

THE VIEWPOINTS BOOK

A Practical Guide
to Viewpoints
and Composition

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LONDON

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PREFACE

“What can I read on Viewpoints?”

The question has been asked of us with increasing regularity over recent years. When either one of us comes close to concluding a class, workshop or production, the questioning often begins: “How do I continue the work?” “How do I apply this to scene work?” “How can I use this in writing my play?” “What if I’m working with people who have not done Viewpoints training?” “What other exercises are there in Composition work?” This book was born out of a desire to answer *some* of the questions we have been asked over the years.

There is not a lot of available material on Viewpoints. There are some articles and essays but, as far as we know, there is no book devoted to the subject, let alone what we have hoped to write here: a comprehensive nuts-and-bolts approach to the uses of Viewpoints. This is not a book on theory, but a practical how-to guide through the stages and applications of the work.

We wrote this book so that our students, actors, collaborators and even skeptics could have something to refer to when desired.

The Viewpoints Book is not definitive, not gospel, not absolute truth. It is written out of personal experience and belief. While we both stand firmly by the notion that Viewpoints is an open process rather than a closed methodology, we do hope that anyone interested in the work will approach it with depth and rigor and the same soul-searching that we both hope *we* have done over the years. Our wish is not that these pages be read as a prescriptive instruction manual, but rather as an array of possibilities, a call to further examination and personalization on the part of the reader.

There *are* steps and basics that we believe are crucial for understanding Viewpoints in the body, and for using it most effectively in training and rehearsal. We have outlined these. There are lazy or undigested ways of teaching Viewpoints and, even more so, talking about it, and people are doing this more and more frequently. But our solution is not that one reads these pages and follows them as dictated. We'd all love an answer, a guarantee, a shortcut. Viewpoints training provides none of these. Although we are laying the work out in a very linear and structured fashion, it's deadly for any artist to mechanically try to follow the steps without wrestling with the questions, adjusting the process, and earning their own discoveries. We hope you read these pages and question. We hope you read them and try. We hope you use them, then write on them, then *rewrite* them, then read them again.

We wrote this book by splitting up the outline, each taking first passes at the chapters we felt strongest about. Then we traded material, adding to each other's work, cutting each other's work, revising together. We made a choice to write from the "we" because the book reflects those things we share as beliefs and practices. Occasionally, in wanting to offer a specific example, we refer to our own productions or experiences: "When Anne directed . . ." or "When Tina directed . . ."

We had difficulty in determining the appropriate syntax in writing to *you*. Are *you* the instructor, the director, a performer, designer, playwright? Leader or participant? For the most part, we

have addressed this book to the person leading the work—the teacher or director. But you will notice that we sometimes fluidly, and perhaps inconsistently, float into becoming the teacher’s or director’s voice ourselves. We might begin an exercise with: “First you gather the group in the center of the space and have everyone close her/his eyes . . .” (addressing the leader), but soon transition into: “Sense the bodies around you, and listen to the sound of breathing . . .” (addressing the participants).

We are also aware that, due to the nature of the subject and the fact that we wrote in tandem, there are many times throughout the book when a topic is revisited, addressed a second or even a third time. We hope we have repeated ourselves within a new context or with a slightly altered perspective.

Each of us was introduced to Viewpoints by another person: Anne from Mary Overlie at New York University, Tina from Anne at the American Repertory Theatre. Both of us went through our own process: first, feeling that the world had been named, that we now had words for what we had always intuited or done; second, becoming seduced by the system itself, its power, its effect, its style; and third, recognizing the need for reexamination and reshaping of the technique to reflect our own passions and observations. In writing down many of the exercises in this book, we found ourselves remembering in vivid detail the moments in which we first created them. Almost always, the exercises were born out of moments of terror: “I have six hours and twenty actors and what am I going to do?!”

We are torn between the desire to provide a map for you and the desire to tell you to rip up this book and enter the terror for yourself. As Joseph Campbell has said: “Where you stumble, there you shall find your treasure.” We invite the stumbling. We hope maybe to have indicated a path but not cleared it, leaving you to work through the most thorny areas. Viewpoints is an open process, not a rigid technique. We hope that this book will be for you not an end but a beginning.

Anne Bogart and Tina Landau
October 2005

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.

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

language 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.