

Right/Wrong vs. Possibility/Choice

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Abstract: Categorized as good or bad since birth (a good baby doesn't cry too much), we are gradually so caught up in the entanglements of approval/disapproval that our creativity is paralyzed and we become unaware of our own human nature. Therefore, I believe that it is very important when we refer to the pedagogy of teaching acting to replace the notions of right/wrong with notions of possibility and choice. I have found that an effective tool to overcome the constraints instituted by such notions of right/wrong is to familiarize the student with the Viewpoints method, as it is based on the spontaneous and intuitive collaboration of a group of actors, who together create new and daring theatrical actions and situations. Viewpoints trains stage artists (dancers, actors, performers) to listen with their whole body, to perceive and use everything that is happening around them, thus training them to keep their stage creation only in the Present, only Here and Now, the only place where the Theatrical Art is born.

Keywords: Here and Now, non-hierarchical art, Possibility and Choice, creator

Since the 2000s, the area of theatre has broaden its horizons. Theatre is now institutionalized or independent, takes place on the "big" stage or in unconventional spaces, it consists in education, personal development, sometimes therapy, is based on classic plays or improvisations made up by the team, is physical, social, political, documentary, visual, site-specific, devised and, in recent years, even virtual. Today, theatre is the mirror of a complex and diverse society that is developing at a dizzying speed. More than two years ago, when we were stunned by how unpredictable history can be and when we were forced to live by restrictions and in isolation, I have wondered with fear whether theatre would survive, whether we were living its last moments.

But today, when the threat of pandemic has been replaced by that of war and artificial intelligence, it seems to me that theatre appears to be the most powerful of the arts. In times of armed conflict, such as we hope we will never experience again, theatre is connecting and uniting people, being at the same time therapy and a post-traumatic balm. Analyzing the impact of the war in Ukraine on theatre, theatre critic Cristina Rusiecki concludes: "Every theatre festival I attended this year invited a troupe from Ukraine. The horrors of the fresh off the battle ground stories have been approached in different ways, with varying degrees of distance. Each time, the discussions after the performance revealed some artists that are ready to find solutions

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to help, within their strength, the population under terror. Whether the musicians played in the streets to ease the pain of ordinary citizens, or the actors read stories in the subway stations to bring some peace of mind for frightened children, or turned their institutions into shelters and distributed water and supplies, each time their stories revealed the same one hundred percent effort to gather their forces in support of those who have lost their homes and the normality of existence."¹

On the other hand, if the future belongs to artificial intelligence, the Art of Theatre will remain the shelter where people will find normality and the feeling that they are not alone. Performing art, be it theatre, dance or performance, is based on real human feelings, which only take place in the *Here* and *Now* and therefore cannot be replicated, recorded or simulated. And even if many people will be excited, in the first place, by the various innovations that technology would have brought, in the end, the energy flow that takes place between the performing artists and spectators cannot be replaced by any virtual reality or artificial intelligence. Man is and will remain a social animal and will need human interaction to survive. And if theatre is going to "survive", then the pedagogy of the Art of Acting would better keep up with the ever-changing times.

Today's young people need to be somebody in a world whose population is growing exponentially, they need to be the best in their field, when every field is oversaturated by experts, in short, they need to prove that they are their parents' best *investment*. It is fashionable and a source of pride to say "I'm investing in my child's future!", forgetting that when you allocate any kind of funds (time, money, health), you expect that, sooner or later, these resources will return to the investor in the form they have imagined when they started the investment. From this point of view, I think there is a lot of pressure on the shoulders of a young person today, because part of the energy they would use to discover who they are and what makes them happy will be wasted trying to become who someone else wants them to be and make that someone else happy. Personally, being born before '90, I don't feel that my parents invested in me - they raised me and educated me as they knew best, but expectations never preceded my desires. I'm not generalising, but one of the reasons why the younger generation of students is fragile (they get dizzy if they rehearse for more than three hours without eating, they have panic attacks), they get easily offended, frozen by the fear of failure (not once have I met young people who because of this fear of being unsuccessful were not willing to even try), I think it's precisely this moral constraint with which they thrive.

Categorized as good or bad since birth (a good baby doesn't cry too much), we are gradually so caught up in the entanglements of approval/disapproval that our creativity is paralyzed and this way we become unaware of our own human nature. Therefore, I believe that it is very important when we refer to the pedagogy of teaching

¹ Cristina Rusiecki, „Theater and the war in Ukraine’’ article Cultura Magazine, www.revistacultura.ro.

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acting to replace the notions of right/wrong with notions of possibility and choice. I have found that an effective tool to overcome the constraints instituted by such notions of right/wrong is to familiarize the student with the Viewpoints method, as it is based on the spontaneous and intuitive collaboration of a group of actors, who together create new and daring theatrical actions and situations. Viewpoints trains stage artists (dancers, actors, performers) to listen with their whole body, to perceive and use everything that is happening around them, thus training them to keep their stage creation only in the Present, only Here and Now, the only place where the Theatrical Art is born.

The method's origins lay in America where, at the end of the last century, a radical cultural shift took place, marked by the protests against the Vietnam War, civil rights marches and the emergence of abstract expressionism, post-modernism and minimalism. The movement was equally political, aesthetic and personal, so it irreversibly altered artists' way of thinking about the creative process, their relationship with the public and their role in the world.

Having painted the scene, in the 1960s, a group of young artists (painters, composers, but especially dancers and choreographers) gathered at the Judston Church Theatre in New York in an attempt to understand the premises from which their art starts, as well as their own training. They wanted to separate choreography from the conventional and the psychological background and find answers to the question: what is dance? Is it dancing when an elephant swings its trunk? What about when a man walks across a stage?

Starting from the idea that anything is possible, these artists began to change the rules, so that improvisation took the place of precise movement. In addition to improvisation, another fundamental element that united this group was their belief in non-hierarchical art and in *real-time* creation that takes place only in the *Here* and *Now*. Therefore, they gave up the mastery of technique or powerful, socially impactful messages and replaced them with decisions, structures or rules born spontaneously and instinctively from within the group and its dynamics. In this way, the stage act became unique, because the artists no longer showed what they had set in rehearsals, but created in real time and any element, impulse or problem that arose became part of the final performance. This is the philosophy behind the Viewpoints method.

Later, in the 1970s, choreographer Mary Overlie tried to find a way to break movement down into understandable components that could then be used, like ingredients, to create structures and compositions. Working with Mary Overlie, director Anne Bogart realised how relevant this process is to theatre, not just dance. She wanted to discover how the actor can train in the same way that the dancer, musician or athlete trains, another fundamental value of the Viewpoints method being that you have to train your body regularly. Over time, tradition (the system) has increasingly imposed the idea that acting is exclusively a psychological act and this avant-garde movement, from which Viewpoints emerged, shifts the emphasis to the

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body, as the mind, soul, voice, etc. are all in the body, therefore the actor must never stop training his body.

At a superficial glance, Viewpoints may seem in opposition to Stanislavski's "system" because the former is physical and the latter is considered psychological. But on the contrary, the two support and complement each other. Stanislavski says: "We artists must make great use of the fact that physical actions, set among given important scenic situations, acquire great force. In these conditions the connection between body and soul, between action and feelings is created, thanks to which the outside helps the inside and the inside stimulates the outside. (...) Feelings cannot be squeezed out. We need a clear physical action, characteristic for the moment we experience. Action will guide us naturally, automatically, on the right path and in difficult moments for creation will not let us make mistakes."². Later, director Declan Donnellan confirms the same theory: "We can't express emotion. Ever. Emotion, however, expresses itself in us whether we like it or not. We can't *make, elaborate, show* an emotion. Our emotions are only expressed by what we do. We can't control the feelings we have. They happen to us without our permission and we are not responsible for them. What we can control, however, is what we do."³

After many years of research and experimenting, Anne Bogart has identified the 9 *points of view – viewpoints* (physical and vocal) from which a stage creation can be viewed. The artist who knows them will be able to combine them in different *compositions*, thus discovering and exploiting their artistic self. As the author states, Viewpoints is not a *method* in itself, as in a set of rules and normative principles for learning or practicing a discipline, but it is a starting point in understanding the process of scenic creation, stimulating artists to become **creators** rather than **performers**. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau present in their book, *The Viewpoints Book* (unfortunately, it is not translated yet in Romanian), a series of exercises that are meant for understanding each of the nine component parts of any stage act.

The components of physical action⁴:

1. **Tempo** - helps the performer to become aware of the speed at which a particular action, any action, takes place and how this speed influences the meanings of the action taken.

2. **Duration** - makes the performer pay attention to how long a particular movement, or rhythm, lasts, encouraging him (as with tempo) to sample the extremes of these aspects, leading to diversity and breaking the monotony of an artistic creation.

² Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, vol. I, NEMIRA Publishing, Bucharest, 2013, pp. 307, 314.

³ Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, Romanian version Saviana Stănescu and Ioana Ieronim, UNITEXT Publishing, Bucharest, 2006, p. 128.

⁴ Tempo, Duration, Kinesthetic Response, Repetition, Spatial Relationship, Topography, Shape, Gesture, Architecture.

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3. **Kinesthetic response** - this is our immediate and uncensored reaction to an event outside ourselves (for example, when someone claps in front of you and you blink, or when someone leaves slamming the door behind him and you tend to jump on your feet). These exercises go a long way to developing performers' attention to everything around them, an essential (and sadly often forgotten) element of a lively theatrical art. Exercises that focus on the *kinesthetic response* also have the quality of relaxing the student - they no longer have to choose between right and wrong, they are relieved of the pressure to be inventive, to be interesting, they no longer have to *come up* with anything, they just have to discover and allow themselves to be modified by everything that is happening around them.

4. **Repetition** - like the kinesthetic response, *repetition* focuses the artist's attention regarding the surrounding world, reinforcing the idea that all the elements we need to create a stage act already exist. By paying attention to the world around him, the artist creates his own composition by simply repeating *forms, tempos, gestures, sounds* that are found outside himself. Repetition should not be understood as *imitation*, but as an entry/insight into the Form and Tempo of the surrounding elements.

5. **Distance in relationship** – there can be three types of relationship: a) the one between two scene partners, b) the one between one or more actors with the group, c) the one between the body and the architecture, the essential part being the distance from these elements that establishes the relationship. In everyday life, we often keep a comfortable average distance in relationships that makes us feel safe - like the distance of a handshake. But when we decrease or increase the comfort zone in our relationship with another being or architecture, we create a dynamic, an event, a relationship. The audience doesn't come to see a theatre play to see events from the everyday life, but to take part in exceptional situations - what happens to the characters on stage has to be for the first or last time, it can't be just another time, it can't be ordinary, everyday events, but tight corners. That's why it is so important for future performers to understand the importance of extremes.

6. **Topography** - is the graphic representation of shapes/trails. Exercises that focus on topography have the merit of stimulating the artist's imagination. He will imagine that red paint is coming out of his soles and try out what feelings/feelings different shapes evoke in him - straight lines and angles, zig-zags, curved lines and spirals etc.

7. **Shape** - is the outline our body establishes in the space; it is made up of straight lines, curves or a combination of the two and can be static or moving.

8. **Gesture** - moves the focus from *form* to *expressiveness*. In other words, if you establish the beginning and ending of a shape, then put a feeling, thought or idea behind it, the gesture is born. Gestures can be:

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(a) Behavioral (a concrete, mundane gesture you encounter in everyday life) - can give information about character, historical period, health, circumstances, weather, etc.; can be public or private, and can conceal a thought or intention.

b) Expressive (a gesture that expresses an inner state, a desire, an idea or a principle) - are abstract and symbolic, universal and timeless (e.g. the gesture that would express happiness, jealousy, mania, the essence of Hamlet, or Moscow for the 3 sisters, etc.).

Exploring *form* and *gesture* will help students understand and master body language, which is often different, sometimes even contradictory to spoken language. The former belongs to instinct and the latter to reason, and stage artists frequently create their roles based on reason alone, thus depriving them of their most vivid side.

9. **Architecture** - is how space affects our movement. The artist has to dance with the space, to be in dialogue with it, to let the movement (*form* and *gesture*) evolve on its own terms from the space that surrounds it.

Architecture is composed of:

(a) Solid objects - floors, windows, doors, furniture, etc.

(b) Texture - wood, metal, velvet, etc.

(c) Light - the light sources and the various shadows that bodies cast in relation to them

d) Color - for example, if we have a red chair amongst other black chairs, this will affect the movement and relationship to the object

e) Sound - the creaking of a door, floor, echo etc.

In addition, physical architecture also creates metaphorical architecture - lost in space, trapped, facing the wall, floating like a kite etc.

The components of vocal action⁵, almost identical with the physical ones:

1. **Pitch** – head voice/chest voice

2. **Dynamic** – whisper/forceful yelling (how loud/soft we speak)

3. **Tempo and Duration** – how fast/slow we speak

4. **Timbre** – different resonating parts of the voice (nose, abdomen, throat)

5. **Shape** – words, as the movement and body can take other forms also. They can be round, soft, fluid, sharp, linear, etc.

6. **Gesture** – as well as the physical ones, the vocal one can be:

a) Behavioral – they give out information about the weather (clenching of teeth), the health of a person (coughing), age, their personality or emotional state, or they can have an intention, a connotation behind them (when you clear your throat in an obvious way)

b) Expressive

⁵ Pitch, Dynamic, Tempo and Duration, Timbre, Shape, Gesture, Architecture, Repetition, Kinesthetic Response and Silence.

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7. Architecture

8. Repetition

9. Kinesthetic response and Silence

I have tried doing the exercises proposed by the two directors with my students and I can say that the results showed up unexpectedly quick. Of course, they didn't turn into „huge” actors overnight, but they gained self-confidence and they started to explore individually the possibilities of art, they have grown from the highschool pupils that were waiting around to be taught the „lesson” of Acting into young people who are discovering their own artistic personality. In my opinion, this is the purpose of a Theatre school, because, as Jerzy Grotowski used to say „The personal technique of an actor is the core of the theatrical art.”.

By focusing on the signals that the artist receives *Here* and *Now* from the outside, by being based on the idea of group and collective creation, the Viewpoints method frees the artist from the pressure to invent alone and to be interesting, a pressure that forces and inevitably kills his creativity. There is no internal dynamic independent of the outside world. We ourselves do not exist separately, but only in a given context. The energy of the theatre artist does not come from within, from some kind of focused internal core, but from the external world that the character perceives - therefore he does not have to *act*, but only to *re-act*. *Viewpoints* frees the artist from notions of *right/wrong*, *good/bad*, *right/wrong* and introduces notions like *possibility* and *choice*, much healthier for a lively artistic creation. Another advantage of this method is that it awakens and engages all the artist's senses, making him focused and aware of everything around him, and his scenic creation thus gains depth, complexity and above all **life** - "Even the most stylized art is still about life, and the more life is found into an work of art, the greater the value of that work." (Declan Donnellan)

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