

VIEWPOINTS AND THE SUZUKI METHOD - A LECTURE BY DONNIE MATHER

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Abstract

This lecture, presented at the opening of the 2nd Engrupedança conference at UNIRIO, Rio de Janeiro in 2009, reviews the main points of the Viewpoints training method, as seen through the personal experience of actor Donnie Mather with SITI Company, directed by Anne Bogart. The text lists the content of the different viewpoints and describes the training, its applications and results through examples from various productions of SITI Company. Donnie Mather also introduces the Suzuki method which, according to him, complements the Viewpoints training.

Keywords | Viewpoints | Suzuki method | SITI Company | Anne Bogart | training

Good afternoon everyone, how are you? [Laughter] Raise your hand if you speak English. [Laughter] OK, excellent. I want to thank UNIRIO and Joana [Ribeiro] for inviting me here to be part of this conference, and to be joined by Enrique [Diaz], and Bel [Garcia], and Isabel [Tornaghi] for this talk.

I thought today I'd talk a little bit about my personal history with the Viewpoints training and my relationship to it because it's something that I normally do not talk a lot about in a workshop or a class. Because in a class, when we are training, it's very important to keep the focus on the performers and allow them to have their own personal relationship to the technique. So this begins with a story; in 1992 I went to see a play called *Picnic* by William Inge. And when I arrived to the theater I entered and the space was very empty. There was no scenery; there was a white cyclorama in the back of the theater, the floor was white and tilted towards the audience. This play, *Picnic*, was at the time about forty years old, in the style of Tennessee Williams, and it was set in the American south in the earlier part of the twentieth century. But when I sat down in my seat I didn't see anything that suggested this setting - and suddenly the house lights went out and Jazz music began screaming from the speakers, and some purple florescent lights around the stage lit up, and the actors poured onto the stage and the play began. And immediately I was transported to a world that was very specific and one did not need the scenery. The actors wore period costumes, there were very few props - I think a boy rode a bicycle across the stage a couple of times. But the play resided in the bodies of the actors and in the space between the actors. And that night changed my life. [Laughter]

I wanted to know - even before the play ended - how did they create this world?! What training prepared them to create this play? And so I discovered that the director was Anne Bogart, and some of the actors in the production were members of the newly formed theater company.

Her theater company was called the Saratoga International Theater Institute [SITI], co-created with Tadashi Suzuki from Japan. And I discovered that the training that they shared was one technique called the Viewpoints training and a second technique called the Suzuki method.

For me this story is important because I encountered the work on stage first and then the technique, and the reason why I think this is important for me is because often when one encounters the training they think it's for a particular style of theater, one style only. So I began to train with the SITI Company over fourteen years ago, with both of the techniques, and for the last ten years I've also been teaching as well.

For me I was excited by the Viewpoints because, first it was physical and it was using improvisation, secondly. The training that I was exposed to at that point was a little bit of a version of the American method, the American version of the Stanislavsky method. And what happened to me, and I think, happened with many others in this training, which is that the work with the emotion shut down the physicality of the actor - and so what happened by entering physical training in this way I felt it helped me to open up both intellectually and emotionally.

I personally believe that all techniques are trying to get to at the same thing, yes? But the journey to get there we take different paths. For me it was important because it was physical and at that point the only physical training I had been exposed to was musical theater, and because it involved improvisation at that time, as a young artist, I had a great fear of improvisation. And so I personally was interested in trying to confront that fear.

When I thought of improvisation then, and still think of it in this way now, I think it's as though it's a giant canvas, for a painter I would imagine, and the question becomes how to begin? There are many questions - what color are you going to use, what size brush are you going to use? Do you start in the middle or in the corner? And so the questions can become overwhelming and that too can also paralyze you.

What happened when I started training with the Viewpoints is it gave me a list of tools to put my concentration on, and by focusing my concentration on those tools I suddenly was free to improvise.

Now, training with the SITI Company is unique because you are simultaneously training with the Suzuki method for the actor, and they are very complementary like the Yin and Yang. The Suzuki method has a very strict form that the actor must find freedom inside of, while the Viewpoints deals with improvisation so it has a lot of freedom so the challenge for the actor is to find the form inside it.

Of course as many of you know, Anne Bogart was not the first to articulate the Viewpoints, that would be Mary Overlie. And yet, even Mary and Anne would agree that these are not something new that magically appeared in the twentieth century - these are ideas that every performer has used since the beginning of time.

And the tools that we are talking about are tools that break down the two issues that every performer deals with: the issues of time and space. In fact we are all handling time and space whether we are performers or not. I'm looking at this room now and I see how you are using space, which is different from how we are using space, and I think the commonality is important because an actor has to wake up these things that already exist.

I like how Anne Bogart says this: that they always exist and yet our job as artists is to wake them up.

Mary Overlie describes the technique as a house of cards, if you remove a card the house will fall down. So what she is pointing to is that they are non-hierarchical, in other words shape is not more important than time. I think this points to what is often called the philosophy of the technique. There are many techniques that point to the text - the text is the most important thing of a production. But perhaps the director Robert Wilson would argue that the movement, or the lighting, might be just as important as the words on the page.

So, in this time when I started training with the SITI Company I also spend some time working with Mary Overlie with what she calls "The Six Viewpoints"¹. The story of what happened there from six and how they changed to nine - I think they are now - with Anne... [Laughter] is that Mary was teaching at New York University and Anne met her in the mid seventies, and Anne was very excited because... Anne was also frustrated with actor training at that moment and was looking for something to invigorate the physicality of actors. So there was this great meeting between the dance world and the theater world - Mary is a choreographer and a dancer and teacher and Anne came from the theater and she wanted to "steal" from other mediums. So Anne took those six Viewpoints and she expanded them and refined them to make them very specific for actors, but I would argue that it's applicable to dancers as well.

And these [Physical] Viewpoints² that I work with include:

- Tempo - it's asking the question "how fast, how slow something is?"
- Duration - how long something lasts.
- Kinesthetic Response - a great example of that would be watching a school of fish moving, or a flock of birds moving. It's a question of timing, when does something happen.
- There is the viewpoint of Spatial Relationship - which has to do with the distance between bodies. We are in a spatial relationship right now. It tells a story of who we are and who you are in this moment.
- There's the viewpoint of Architecture - using the actual space we are working in, and allowing it to have a conversation with us.

- There's the viewpoint of Topography – that's the journey of how one gets from one point of the stage to another.
- The viewpoint of Shape - I'm in shape right now, you are in a shape right now - I'm in another shape. So they can be abstract, but they can also be very everyday. Shape can be isolated with one body, or with another body, or with the architecture.
- And lastly there the viewpoint of Gesture - a gesture is an action so it might include many different shapes. There was a gesture, there was another gesture - so they can be abstract or they can be everyday.

What we do when we start training with the Viewpoints is we try to wake them up in as many different ways as we possibly can. It's interesting and fun to work with shapes and timing that are different than how we work everyday, but it's often very difficult to work with those that are closely related to everyday. So each performer begins to have a dialogue with these tools - and ultimately it is ensemble work, so you're not only trying to train this for yourself, but you're trying to train for the ensemble, to create a group connection. It could change, perhaps, in a moment.

So this is kind of a very quick history of Viewpoints training. But personally for me, I find it fascinating because the training changes as I change. After fifteen years I'm older so I have a different - I am a different person. My body is different, I have to deal with a different body - it might change how I listen to the ensemble, or, to an audience. The conversation never ends for me.

I think this points also to that it is a practice, in the truest sense of the word, it's a practice. I love changing the context of the training and coming to places like this, in a different setting, a different culture, a different language because I feel like that also wakes me up as an artist as well. In the ten years that I've been teaching, I've learned a lot but I also have many more questions about it, so I find it interesting with opportunities to teach workshops like this week so that I can continue this investigation.

It actually reminds me of what the structure is to act, you prepare, you prepare, and then you throw it away so that you can be present in the moment. There are many exercises that we will do in the Viewpoints training that are common, that do not change but they will change based on the context. For example there is a context this week of a group of performers that are going to get a taste of this training, very brief, but they are going to get a taste of this, and so there is interest - which is great for any technique, and

the challenge in a workshop like that is to work in such a way as though you've been doing it for many years.

Training with friends of mine in the SITI Company is unique because I know them for many, many years, so the context for me is: can I treat this actress differently even though I've known her for many, many years? So, you see, we are talking not just about waking up these tools, we are also talking about waking up our awareness, overall.

I think I'm almost out of time so I'll tell one last story. There was a production I did, the first production I did with Anne Bogart was actually an opera, called *Seven deadly sins*. And it was a very strange experience because we were invited by New York City Opera, an opera company, and it was the first time Anne directed an opera and none of us are opera singers - we were not hired to sing, I promise. This opera is written by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht and it's actually more a song cycle than it is a full opera, it's only one act. So there is a prologue and there is the scene that is one of the sins, the next scene is the next sin, the next scene is the next sin, and then there is an epilogue - so nine scenes, yes?

So we go in, to work and... Oh I should say that there is one soprano, and she tells the story of *Seven deadly sins*. And so our job as the acting ensemble was to tell the story through our bodies, so it was kind of like acting in a silent movie, almost in that style, that kind of broad Vaudeville style. And so in rehearsal we worked very, very quickly, on our feet, physically. And I really believe that we could have never made that production if we brought in seven actors that had never worked together before. I don't think we could have made this if we didn't know each other; this is where the training from Viewpoints really paid off.

Anne has a phrase, she just says: - Five, six, seven, eight, GO! And that's exactly how we worked. Not always but on that production that's exactly how we worked. So on day one we worked on the prologue, and the next day we worked on in the first sin. So the only thing we had, because we were not singers, we were given a kind of archetype. So you were the "coquette", and you were the "boss", and you were the "lover", and I was the "poet" - so we had an archetype to work with; that was it.

And in each scene we created relationships that we never talked about, but only created physically. Because if I'm playing the poet, then I have an idea on how I might relate to the boss - and so we never talked about the relationships, we only worked physically and each day we created a different scene.

It reminded me, there is Stanislavsky quote that I really, really love, he said: "you should rehearse a play in two weeks or two years". So we basically made this in two weeks.

What's exciting about that is that we didn't have time to get stuck in our head; it was one of the greatest acting lessons I ever got, working on that show. Because, by going: - "five, six, seven, eight, GO", my body made choices that probably my mind would never had come up with.

Now don't get me wrong, there was talk, because half way through, we got stuck. What have we created? Where are we going? How is it going to end? And it was right to get stuck, in that moment, because in the middle of that opera, the middle song, was a *cappella*. So there is a structure, in the opera, which means everything after that is going to change. So there the structure was telling us about the acting, in a way. So after about ten days, eleven days, we had built the piece and went back to the beginning.

And here was the second acting lesson: I had to revisit the crazy choices that I had made, and everyone had made, at the begging of that rehearsal. And I have to say we did not edit very much, we tried to keep what we made, and for me the acting lesson was: how to make it live, how to make it breathe. And so for me that related to the Viewpoints training because it's asking us to stay awake inside of a structure.

I think that's enough.

To listen to this lecture on youtube, click on these links:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNCNCTRbQYs>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jP68Cmrai0c>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9v6zxwdVXY

Notes

¹ Mary Overlie (1946) originally conceived "The Six Viewpoints" system, consisting of: Space; Shape; Time; Emotion; Movement and Story. See also: <http://www.sixviewpoints.com/Theory_3.html>. [N.E.].

² Donnie Mather didn't mention the Physical Viewpoint of Repetition. It's important to note that Anne Bogart and Tina Landau also created a set of "Vocal Viewpoints", including: Pitch; Dynamic; Acceleration/Deceleration; Silence and Timbre. See more in: LANDAU, Tina and BOGART, Anne. *The viewpoints book: a practical guide to viewpoints and composition*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005. [N.E.].

DONNIE MATHER is an actor, teacher, and co-founder of Collective Intelligence Arts. As an actor, he has been Associate Artist of Anne Bogart's SITI Company (2000-2007). In 1995, he began his relationship with SITI Company by training in the Viewpoints and the Suzuki Method, eventually performing with the company in numerous productions. He has spent three seasons at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (1999-2001). Donnie has taught at NYU, Columbia University, Bard College, The New School, Fordham University, University of Puerto Rico, and in Bogotá, Colombia. He holds a BFA in Theatre and a minor in Dance from Western Kentucky University and is currently a faculty member as Movement Instructor for the Atlantic Theatre Conservatory.