Which groupings suggest an event or emotion, express a dynamic? In both real life and onstage, we tend to position ourselves at a polite two- or three-foot distance from someone we are talking to. When we become aware of the expressive possibilities of Spatial Relationship onstage, we begin working with less polite but more dynamic distances of extreme proximity or extreme separation.

TOPOGRAPHY

The *landscape*, the *floor pattern*, the *design* we create in movement through space. In defining a landscape, for instance, we might decide that the downstage area has great density, is difficult to move through, while the upstage area has less density and therefore involves more fluidity and faster tempos. To understand floor pattern, imagine that the bottoms of your feet are painted red; as you move through the space, the picture that evolves on the floor is the floor pattern that emerges over time. In addition, staging or designing for performance always involves choices

about the *size* and *shape* of the space we work in. For example, we might choose to work in a narrow three-foot strip all the way downstage or in a giant triangular shape that covers the whole floor, etc.

COMPOSITION

- Composition is a method for creating new work.
- Composition is the practice of selecting and arranging the separate components of theatrical language into a cohesive work of art for the stage. It is the same technique that any choreographer, painter, writer, composer or filmmaker uses in their corresponding disciplines. In theater, it is *writing on your feet*, with others, in space and time, using the language of theater.
- Composition is a method for generating, defining and developing the theater vocabulary that will be used for any given piece. In Composition, we make pieces so that we can point to them and say: "That worked," and ask: "Why?" so that we can then articulate which ideas, moments, images, etc., we will include in our production.
- Composition is a method for revealing to ourselves our hidden thoughts and feelings about the material. Because we usually make Compositions in rehearsal in a compressed period of time, we have no time to think. Composition provides a structure for working from our impulses and intuition. As Pablo Picasso once said, making art is "another way of keeping a diary."
- Composition is an assignment given to an ensemble so that it can create short, specific theater pieces addressing a particular aspect of the work. We use Composition during rehearsal to engage the collaborators in the process of generating their own work around a source. The assignment will usually include an overall intention or structure as well as a substantial list of ingredients which must be included in the piece. This list is the raw material of the theater lan-

guage we'll speak in the piece, either principles that are useful for staging (symmetry versus asymmetry, use of scale and perspective, juxtaposition, etc.) or the ingredients that belong specifically to the Play-World we are working on (objects, textures, colors, sounds, actions, etc.) These ingredients are to a Composition what single words are to a paragraph or essay. The creator makes meaning through their arrangement.

- Composition is a method for being in dialogue with other art forms, as it borrows from and reflects the other arts. In Composition work, we study and use principles from other disciplines translated for the stage. For example, borrowing from music, we might ask what the rhythm of a moment is, or how to interact based on a fugue structure, or how a coda functions and whether or not we should add one. Or we'll think about film: "How do we stage a close-up? An establishing shot? A montage?" And we'll ask: "What is the equivalent in the theater?" In applying Compositional principles from other disciplines to the theater, we push the envelope of theatrical possibility and challenge ourselves to create new forms.
- Composition is to the creator (whether director, writer, performer, designer, etc.) what Viewpoints is to the actor: a method for practicing the art.