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UNDER CONSTRUCTION:
ACTING, CREATIVITY, COLLABORATION, AND SITI COMPANY

By

Carol Stewart
B.F.A., Goodman School of Drama, 1984
M.A.T., University of Louisville, 1994

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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In Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2019

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 16, 2019

By the Following Dissertation Committee:

Dissertation Co-Director: Ann C. Hall

Dissertation Co-Director: Albert J. Harris Jr.

Annette Allen

Julia Dietrich

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family: my mother, Kathy Coons, and my brother Tom Coons, who always knew I could do this.

This work is also dedicated to my dear friend and mentor Bert Harris, without whom this couldn't have happened.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people – family, friends, and mentors – without whose love and support this acrobatic feat would not have been possible, and whose encouragement is a part of every page. I have relied heavily on the kindnesses of almost anyone who isn't a stranger – but there are certainly those who have gone above and beyond on my behalf.¹

I am so grateful to Ann Hall, Annette Allen, Julia Dietrich, and Bert Harris – they have all been enormously generous with their time, commentary, and inspiration. Ann came in when I most needed her; Julia could not have responded more quickly to my invitation if she had tried. Annette in particular has been all-in with me since Day One of this (really incredibly long) journey through creativity and madness. Among other things, Bert has been and will continue to be the best person to see plays with (and then discuss all the nuts and bolts of them in what to other people would be excruciatingly boring detail): more importantly, he has been a true friend.

The constancy of love and support from my mother Kathy Coons and my brother Tom Coons had made this all possible (the ham and the bourbon were always-welcome bonuses). The voices of my father John Coons, and my grandparents Nellie and Raymond Radmacher, urged me on as well (and Nellie in particular knew the true value of a formal education, since she had been denied so much of it).

¹ And that means that these acknowledgements are so lengthy that they require a footnote of warning. Consider yourselves warned.

I have been so, so fortunate to find myself with such an embarrassment of riches when it comes to friends, and I have shamelessly relied on them throughout ... well, throughout whatever we want to call All of This. Julia Guichard and Stirling Shelton have cheered me on through any number of major life events; they are hands-down the best thing that could ever have come from my time at the Goodman (and who would ever have thought *that* would lead to *this?*). Quinn Chipley and Leo Schwendau supported me from the moment I first dipped my toes in the water of graduate school of any kind (along with jumping in as the best dinner-party co-hosts in the history of dinner parties – they are woven into the fabric of many of the best times of my life, both big and small). Julie Shahroudi has been an inspiration and a source of endless light and love – the best and truest friend I could ever ask for.

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Tony O'Keeffe and John Gatton welcomed me into the halls of academia with open arms, and then made sure I was happy there. I need to thank the best friends and neighbors anyone could ever have: the Planks, the Spencers, and Clara Leuthart – not only have they been constants throughout my life, they also served as early inspiration for what it meant to lead rich, creative lives; lives that made me decide long ago that this academic gig, what with the cool outfits and interesting points of view, seemed pretty darn awesome.

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I can see the long wooden hook coming from backstage, ready to yank me off into the wings for having spent so much of your time here on the acknowledgement pages, but I've been willing to risk the slings and arrows in order to make sure you know how much a part of this you all are, and how endlessly grateful I am.

ABSTRACT

UNDER CONSTRUCTION:
ACTING, CREATIVITY, COLLABORATION, AND SITI COMPANY

Carol Stewart

April 16, 2019

This dissertation is a case study of New York's Saratoga International Training Institute (known as SITI Company), one of the most innovative American theatre companies of the last twenty-five years. Research for this study was based in part on the author's experience with the work of SITI throughout those years, including participation in intensive training with the company and observations of rehearsal and performance of the 2014 world premiere production of *Steel Hammer* at the Humana Festival of New American Plays, at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

SITI Company is defined by their dedication to actor training, and to a democratic structure of collaboration in which actors, directors, playwrights, and designers are all full collaborators in the creative work of the company. While SITI is known for its postmodern productions of devised theatre, the company's development of three unique training methods – Suzuki, Viewpoints, and Composition – is the most significant element of their artistic legacy. Taught and practiced in combination, these methods give the actor new ways to approach theatrical embodiment by developing skills based on kinesthetic response, stage presence, and creative collaboration. This approach to making theatre

frees actors from the emotional and psychologically-based practices of American Method training, and grounds them in a physical presence that transcends genre and style.

The work of SITI Company serves as an ideal platform for considering the work of the actor within the larger framework of creativity theory research, which sometimes emphasizes the concept of “new-ness,” raising questions about the value of the creative contributions of artists who “interpret” rather than “invent,” such as orchestral musicians, ballet dancers, and actors.

New research in collaborative creativity broadens our understanding of the work of actors, who always work in collaboration, including taking part in the creative relationship between the actor and the audience.

This dissertation uses the intersection of creativity theory, performance theory, sports theory, the dynamics of creative collaboration, and the training methods of SITI Company as a means of analyzing the experience of “flow,” wherein self-consciousness falls away, perceptions of time disappear, and actions seem to happen without effort. The conditions for finding flow are based in skills that can be learned and implemented by the actor in training, rehearsal, and performance.

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PRELUDE

Under Construction

At the doorways entering the theatre
an artist's easel will have a blackboard on it
announcing:

Tonight we will be performing scenes

6

79

29

22

67

107

18

57

122

5

41

This version of the script is the way it's been done
with the SITI company,
and it seemed to us that these scenes,
in this order, are wonderful.

But, in the future, when others do it,
it may be that they will want to throw out some of these scenes,
write some new ones,
change the order of things.

And so, in this way, the piece will remain,
like America,
permanently
under construction.

Under Construction
— Charles Mee

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Remember your lines and don't bump into the furniture.

— attributed to Spencer Tracy

In the PBS series, “Shakespeare Uncovered,” scholar Marjorie Garber says: “Something is happening on the stage *for us*, so that it might not have to happen *to us*.” If that is the case, what is the creative work and experience of the artist who engages in the action of the stage on our behalf?

One of the goals of the creative work of the actor is to serve as the point of connection between the larger endeavor of the theatrical event and the audience. The actor becomes the vehicle through which the play – an exploration of some part of the human experience – is offered. For us, the viewers, to engage with the play, we must see something we recognize, something that resonates on the stage in front of us. Whether that resonance is expressed through the theatrical conventions of Realism or Anti-Realism, through a language we understand or a series of unrecognizable sounds, through the familiar or the alien, we look to the stage to see some kind of subjectively authentic reflection of ourselves and our experience of the world. The actor’s task is to serve as a conduit for that experience; it is, in fact, to become some manner of *us*, in a brief period of time and in a specific space, *for us* and *with us* (States, *Pleasure*, 28). The actor’s

creative work is to determine how that can best happen, and to reliably and authentically make it happen, performance after performance. This dissertation examines that process and what it requires of the actor while placing it in the context of theories associated with creativity and performance. A second point of focus is on the ways that creativity theories under-represent and/or misinterpret that work.

Due to the ephemeral nature of stage performance, defining its creative process and results is a complicated task. Since theatre is entirely allocentric, it can only be experienced through our presence over a period of time. To further complicate matters, it's not always entirely clear what the artifact of acting *is* to begin with. The play? The character? The actor herself? The audience's experience of it? Additionally, since theatre requires both artist/s and viewer/s, stage performance can only be experienced in a specific, agreed-upon location. There are no second or third "takes" in theatre; it's now or never.

Defining the creative nature of acting leads to questions of interpretation, the work of the solo creator versus the creative experience of the ensemble, and the complications associated with different theatrical styles and forms. These variables raise another set of questions about the unique qualities of performed embodiment in theatre: a process that requires some type of authenticity, connection, and repeatability (whatever those ideas might be in different genres of theatre). How does an actor train to meet those creative challenges, and what are the creative demands associated with the rehearsal process – and how are those experiences different in performance? What is it, exactly, that actors do?

In his book, *The Necessity of Theatre: The Art of Watching and Being Watched*, theorist Paul Woodruff defined theatre in this way: “Theatre is the art in which human beings make human action worth watching in a measured time and space” (4). He maintained that the idea of watching has a vital place in our culture, historically and contemporarily, and that theatre is an important tool in learning empathy. He went on to discuss the responsibilities associated with the “watcher” (the audience) and the “watched” (the actor) that are part of generating that cultural value. Woodruff noted that it is the actor’s process of *inviting* the experience of watching that is the foundation of performance: in his definition, the task of the actor is to create work that is *worth watching*. The task of the watcher is to accept that the actor is not “just” a performer, but that both spectator and actor are vital creative partners in the act of creative *making* in the theatre. One of the creative challenges for the actor is to invite the watcher every night: every performance is a new partnership. SITI director Anne Bogart presents another way of looking at this “newness” of the creative partnership in theatre that the actor must invite, performance after performance, when she says:

Here’s what you have to remember, going into every performance: there’s a very good chance that there’s someone in the audience who is visiting the theatre for the very first time tonight. There’s also a very good chance that there is someone in the theatre for whom this will be the last time they will ever be able to come to the theatre. Those people are your audience – they are the people you must reach (2013 lecture).

What, then, is the creative experience of the actor if that is their responsibility on the stage?

In analyzing the creative work of the actor it is important to remember that in many ways, acting is not about pure personal expression, or at least not in the way that painting or writing are about personal expression. Acting is about creative expression *embodied*; about using the actor's body to express ideas, themes, thoughts, and experiences. Most often, these ideas do not originate with the actor, no matter how much he or she might agree with them. Broadly speaking, actors don't necessarily start acting because they have something to say; instead they often go into acting because they find that they're good at the mimetic process of serving as some kind of live creative conduit between the content of the play, the moment of performance, and the audience: they have, and are interested in developing, the skills of inviting the watcher in a measured time and space.

It's also worth noting that, when analyzing their work, we sometimes consider stage actors to be the mouthpiece of other, more "obviously" creative artists, the ones with the original ideas and stories: the playwrights and directors. It's also true that we sometimes think of actors as frivolous, as Woodruff's ideal dynamic of being "worth watching" slides toward something that is much more like "Look at me! I'm in a play!" Few artists would define either of those ideas as vital creative work.

This is not to suggest that acting is somehow more complicated or more challenging than other creative activities. However, as we examine what is it that actors *do* in order to consider *how* they do it, acting can seem somewhat mysterious – that might contribute to the way that many creativity researchers simply work around the edges of it. Being the creator, the creative process, and the creative product all at once is the foundation of live theatre. Having to account for that three-element creator/creative

package in generally recognizable walking and talking human behavior, and then make it all repeatable for performance after performance, usually while saying words that someone else wrote, and also to do that in collaboration with other artists and an audience that changes every night – that’s very different from painting. That also makes it harder to break down and analyze it, especially given the different types of acting that have different notions about the concept of and goals for *embodiment* on the stage.

There are two stories about Laurence Olivier that shed some light on the challenges that face the actor. During a 2006 “Inside the Actors Studio” interview, Dustin Hoffman described a moment when he had the opportunity he’d been waiting for: to ask Olivier about acting. Hoffman asked, “What’s the reason that we do what we do?” In answer, Olivier leaned in so that his face was about four inches away from Hoffman’s, stared directly into Hoffman’s eyes and said, “Look at me Look at me Look at me Look at me.” Good actors don’t only want the spotlight: they want it and they know how to powerfully and rightfully *claim* their space in it at the same time – and the better the actor, the stronger the claim.

The other story is set in Olivier’s dressing room after an astounding performance in *Othello*, where everyone in that theatre knew that they were seeing something legendary. Frank Finlay, a friend who played Iago in the production, went backstage afterward to congratulate him and found Olivier in tears. Alarmed, Finlay said, “Why are you so upset? You were brilliant out there!”, and Olivier said, “I know. And I don’t know how I did it” (LaButte). This is the challenge of repeatability in stage acting: identifying how you got there.

Actor training, inspiration, and creative flow

Like musicians, great actors spend their lives expanding and refining their use of their instrument: in the case of an actor, that means the body, the voice, and the imagination, along with skills in research and textual analysis, all in some combination. Each school of acting has its own approach to how that works. There are, however, some larger, more general themes associated with the phenomenology of the actor on stage: ideas that are harder to train towards.

Both Anne Bogart and Lawrence Olivier touched on one of the biggest challenges to the actor: each night is a new opportunity to make the interpretation of the character *live* on stage. Yet the creative challenge with interpretation is that “making something new” is not entirely unlike “somehow making the ‘same’ thing new over and over again.” Again, this sets the actor aside from the painter, who, while they may paint the same subject over and over again (Monet’s haystacks come to mind) is not required to do so by the nature of painting, or by the script and the demands of a particular production.

The most significant difference between the work of the actor and the work of someone who is a painter or a poet is that, for the most part, a poet or painter can rely on, and even wait for, a certain amount of inspiration, while the actor must achieve “inspiration” in the moment, every time. That moment of inspiration is sometimes called an A-ha! Moment, and a sustained feeling of inspired connection to the creative work at hand is described by researchers in creativity as the “flow state” or simply “flow.”² While we may not know that researchers call it “flow,” we recognize it when we see it, hear it, or experience it. “She’s in the groove,” or “He’s on fire!,” or “She’s in the zone!”

² Flow will be defined more specifically within that body of research later in this chapter.

Musicians, DJ's, dancers: we see the moment of inspiration, we see the creative energy flowing through everything that's happening. Everyone watching Olivier's Othello that night knew what they were seeing, right along with Olivier himself.

Without some understanding of how flow might work, and how they might best bring it about, an actor is entirely at the mercy of the Muse and, as Olivier's Othello tells us, that's a miserable place to be. In his book, *The Art of the Actor*, Stanislavski scholar Jean Benedetti noted that some of Stanislavski's techniques were developed to serve as fall-back for the times when inspiration is not forthcoming; actors sometimes (derogatorily) interpret that as "faking your way through it" (116). However, what if part of actor training is about developing the skill of regularly being able to step into the open creative moment because you have trained yourself to recognize the door (and even to create that door if you can't see it from where you're standing)?

Actors who cannot find some kind of creative flow frequently struggle; they become confused and frustrated and distracted. They do not understand why some performances are "connected" and some are not. Perhaps they experienced a moment in rehearsal or performance that somehow allowed them to fall into that connected space where everything came together, freely and seemingly without effort on their part, and they were not sure what that experience was, or how they got there. They were doing all the "right" things, but after the fact they often associate the feeling of flow with the emotional content of that part of the play as it bloomed around them in that moment. The next time they're on stage in the scene that felt so magical the night before, they may be desperately searching around inside themselves trying to recreate the emotion – and in doing so, accidentally pull themselves farther and farther away from the live connection

on the stage. It is that live connection, the action, on stage that could have triggered the state of flow in the first place.

All this is to say that an analysis of the concept of flow and methods of reaching and developing it can be beneficial to actors. However, the relationship between acting and flow is rarely a point of study in the field of creativity theory.

Creativity and Flow

Research on the creative process and experience is relatively new. Foundational work began in the US in the 1950s, driven primarily by psychologist and social scientist Mihali Csikszentmihalyi at the University of Chicago. Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues conducted thousands of hours of interviews with people from all walks of life in an attempt to get closer to understanding the experience of what he called the “A-ha!” moment of discovery, and the experience that can lead to the A-ha: flow. Part of his research was based on conversations with people who are what he calls “Big C Creators”: individuals whose work in their specialty has significantly affected not only their specific domain, but the larger culture in which that domain exists. Big C Creators push those boundaries into uncharted waters. Science, business, literature, the arts, philosophy, sports, history, mathematics: in his research, all of these endeavors offer potential for deep creative work. His continued research has been focused on interviews with “small c creators”: regular people who are simply doing things that fully engage them. These are people who rock climb, who knit, who parent, who read novels, who work on farms, who work on Wall Street. He found that all of these people – big C and small c – experience flow, and describe the experience in consistent ways, whether the activity is new research in neuroscience or knitting.

What he found was that, while in flow, people feel a sense of focused concentration and command, along with an altered sense of time, and a complete loss of self-consciousness. They are so completely engaged in what they are doing that the world around them seems to disappear: there is only the task at hand, a task that almost feels as if it is doing itself.

What Csikszentmihalyi's respondents said about their experience of flow – what it feels like, what it allowed them to do – was consistent across remarkably diverse disciplines and activities, and even across cultures. His research showed that the experience of flow doesn't seem to be in any way dependent on education, age, intelligence, or social class. Flow, apparently, is something we are all capable of experiencing when engaged in something that we enjoy and are at least moderately good at.

Once he defined and documented the state of flow, Csikszentmihalyi shifted his research in the direction of these questions: If we can all experience flow, is there a way to summon it at will? Is it possible to extend the brightly illuminated focus of the A-ha! moment into something that can be sustained over time? What are the conditions in which we are most likely to experience that transition from sudden inspiration to an open, extended, and deeply creative space? Again, he looked first to the Big C creators: his early interviews with them suggested that, along with a high level of mastery of their domain, they had more than their share of A-ha! moments, and without knowing a specific term for it, they were able to describe the dynamics of a state of flow. What's more, they were also able to access an ongoing state of flow more often, and for longer periods of time.

Csikszentmihalyi's research showed that that the flow state lives where there is a situational challenge that is at the farthest reaches of the skills of the individual. If the challenge isn't great enough, the person gets bored; if the challenge outstrips her skills, she becomes frustrated. People with a high level of skill are able to identify challenges more easily because they know what they are capable of, and so as they work to push the domain in which they work in new directions, they are regularly at the edge of that matrix where skills meet challenge (*Flow*, 109).

Through thousands of interviews, Csikszentmihalyi found several consistently shared components associated with reaching the flow state. The activity must have clear goals, and provide an engaging balance between the level of skill and the level of challenge. The flow state is autotelic and self-reinforcing, but an opportunity for direct, immediate feedback must be in place: without feedback, the *doer* can become unsure of their progress. With consistent feedback, there's an increase in confidence, an increased ability to fine-tune the balance between skill and challenge, and the facility to set ever-more specific goals, all creating a self-reinforcing loop (*Flow*, 113).

This research on the experience of flow as a means of analyzing creative process offers a new, different platform for considering the work of the actor. Western theories about and analysis of the creative challenges of modern acting have generally focused on developing and playing a character: the questions are variations on "How do you do that?" The results of Csikszentmihalyi's interviews suggest that we can learn more about "How do you do that?" by beginning with his more phenomenological point of departure for examining the creative experience itself and asking: "What is it like when you do that?"

It is important to note that when Csikszentmihalyi published his initial work on flow based on interviews with hundreds of Big C creators, his research included thousands of hours of interviews (*Creativity*, 373-391). However, in the index that provides the names of all the participants in the study, only one actor is listed – Ed Asner – and Asner’s commentary is not included in the book that presents Csikszentmihalyi’s findings.

Sports, flow, and acting

Research on the dynamics of flow has expanded in the past fifteen years into the field of sports performance theory. Early work was conducted by Susan Jackson (in partnership with Csikszentmihalyi), when she conducted a series of interview to investigate the experience of flow in athletes. In these interviews, the ways in which athletes described flow sounded exactly like those of the poets or painters who spoke with Csikszentmihalyi: they said that the awareness of surroundings fell away, time felt suspended, there was no obvious effort involved in the task at hand, and the results of actions – a perfect pass, a basket from the 3-point line, a serve – seemed inevitable, or almost as if they occurred on their own, and the person was simply a channel for what was happening. Notably, a large number of artists in a variety of disciplines use the same image when speaking of the sources of their “inspiration.” The same set of circumstances and requirements that often leads to the experience of flow also appeared: the way in which the level of skill met the level of challenge, and the need for immediate, focused feedback.

The next step in their research was to investigate what an athlete requires in order to dependably find a state of flow on a schedule, rather than waiting and hoping for a

point where everything somehow “clicks into place” on the playing field. Jackson found that, using the structure of the rules of the sport, it was easier for athletes to identify their strengths and weaknesses within their own skill set in some detail, and assess specific qualities of each particular challenge. That information eliminates the ambiguity that can impede flow (where the goal is something abstract like “to win”); instead it provides flexibility, where athlete can fine-tune the level of challenge to their level of skill. Jackson, Cooper, and Millman all concluded that the ability to lay the groundwork where the flow state is more likely to occur is itself an observable and learnable set of skills.

Athletes work to succeed within the rules of the game. They also know that the same game (golf, ping pong, a triathlon) is never the same: there are always different opponents, different conditions of play, and differences in their own abilities on any given day. Rules make games dynamic, and give them great energy: pushing oneself to the limit of your skills inside of those rules is the best way to regularly access flow on the field.

That an actor must, like an athlete, access flow on a schedule, at particular times and places, suggests that in terms of creative experience, acting may be much more like playing a sport than it is like painting. Actors don’t need to win when they perform; in that way their goal is different from that of athletes, though actors certainly want to succeed in what they’re doing. However, actors could benefit from having a specific set of quantifiable and doable tasks that can reliably lead them toward flow as a means of fulfilling the creative demands of stage acting.

There is another similarity between athletes and actors: working as part of a team. Success in many sports depends on teamwork and interdependence; great teams work to

find paths to flow for the group, not just for the individual player. Like athletes, actors prepare for the work independently, but the majority of their time is spent working in creative collaboration with other artists, where everyone brings something to the table, and the goal of rehearsal and performance is making something cohesive that is larger than the sum of those individual contributions. The focus is on creative interpretation within and by the group rather than on each actor working solo.

The series of questions posed to creative people in Csikszentmihalyi's interviews focused heavily on the experience and work of the individual, neglecting to record aspects of collaboration with teachers, mentors, coaches, partners, a group, or a team. While sports performance research includes work on this concept, a new field of creativity studies focuses entirely on this dynamic: collaborative creativity.

Collaborative Creativity

Recent research by Vera John-Steiner and others (Miell, Littleton) explores the nature and benefits of creative partnership, and challenges the Romantic notion of the solitary individual creator. These investigations into the workings of creative collaboration are particularly valuable to a project like this one, with its illustration via SITI Company—an artistic ensemble dedicated to collaboration on all levels: members of SITI have been making work, training, and teaching together for twenty-six years.

In her book, *Creative Collaboration*, John-Steiner wrote: “One of my central claims is that *the construction of a new mode of thought relies on and thrives with collaboration*” (7, emphasis hers), and she offered some parameters that help define the nature of collaborative groups: who is in them, what makes those people collaborators, how they work. Her analysis indicated that true creative collaboration requires a high

level of democracy because creativity (as researched by Csikszentmihalyi and others) requires very specific goals. If the people in the group don't all share the same focus, collaboration suffers. This theme of democratically shared goals provides a method of assessing elements of collaboration. She provided detailed case studies of democratic collaborations, including a case study of the theatrical ensemble the Group Theatre.

She also presented a working model of the practices of effective creative collaborative teams, with an emphasis on the structure and history of the ensemble, and the ways in which the collaborators are able to connect to new ideas and new ways of seeing. She stated that when the collaborators work in a more democratic fashion, rather than in an hierarchical one, this gives the individuals in the ensemble creative agency and builds confidence in their contributions to the project. Collaborators who develop a long-term history of working together are able to build more effectively on what has come before: over time, they create a shared vocabulary about and connections to the work, and they can rely on a kind of creative shorthand that allows them to work more efficiently. However, the ensemble also benefits from regularly bringing new contributors in from outside: they bring fresh ideas and new energy that prevents a kind of staleness that can creep into the creative shorthand that comes from long collaboration – we may be able to work together seamlessly because we have done so for years, but I may also believe that I already know everything you're going to do before you do it. These collaborators are temporary guests – they are not there to join the ensemble long-term, but rather to invite new, unpredictable energy into the collaborative process (6).

Finally, John-Steiner discusses the importance of teaching or mentoring. She maintains that working with students requires constant change on the part of the artist

who is mentoring or teaching the methods practiced by the ensemble; the teacher is required to look at praxis in new ways in order to communicate those ideas to students who come to the work from different places and with different goals. Returning to the ensemble having practiced a kind of flexibility of thought as it applies to the larger project, the teacher can bring new insights into both process and the larger creative goals of the group (151).

This research on the dynamics of the most effective methods at the heart of successful collaboration provides an important platform for considering the work of the stage actor, who by definition cannot complete a creative project alone. The specific elements John-Steiner mentions – an established ensemble that sometimes incorporates guest artists, and that relies on teaching as a means of deepening the collaborative experience – is a perfect description of the structure and process of SITI Company.

SITI Company

In 1992, directors Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki came together with a group of like-minded theatre artists and created the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, or, as it is now known, SITI Company. Their goal was to redefine and revitalize contemporary theater in the United States, in part through international collaboration (SITI, web).

The development of Bogart's and Suzuki's aesthetics within and beyond the artistic practices of SITI generated three unique and markedly different methods of actor training: what they refer to as Suzuki, the Viewpoints, and Composition.³ Practiced together, these techniques have great resonance, and the differences among them generate

³ The SITI training method of Viewpoints is founded in a dance technique called "The Six Viewpoints," developed by choreographer Mary Overlie. The use of the word "Viewpoints" will refer to the SITI practice unless otherwise indicated.

a useful and vital creative tension. All three techniques seek, as Suzuki says in *The Way of Acting*, to “strive to restore the wholeness of the human body in the theatrical context...” (15).

The Suzuki Method is physically demanding and exceptionally rigorous. Its focus is on strengthening the core of the actor’s body with movements that repeatedly challenge the actor’s control of that core by throwing him off balance. The actor is taught to resist that challenge by focusing her energy down through her feet into the floor, and on down into the center of the earth in order to find a powerful stillness – this sometimes referred to as the “vertical” dynamic of Suzuki (Bogart, in “Balancing Acts”). The training helps the actor develop great strength and precision; onstage that translates into a focused and palpable stage presence. In Suzuki training and practice, the actor must repeatedly push the psyche aside in order to pursue a relentless questioning of the body, a process that uses the body to focus the will.

While Suzuki strengthens the body and deepens internal awareness, the practice of Viewpoints strengthens the facilities of kinesthetic impulse, open awareness, and connections to others as if they were each another “muscle” rather than experiential concepts.

The Viewpoints work on a horizontal plane, with the actors’ focus extending in all directions around them as they develop the ability to listen and observe with the whole body, and to physically communicate expressions of space and time (“Balancing Acts,” web).

The language of the Viewpoints sounds formal, even technical; the way the vocabulary is expressed through the body is entirely organic. There are three areas of

awareness and practice: Space, Shape and Time. The Viewpoints of Space includes architecture, spatial relationship, and topography. The Viewpoints of Shape focus on the actor's body and includes shape and gesture, with gesture broken down further into behavioral and expressive gestures. The Viewpoints of Time include tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition. The various Viewpoints can be practiced one at a time, in combination, or with the full "vocabulary," depending on the focus of the training at any moment.⁴

The Viewpoints are similar to Suzuki training in that they require commitment to the moment and a disciplined focus, but that commitment and focus is directed toward practice in creating open, direct, and immediate connections. Everything in the space becomes something that the actor can push back against, form an alliance with, echo or respond to in some way. Bogart describes the Viewpoints as "a balance of multiple possibilities sustained for a number of people" (Cummings, 76).

The power of the Viewpoints is the way it enhances the opportunity for play – you don't have time to think. Something enters your awareness, and before you can worry about the "right" thing to do, you have already done it. Because the vocabulary is so specific, practice over time allows the actor to develop an equally specific level of awareness of each element, and to naturally internalize their practice of each over time.

In terms of the relationship between acting, flow, and sport, both Viewpoints and Suzuki focus on skills that can be clearly identified and improved, and provide both internal and external sources of immediate feedback. Both methods require actors to think in physical rather than analytic or emotional terms, and their rules are clear. Each

⁴One of Bogart's goals in developing the Viewpoints was to create what she called a "shared vocabulary" for stage actors (something more nuanced than "downstage left"), much in the way that both classical and modern dance have a vocabulary of choreography.

requires different kinds of immersive and imaginative focus, and once the actor gains some of the basic skills, the practice of both can be self-reinforcing. Both provide opportunities for the actor to situate herself in a place where the challenge pushes her to the edge of her skills, increasing the availability of flow while offering the means to learn flow as a skill.

SITI's Composition technique serves as a bridge between training methods and rehearsal. The practice of Composition is based on creating a highly structured "scene" from the ground up, and is focused on a particular project that is in development or rehearsal. Actors are asked to create a scene associated with the ideas, plot, language, and/or characters of a play, and are given a list of themes and concepts that must somehow be included in the scene. The length of the scene is determined in advance: usually 5 or 10 minutes at most, and all actors assigned to the group must appear in it. The list is always long – a much longer list than seems possible for so short a scene. Some items on the list are vague ("the moon," "betrayal," or "a surprise"), and some are very specific ("10 seconds of dancing," "20 seconds of silence," or "singing"). What's more, these scenes are also developed quickly, over the course of just a few hours (training session, 2013).

Composition sets up a kind of training field that is bound by rules created in association with the play ("the moon" appears on a Composition list associated with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example). The short time given to develop the piece puts the actors in a place where they must play the game well (and the challenge of including and "composing" all the items is a kind of game), while giving themselves a lot of room

to improvise and respond to the moment within those rules – much as athletes do in the moment of play.

Why SITI Company?

Research on the experience of artists who make significant contributions to their field only marginally addresses issues of creative interpretation in performance; also, much of that work privileges the experience of the individual rather than documenting concepts of collaboration. By using SITI Company as a research subject, the application of creativity theories can focus on the creative experience and practice of actors who are members of a non-hierarchical collaborative ensemble that is widely recognized expanding our understanding of the responsibilities of the actor and approaches to actor training. While this research is based on a case study to facilitate the application of theory, it also provides a template for further research examining the actor’s creative experience in other approaches to training and rehearsal; the work also adds a unique point of view concerning the body of work that documents SITI Company itself.

The stated goal of SITI is that they work to “redefine and revitalize contemporary theater in the United States,” and a great deal of that work is built on developing, practicing, and – most important – sharing their specific approach to actor training, rehearsal, and performance over the twenty-six year life of the company (web). For the majority of those twenty-six years, the actors of SITI Company have been engaged in teaching their practices to others: actors, directors, educators, designers, and choreographers. This dedication to sharing training practices is unusual. Unlike many other companies that focus on their own theatre-making, often with a regular performance space in New York City or other large metropolitan areas, SITI Company

instead has dedicated its resources to developing its own training center in Saratoga, New York, emphasizing the importance of this element of their work by not connecting it directly with a performance space. Additionally, for the past two decades, company members have traveled to cities around the world to hold intensive training workshops for artists interested in studying their methods.

One of the most significant results of SITI's partly itinerant approach to performance and training is this sharing of their methods. Ordinarily, an actor might see a powerful performance by an ensemble and want to know more about the company's approach to making that kind of theatre, or the methods of being on stage that that company exhibits, only to find that observation of the production itself is as far as it goes. Sometimes this first-hand (and frustrating) observation of the work is supplemented by information from interviews with or articles about the ensemble, or sometimes even short workshops. In contrast, the techniques of SITI Company are accessible to anyone who is interested; training opportunities with the company are always available, in sessions ranging from two weeks to a new program that lasts a full year.

The results of the years devoted to training is that thousands of students have learned the techniques of Suzuki, the Viewpoints, and Composition from the founders themselves: a feat no other theatre company has come close to. This achievement strongly suggests a cultural parallel with the U.S. tour of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1921 and the subsequent demand by U.S. actors for training in Stanislavski's System and the demand for the training developed and taught by SITI actors. Whether or not their productions will prove to have the kind of artistic legacy of the Moscow Art Theatre's

production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, their training methods have dramatically changed the landscape of actor training throughout the West.

The unique and well-documented structure of the training, rehearsal, and performance methods of SITI Company, along with the company's significant impact on contemporary theatre and actor training, makes SITI a highly appropriate subject for applied case study analysis.

Steel Hammer

SITI Company has developed and premiered many productions at Actors Theatre's Humana Festival of New American Plays; Actors Theatre has been a creative home-away-from-home for the entire twenty-six year life of the company. I've had the opportunity to see every show SITI has performed at Actors, and after training with the company, I was eager to see what I'd learned about their training methods applied to a new production. Since I'd made strong connections to the SITI actors during my time in the Training Intensive program, they were happy to include me as an observer of *Steel Hammer* throughout rehearsals and performance.

SITI's interpretation and adaptation of a song-cycle opera (also called *Steel Hammer*) about the legendary American hero, John Henry, is a production that was intentionally conceived as a way to reach outside theatre to find new artistic collaborators. However, this extensive collaboration illuminated the ways in which their non-hierarchical ensemble approach to developing a production can falter when placed within a larger hierarchical system.

This project

Given the unique approach to actor training developed by SITI and the way those methods inform their productions, the company serves as a particularly strong case study for the intersection between theories associated with creativity and the experience of the actor in training, rehearsal, and performance. Their methods are well-documented, and the goals of those methods have direct ties to the ways creativity theorists discuss their research. This project documents and analyzes those connections, and begins to address the gaps in creativity research on the topic of the creative phenomenology of the actor.

CHAPTER II

CREATIVITY

*Theatre is not about understanding what is going on.
It's about meeting something you don't know.*
— Anne Bogart

Introduction

This chapter introduces the concept of creativity within both historical and contemporary theoretical frames, and includes early writings, definitions, developing models, social and psychological research, theoretical constructs, and the use of metaphor to describe what is otherwise difficult to describe. These ideas are then applied to the creative experience of the actor, and are used to introduce the training and rehearsal methods of SITI Company.

History, concepts, and definitions

Our record of writings on the creative impulse and process began in the West in Ancient Greece, when Plato maintained that the creative urge was a kind of demon and that engaging with the product of that urge—the product being a mere imitation of some element of the real world—pushed us away from the true illumination of reality: what we perceive is equivalent to shadows of reality, as if projected on the back wall of a Cave. Thus, artists dangerously created shadows of the shadows at the back of the Cave

(Weiner, 35). This connection between creativity and an external “mover” is later reflected in various writings (by Plato and others) on the “Divine” as a source of creation. In his book on the history and theories of creativity, Rob Pope notes that early writers considered creation as something a deity brings forth from a void, or as something an outside force shapes from chaos (37). When medieval writers said that God created Creation from nothing, this claim was also true in reverse: there was no creation without God.⁵

A focus on the concept of human imagination, rather than on God, was an element of the rise of humanism in the Renaissance (Weiner, 53). However, an isolated imagination—in which human beings create something from nothing entirely on their own—was considered suspicious, even dangerous. Pope uses Gertrude in *Hamlet* as an example, when she describes Hamlet’s antic disposition, and says “This bodiless Creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in” (III; iv): in other words, the products of imagination without a divine hand could indicate madness (38). In the Enlightenment and beyond, human imagination was no longer seen as a symptom of madness, as cultural recognition of the importance of *ingenuity* took hold, and writers started to make a distinction between “imagination” and “imitation.” However, while the spark of intuition was still attributed to an external deity, there was a shift toward the idea of an internal process that resulted in a creative product (Weiner, 66).

The Byronic hero of the Romantics introduced the idea that the artist was driven, at least in part, by overwhelming emotion that could only be expressed through creative

⁵This section on the historical development of concepts of creativity relies heavily on the work of Rob Pope (*Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*) and Jane Piirto (*Understanding Creativity*). Most writers in the field are focused on contemporary research and ideas; Pope and Piirto have most expansively documented the history.

work. This period also introduced the idea of the “tortured artist”: all that emotion both came from and also fed the artist’s inner demons. It is important to note that this cultural concept is still prevalent today: from James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and Virginia Woolf to Sid Vicious, Amy Winehouse, and Heath Ledger, artists are often portrayed as tortured geniuses.⁶

Actor Heath Ledger is a good example of the ways in which the contemporary intersection between overwhelming emotion and the popular imagination of the tortured artist plays out. The question of whether his death was intentional or not has remained, but even renowned actor Jack Nicholson immediately embraced the notion that he must have taken his own life because he had gone too far into the dark psyche of the character Ledger played in “The Dark Knight Rises,” the Joker.⁷ Our culture has come to expect that kind of “madness” from actors, based in great part on our awareness of emotional and psychological struggles of well-known actors of the 20th and 21st centuries. Many of those actors have been associated with the practice of a concept called “Emotion Recall” that is part of The Method, or Method Acting, as developed by Lee Strasburg and others.⁸

Regardless of the source of creative inspiration and its effect on the person involved in the process, it is important to note here that the actual concept of creativity itself is significant. In his book, *Creativity and Beyond*, Robert Weiner writes that creativity has *value* across almost all cultures: we are surrounded by the products and

⁶ As presented by Gilbert, Jameson, Nettle, Runco, Sassman, and others.

⁷ An unattributed paparazzi video (hosted on the AV Club website) recorded Nicholson’s candid response at the moment he was told about Ledger’s death by overdose. Nicholson said, “Well. I warned him.” Nicholson’s work as an actor is founded in the practice of Method acting, discussed below.

⁸ Further exploration of this dynamic appears in Chapter 4.

ideas of creators—so much so that we take the concept for granted. Historians often judge different cultures through examination of the creative products of that time and place: inventions, the arts, scientific discoveries, the creative application of social theories—even the structure of governments (and he focuses here on the democratic notions of Ancient Greece and the United States) (125). This association between creativity and value—both cultural and personal—is echoed by musician and scholar Questlove. He has written several books on creativity and creative work, and in his most recent book, *Creative Quest*, and says that he believes that “More creative work can save the world. Is that a grand claim? I hope so.” (36)

Contemporary creativity

The contemporary sociological and psychological drive to examine the experience and process of creativity more closely didn't begin until the 1950s, when researchers (as opposed to aestheticians) began investigating the nature, processes, and products of creativity. Almost immediately, this research divided into two general camps: those who focused on external elements of creativity, and those who focused on internal processes—a kind of “why” versus “how” duet.

We see this the first time the word “creativity” pops up in psychology. In 1950, J.P. Guilford, president of the American Psychological Association, charged his colleagues with exploring the dynamics of creativity in their research, specifically as these observations might affect the development of creativity in children, and enhance what he referred to as “the creative personality” (Piiro, 9). Psychologist Carl Rogers discussed the importance of developing “conditions for creativity,” as part of his 1954 study of the phenomenon of internal versus external reinforcement of the motivation to

create. By 1971, Mihali Csikszentmihalyi had published his earliest research on the creative flow state: a foundational piece of research based on interviews with hundreds of people doing innovative work at the top of their respective fields. Yet at the same time that Csikszentmihalyi was continuing his research on flow, the word “creativity” still hadn’t made its way into the 1971 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (Piiro, 6).

All this is to say that our contemporary concepts of “creative” and “creativity” are relatively new and in flux: still in the process of definition. Since Guilford’s exhortation, research into what creativity might mean has primarily been the subject of psychologists and sociologists, specialists in the fields of human thought, motivation, and behavior. Research in those years focused on investigating what creativity might be: An innate talent? A potentially learned skill? Something only geniuses possess? A process? A product? These questions and this research were, in great part, focused on finding answers so that creativity could be taught—and learned—primarily by schoolchildren; a teaching/learning model that is still active today (Piiro, 12).

Modernist and post-modernist philosophers have challenged, both passively and specifically, the “mystique” that the humanists often ascribe to creativity. “Passively” is illustrated by noting that (to echo the dictionary dynamic above) the term “creativity” is rarely even listed in texts on literary or cultural theory prior to early 21st century: “creators” and “creating,” yes; but “creativity,” no. Instead, they offer distinctions between “creation” and “production,” and some Marxist theorists in particular emphasize the need to redefine the idea of “production” as a means of jettisoning the idea of creation, where production stands in for work: work that is not in any way mystical, but something everyone does (Pope, 7).

However, theorist and historian Jane Piirto makes the case that many psychologists set out to examine creativity as a process, but end up assessing and discussing that process by evaluating the final product (*Understanding*, 12). In the introduction to his book, *Creativity: Theory, History, and Practice*, Pope states that our vocabulary for discussing creativity is weak, and makes clear that a significant portion of the book was written specifically to address that pivotal point. Notably, he sets this dynamic in motion when he writes, paraphrasing E. M. Forster: “Look before you leap is criticism’s motto. Leap before you look is creativity’s.”⁹ He makes clear that what we’ve seen so far is a conversation about creativity, or the work of creation, based on an either/or: divine versus human; why versus. how; product versus production or process; creation versus creativity; looking before leaping versus leaping before looking. As a part of that process, Pope establishes the concept of “the tension between,” which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (64).

In *The Creativity Question*, Arthur Rothenberg points out this same problem with research on creativity: he also maintains that the idea of creativity itself remains undefined, amorphous. He notes that creativity “is not synonymous with originality, productivity, spontaneity, good problem-solving, or craftsmanship although the term is often used interchangeably with all of these” (311). Creations are “products that are *both* new and valuable,” (emphasis his) and creativity is “the capacity or state which brings forth creations, but the specifics about that “capacity” are still not fully defined (312). However, he developed research instruments to examine “the artist’s capacity to integrate abstract ideas with concrete forms” as a means of exploration (322).

⁹Forster’s poem is titled, “Leap Before You Look,” and appears in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, published in 1951. The first stanza of the poem reads: “The sense of danger must not disappear:/ The way is certainly both short and steep,/ However gradual it looks from here,/ Look if you like, but you will have to leap.”

One of these research models was a series of interviews with subjects who were considered to be both creative, and—like Csikszentmihalyi’s “Big C” creative people—working at the top of their fields. Unlike Csikszentmihalyi’s subjects, Rothenberg’s artists and scientists remained anonymous, though he noted that they included people who had been awarded Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards, Bollington Poetry Prizes, and who were members of the American Academy of Arts and Scientists. His research also included a double-blind study of people who he considered to have what he referred to as “high creative determination”; they were compared to people who considered themselves to be not in any way creative. The subjects were assessed on how quickly they were able to respond to a series of word associations, where instead of an open-ended association, the subjects were to always choose a word that was the opposite of what they have been given (323).

Rothenberg’s later double-blind research itself seems to work against the very point he’s making: how can we measure creativity (as he did when placing his subjects in one of the two groups), if we don’t yet know what it actually is? This is the case across the board with research into creativity: there are endless tests *for* it, but very little clarification on what those tests are really looking for. It is important to note that he defines a creative work is this way: “... I will assume that creations are products which *appear* new and are considered valuable by *consensus*, i.e., experts have considered them creations over a period of time” (312, italics his). The question—as with other theorists and researchers, including Csikszentmihalyi—is who is doing the voting, and how many

of them have to give a work a thumbs up before *consensus* occurs? And, as it relates to theatre and other kinds of live performance, how can consensus occur at all?¹⁰

The either/or

Another contemporary approach to the topic of creativity is the tendency to contrast creative people with non-creative people. This contrast of opposites - creative people versus “non-creative” people - is also part of the language used to describe the experience of creativity itself, through the dual concepts of *tabula rasa* versus *tabula inscripta*; internal versus external motivation; chaos and order; skill and challenge.

As discussed previously, the Western medieval notion of creation was based on the belief that God created something—Creation itself—from nothing, from the Void as it appears in Genesis I;ii. However, while the Latin phrase is classical, the act of facing a *tabula rasa* is still a daunting experience for the contemporary artist. Writers refer to the challenge (a challenge that is often intimidating, and sometimes overwhelming) of the “blank page,” and painters to the “blank canvas,” but this is equally true for other artists and thinkers.

It can also hold true for an audience. A recent SITI Company production, *the theater is a blank page*, explored this dynamic, using the text of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* as a foundation for developing a work that requires extensive participation from the audience. Audience members must give up all personal items—coats, bags, phones—before leaving the lobby, creating an environment of *tabula rasa*, where the

¹⁰It is interesting that the groundswell of creativity training in the workplace—what is called “the economics of creativity” —is at least partially focused on people who have been, by Rothenberg’s standards, determined to be “non-creative,” in order to enrich the business model, and ultimately the resources available for profit-making (which takes us back to the Marxists, who are obviously not far off the mark in this case).

familiar is taken away. They are then given a loose leaf binder with the text of *To the Lighthouse* and a pencil; they are encouraged to read and mark the text over the course of the play (and, with the possible exception of the texts for the opening night audience, all the texts had some kind of markings from when they were used in previous performances). The binder includes the text of the entire book, with notes on the editing choices made in adapting the novel for the play. While the edited text of the book is read aloud over the course of the performance, audience members are moved from the very last rows of the theatre—where they see a blank stage, with no actors, no set, nothing but the ghost light—under the stage and through the backstage areas, until they are sitting on stage with the actors, and then finally lying on the floor with the actors while looking at abstract projections of light and shadow overhead as the narration of the end of the novel goes forward. More literal representations of parts of the book appear: a scaffold that serves as the boat with actors dressed in white linen waving handkerchiefs in farewell to those on shore on it as it rolls, and a solo white revolving light shining from the far end of the theatre at the end of the play. However, other deep metaphors developed entirely through movement, architecture, texture, and color connect the audience to the novel in additional, different ways, and even as they hear the text itself, the blank page becomes *tabula inscripta*.¹¹

SITI director Anne Bogart often says that members of the audience come into the theatre not knowing what they will experience, and it is up to the actors to teach the audience the rules of the production within the first five minutes. This suggests that the

¹¹This production is an example of what is called “devised theatre,” where a play is developed from a central idea, rather than from a finished playscript as the point of departure for a production. This kind of theatre is something SITI Company excels at, and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

people in the seats, the co-creators, can also experience the tension of a blank page, especially in theatre – an art that cannot exist without an audience.

Internal versus external motivation

Author Elizabeth Gilbert illustrated another theory of creativity, one that connects to the previously-discussed concept of God being the mover and the artist being the moved in the act of creation; in Gilbert’s case, the focus is on the more modern concepts of internal and external motivation. In a 2014 Ted Talk, “Your Elusive Creative Genius,” she made the point that our culture puts an enormous weight on artists; a cultural weight that is documented as sometimes resulting in depression, addiction, and suicide. After her book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, met with huge success, people started telling her that she’d created the work of a lifetime—or, rather, that she had written the best book she would *ever* write. Where to go from there, in light of that depressing thought? She was in her early 30s when she published the book: did that mean that she should just stop writing, since nothing could ever meet with equal success? She noted that, when faced with this kind of pressure to create, many artists turn to drugs and alcohol as a means of summoning the Muse, and that we are unsurprised by the rate of addiction, poor mental health, and even the rate of suicide among artists. As with the story of Heath Ledger, we still believe in the Byronic tortured artist, and as a result, we don’t give artists the space and the care that they need in order to work.

She went on to question the concept of genius, and the way in which we believe it can help summon the Muse. We refer to great artists as “geniuses,” but what if, instead of *being* a genius, we *had* a genius? She described the idea of *genii*, and the magic that comes from outside a person, but touches them and makes magic. What if the artist’s job

was to remain open to the visit of the genius, rather than hunting it down, or being cowed into an inability to work at all when the critics and readers say that he or she is a genius who has created this astounding work? Gilbert related two stories as a means of illustrating these ideas. The first came from a friend of hers, a poet of some renown, who said that sometimes she could feel a poem rolling over the landscape in her direction. If she is able to grab pencil and paper quickly enough, she can capture the poem: it is hers. If not, instead of chasing it, she allows it to roll on past, and knows that it is making its way toward another poet who already has a pen close to hand.

The second story is about the cutting-edge musician Tom Waits (who many consider to be a genius in his field). She conducted a lengthy interview with him, and at one point she asked how he felt when people asked the question they ask of many artists: where do you get your ideas from? He said that he frankly got his ideas from nowhere: that they just appeared. He said that he'd recently been stuck in traffic on the 105, one of Los Angeles' worst freeways, and felt the beginning of a song coming on. It made him furious, and he said to the song itself, "Can't you see I'm busy here? Go bother Leonard Cohen!"

We tend to value creations that come from inside the creator and have emotional weight—we even sometimes say, it's from the heart," the metaphoric center of feeling. However, Gilbert suggests that thinking that an artist *has* a genius rather than *being* a genius, ascribing some level of external mystery to the act of creation, can benefit the artist in significant ways.

The Janusian process: chaos and order

Creativity theorist Arthur Rothenberg discussed the dynamic of creativity as something he came to call the “Janusian process,” as a result of his extensive research on the creative processes and experiences of people working at the top of their creative game in literature, the arts, and science (*Creativity Question*, 311). The Roman god Janus had two faces, and could look in opposite directions at the same time, and Rosenberg noted that this ability to conceive and hold opposite, or even multiple, ideas simultaneously was a consistent theme when his subjects discussed their experiences during different stages of creating. He uses the idea of “true and not true”:

A particle spinning is going too fast and too slow at the same time, a chemical is both boiling and freezing, or kindness and sadism operate simultaneously. Previously held beliefs or laws are still considered valid but opposite or antithetical beliefs and laws are formulated as equally operative or valid as well (“Janusian,” web).

He goes on to say that in this process, “Previously held ideas and systems of ideas are split apart,” and the act of creativity is holding “the *simultaneity of opposition*” (*Creativity Question* 312; italics his).

Nietzsche philosophically presents this duality as Dionysian versus Apollonian, referring to an opposing pair of gods who act in deliberately disruptive versus deliberately orderly ways (Nietzsche 821). “True versus non-true,” chaos versus order, and Dionysian versus Apollonian all have direct applications to the creative work of the actor, and the structure of the training and rehearsal methods of SITI Company.

Cognitive neuroscience and creativity

Neuroscience also highlights a binary system in its explanation of creativity. In his article “The cognitive neuroscience of creativity”, Arnie Dietrich offers a new scientific framework in which to consider creativity and the creative process. Based on current research in neuroscience and cognitive psychology that demonstrates the ways in which the circuits of our brains share, summon, retrieve, combine, and act on chunks of information, his model states that creativity results from the factorial combination of four kinds of brain activity (1018). Neural activity that results in novelty can occur during two modes of thought—deliberate and spontaneous—and within two types of content—emotional and cognitive. No matter how the material is generated, this processing in the prefrontal cortex is necessary to make the new thought fully conscious, consider its value and appropriateness, and give it creative life. Creative thoughts are generated in the same ways in which non-creative thoughts occur; there is no special “more creative” area of the brain that makes that happen (though the ways in which this idea is developed metaphorically by theorists and others will be discussed later in this chapter).

The four general types of creativity defined by the overlap of deliberate and spontaneous, emotional and cognitive are described by Dietrich:

Deliberate mode/cognitive structures. “Insights of this type are instigated by the prefrontal cortex,” where one deliberately “fishes” for the answer to a problem. He gives Edison’s algorithmic approach to inventing as an example.

Deliberate mode/emotional structures. This type of thinking is also instigated by the prefrontal cortex, but the information sought is found in the affective memory, rather than the TOP (temporal/occipital/parietal) areas of the brain. Insights during

psychotherapy are a good example. The quality of the creative insight in the deliberate mode is based on the amount of information available (knowledge base, whether that consists of the facts of a domain or rich emotional memories) and the flexibility demonstrated by the prefrontal cortex in juggling these retrieved chunks of information in working memory while the problem is being considered.

Spontaneous mode/cognitive structures. The spontaneous mode of processing is accessed when the prefrontal cortex is either deliberately “turned off” —the thinker walks away from the problem, has focused attention elsewhere, etc., —or when the prefrontal cortex has downregulated itself (giving itself a break), and allows cognitive information from the TOP to associate unconsciously. When a novel, or somehow arresting, association is made unconsciously, it is pushed up into working memory and is experienced as a sudden insight by the thinker. Some research indicates that the prefrontal cortex has a lower threshold of entry, allowing for a “surprise violation of learned associations” for thoughts that are particularly novel. Newton’s insight about gravity is a good example of this kind of thinking. Dietrich stresses that the quality of the creative insight depends entirely on the thinker’s mastery of the knowledge base of his or her domain.

Spontaneous mode/emotional structures. In this part of the model, thoughts compete for consciousness, because there is limited space for information in the prefrontal cortex. (Dietrich notes that it can generally handle about four chunks of information at any given time.) “Since emotions signify biologically significant events, neural activation in emotional structures makes for ‘loud’ signals that are designed to enter consciousness and impress the organism” (1019). He uses Picasso’s witnessing of

the events of Guernica as an example. Of course, there were other witnesses to that atrocity; that urgent emotional material was thrust into the forefront of the mind of each of them. That kind of material demands expression of some sort. Many of the witnesses would have simply told the story of what they saw to reduce that internal pressure. However, Picasso used his skill as a painter to express those “loud signals” in a way that makes the event universal to the human experience (1019-1020).

Dietrich also suggested that, because all humans share emotions (but do not necessarily share cognitive material), art speaks across borders of time, culture, and the individual in ways that creative work based in the cognitive structures – many scientific discoveries – do not. Moving creativity back outside the world of neuroscience returns us to Weiner’s concept of the value that cultures ascribe to creativity, creation, and creative works (Weiner, 12).

The “tension between”

Dietrich’s factorial combinations suggest that creativity may live in the middle, where the edges of those four areas come together and overlap at different times and in different ways. This neurological model is in some ways similar to Rothenberg’s Janusian simultaneity, where new things are born when opposites come together in the mind of the creative person. These concepts of opposition and the combine either/or generate a dynamic that Rob Pope has called “the tension between.”

In his search for a definition (or *the definitions*) of creativity, Pope addressed the concept of novelty-in-repetition (a concept of significance to the actor). He related a story about Jacques Derrida that features this question from the philosopher: “What am I going to be able to invent this time?” (64). Derrida’s query regarding novel invention was in

response to his experience of three incarnations of his own theoretical content— something I believe we can consider to be his own version of what could be called a “received text,” similar to the playscript within which the actor creates.

Derrida first discussed a paper that he had written that expressed his straightforward presentation of a new idea. Next came a lecture he gave based on that original paper, where the structure of the content delivered live in the lecture hall was not entirely predictable as it shifted in response to the energy of the listeners, even though the content itself was consistent. Finally, a post-lecture version was published in the format of another written paper that served as a record of what he had presented to his audience. This examination of Derrida’s experience, and the process and the manner in which form supports, influences, and affects content, led Pope to his concept of “the tension between,” which he describes as the place where the actual creative content lives as it waits during the creative process to be poured into the next form (65), not unlike the poet who felt the poem rolling across the field, searching for someone with a pencil.

This concept is also similar to what Bogart refers to when she suggests the importance of restraint in the face of the pressure to identify and define work *before* the creative exploration of the play has even begun; it is important to work with the undefined (Cummings 226). Actor/director Joe Chaikin phrased that same idea in this way: “Only when we finally began to *examine our process of examining* were we able to alter our approach to a more creative one...” (*Presence* 28; italics his).

In the story of Derrida’s lecture, the content remains essentially the same, regardless of the container: whether he speaks of the published essay, the lecture, or the final recap of the lecture, the content is constant. Yet as the container shifts from text to

lecture and back to text again, the content is affected, and as it shifts to settle into its new container it is, on a deep and subtle level, made new. It is this re-created level of experience that Derrida responded to with his question, “What will I be able to invent this time?” This dynamic could be reframed as a question from the actor: “How will I be able to create a new performance of the same material every time?”

Csikszentmihalyi, creativity, and flow

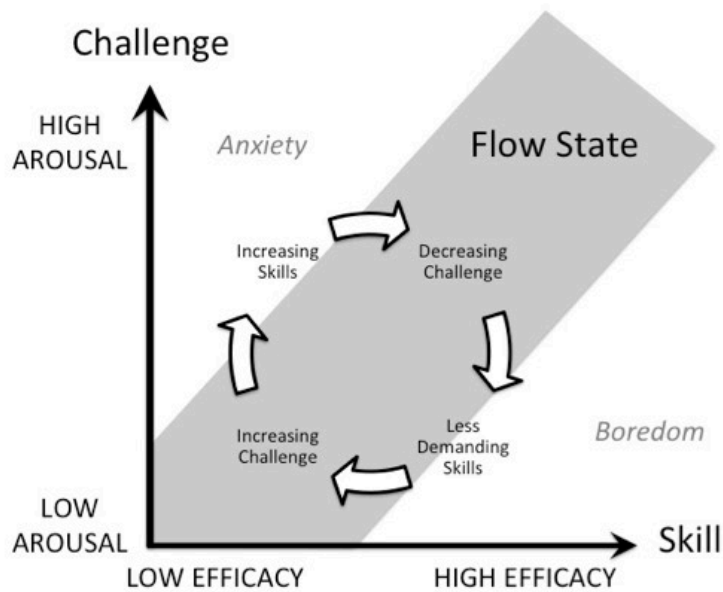
Derrida’s question of invention reflects the work of psychologist and researcher Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, whose far-ranging interviews on the experience of flow present a model that examines, in a way, both product and process. His pre-research assessment of a broad range of creative products led him to his chosen research subjects: those whose creative work contributed significant innovative value to their respective fields. In nearly countless books, essays, and psychological research, he has published the results of over thirty years of research on how people live and work, and how their creative experiences have shaped their worlds.¹²

The people he interviewed described consistent themes, even across a broad range of fields: painters, economists, physicists, athletes, and poets all appear (along with many others) in his research. They regularly reported a series of paradoxical feelings: a feeling in which time seemed to stand still, but in which the experience also felt like no time had passed at all; in which overcoming significant challenges was effortless; in which they felt open and relaxed in spite of their intense concentration; and in which they felt fully present while they also lost all sense of self (*Creativity* 111).

¹²He later shifted this research toward what he called “everyday creativity,” and expanded his field of subjects to include all kinds of people, not just the original Big C creators. This is a concept that can be applied to actors who train with SITI.

The feeling of flow is also sometimes described as being “in the zone,” a term often used to describe athletes (and that they use to describe their own experiences), and it is their experience of flow that is often easiest for us to see from the outside. An example is basketball player Michael Jordan, whose state of flow in a game in the 1992 NBA championships has become legendary. He came onto the court following a timeout, when his team, the Chicago Bulls, were behind. In the next twenty minutes, he hit six three-point shots, missing none; it seemed as if he *couldn't* miss. It was his awareness of being in the zone that makes this a powerful example of flow—at one point he even turned to the crowd and shrugged his shoulders, as if saying, “I have no idea what is happening here, but it seems I can't miss. I'll just keep rolling with it” (ESPN).

Jordan's example is a good model for identifying elements of the situation in which flow is most likely to occur. The opportunity to reach the flow state comes from a place in which the challenge of the action or task demands that the person is using every bit of skill at their command; perhaps the task is even slightly beyond their perceived skill set. If the stakes associated with the task are too low, the person can get bored, and if the stakes are entirely unattainable, the person gets too frustrated to continue. Susan Jackson, who has expanded Csikszentmihalyi's one-on-one research into interviews with athletes (who were not part of his original study), calls this the skill/challenge matrix (*Flow* 37), illustrated by the graph below:



An illustration of the skill/challenge matrix (McKay)

The gray bar running diagonally across the graph shows the matrix, the “sweet spot” where flow is most likely to occur. Skill meets challenge at a specific point on the grid: the place in which flow is most likely to occur is just slightly beyond that point (*Flow* 37).

The balance between challenge and success in the face of that challenge where flow can occur also requires regular reinforcement. In Jordan’s case, that reinforcement was clear—he made the three-pointers—and it is important that that reinforcement is clearly defined. Without some regular measure of success, it can be difficult to stay in flow.

Csikszentmihalyi maintained that the experience of creativity is a central source of personal and cultural meaning and is, to use his word, *fascinating* enough to make us feel that we are living more fully when we experience it: the process becomes autotelic, pleasing in and of itself. He wrote that the “outcome” of creativity is that “it adds

richness and complexity to the future,” regardless of measures of success that might be applied to the “product” of that experience (*Creativity* 11). According to his research, a regular experience of flow (which he also refers to as a “peak experience”), on a large or small scale, is a much higher indicator of someone feeling that their life has value than standard measures of happiness. He maintains that this is because the feeling of flow is an internal one, coming entirely from the person her- or himself, whereas the idea of a “happy” life often requires external elements that are beyond the person’s control, whether it’s in work, relationships, or other elements of day-to-day life.

The previously-mentioned musician and author Questlove beautifully expressed the perception that creativity led to increased happiness when he said, “More creative work can save the world. Is that a grand claim? I hope so.” (36)

The rules of the game

When talking about the experience of flow, Csikszentmihalyi noted the importance of feedback and reinforcement, and Jordan’s shots illustrated how that can work: they were created in response to the rules of the game, where the size of the court, the shape of the ball, and the obstacles between a player and success are clearly defined. As a part of his work on creativity, theorist Rob Pope more closely examined this relationship between play, rules, and creativity, and examined the dynamic between creativity and constraint (yet another dualism), and noted that game-like structures can be used to stimulate what he calls “playful creativity,” and increase complexity (118).

Pope maintained that there is a delicate balance and, in practice, a moving point of equilibrium between creativity and constraint. Too little constraint and nothing happens (because there is no pressure for change), or it just occurs haphazardly. Too much

constraint and again nothing happens (this time because the system is seized up), or it all happens in a rush, out of control. Either way, he said that “it’s a miss or a mess ... The crucial thing ... is to grasp creativity *as* constraint (not in opposition to constraint); just as the way to develop one’s ‘game’ is to play it in every sense *to the limit* (122, italics his).

He expanded the dualistic qualities of the creative experience when he discussed the differences between players of *finite play* (who play for themselves, competitively; who play to win) and players of *infinite play* (who play for the joy of playing, with and for others), and noted the contradiction that arises. Those who play for themselves bring the game to a close in their efforts to win; those who play co-operatively create a kind of play that cannot be finished because no end is built into it (123).

Pope’s continued his analysis of the relationship between games and creativity, and defined the four general “types” of games:

agon – where competition is dominant (cf. *antagonism*): pitting one person or team against another (e.g. football, tennis, chess)

alea – where chance is dominant: submitting oneself to fate or fortune (e.g. roulette, the lottery, spinning a coin)

mimicry – where simulation is dominant: assuming the personality or taking on the role of another (e.g. role-play, charades, “pretend”)

ilinx – where vertigo is dominant: aiming at giddiness or, in extreme cases, ecstasy (carousels, driving fast, raves)” (120).

None of the types of games listed are exclusive; more regularly they recombine and overlap. They can be either finite or infinite play, depending on the player or players.

It is interesting to note that one of the four types of games is mimicry, where “taking on the role of another” seems to define where the creative work of the actor would fall in this list. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, elements of both *alea*

and *ilinx* are seen in SITI Company training methods; very little attention is given to mimicry, and none at all to *agon*.

The creative experience and metaphor

This review of concepts and research associated with defining and experiencing creativity has pointed out the consistent dynamic of paired ideas, where each element of the pair is often in opposition to the other. Another dynamic has also been uncovered in this work: that of the use of metaphor in describing the creative state. Theorists depend on the names of Greek gods, a “flow” that has nothing to do with water, Latin terms that have applications beyond the written word, and zones that aren’t associated with areas of physical space: the creative state is hard to define and describe using concrete language.

Metaphor is also used by popular how-to authors on the topic of creativity. These are people who have seen and experienced flow, and who have seen some of the barriers others face when attempting to achieve it. Instead of using metaphor to describe what the experience of flow is like, they use it to map a path on how to get there.

Two of the most widely-read of these popular authors stand out: teacher and artist Betty Edwards, and tennis pro and player Tim Gallwey.

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain

The success of Betty Edwards’ approach to teaching art to people who consider themselves to be “non-artists” is in part demonstrated by the publication history of her book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. First published in 1979, it was on the *New York Times* bestseller list within two weeks, where it remained for almost a year. Ten years later, the first revision of the book put it back on the bestseller list. Since then the

book has gone through four updated editions, extended to include a workbook (along with a book of exercises using color), has been translated into seventeen languages, and has generated DVDs, a website, and hands-on workshops. It is widely considered to be the best-known and most consistently used book on learning to draw, a comment on how it is also one of the most influential books popularizing this way of thinking (Edwards, web).

She based the concepts of the original book on the research of neuroscientist Roger Sperry, published in 1974, which focused on test subjects in which, through different kinds of accidents, the *corpus callosum*—the bundle of fibers that communicates information between the two hemispheres of the brain—had been entirely severed. This physical separation of different areas of processing led Sperry to construct a model in which each hemisphere is “indeed a conscious system in its own light,” in which the left side is responsible for “verbal, analytic, sequential” functions, and the “visual, perceptual, spatial” functions are found primarily in the (Sperry, 1975).

In the 1989 updated edition of *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* Edwards shifted her labels—“right brain” and “left brain” became the more generalized “R-mode” and “L-mode.” She explains the updated concepts on her website in this way:

Each mode contributes its special functions to most tasks (this is [Sperry’s description of] the brain “working as a whole”), but a few activities require mainly one mode, without significant interference from the other. Drawing is one of these activities. Other examples from ordinary life requiring largely separate systems are:

For L-mode, the left hemisphere[’s] verbal, analytic, sequential system: *Balancing your checkbook*. We do not want creative, intuitive checkbook balancing. We want step-by-step verbal, numerical, sequential analysis.

For the R-mode, the right hemisphere[’s] visual, spatial, perceptual system: *Facial recognition*. We do not analyze a face naming each feature in sequence, in order to recognize the face of a friend. Recognition is instant, visual, and global (all-at-once) (web).

Sperry’s work has long-since been dismissed—his research model was fundamentally flawed because of his sample population: people with severe brain trauma cannot represent the general. Beyond that, contemporary research in neuroscience has demonstrated that processing information through the brain is infinitely much more complicated.

Since Edwards’ work was based on Sperry’s research, her ideas on brain function are generally dismissed by contemporary psychologists, neurologists, and sociologists. In spite of this, it is significant that she used what has been called “pseudoscience” to build a tool that thousands of people who consider themselves to be “non-creative” (and who would have put themselves into that category in Rothenburg’s research) have used to explore and expand their own creative skills. While some of her readers note what they feel are limitations of the book—that it is primarily focused on a realistic rendering of a subject that is in front of you—many more are thrilled by discovering a creative skill they never thought they possessed (web).

In response to the debunking of Sperry’s research, Edwards shifted her language from right brain/left brain, to R-mode/L-mode, using this more as metaphor and less as neuroscience. She describes the process of her methods as “bypassing the L-mode system,” and outlines the foundation of her drawing exercises in this way:

In order to gain access to sub-dominant, somewhat hard-to-access R-mode, the non-verbal, visual perceptual system of the brain, it is necessary to present one’s own

brain with a task that the dominant verbal system, L-mode, will turn down (web).

Her best-known exercise is called “upside-down drawing,” which utilizes the way the L-mode “turns things down.” Unable to label the now-unrecognizable parts of a figure, the L-mode “shuts off,” and the person drawing can more clearly see and render the 2-dimensional elements of a 3-dimensional figure.¹³

While contemporary science has moved far beyond the R-mode/L-mode model, the fact remains that thousands of people used Edwards’ metaphorical frame to discover something new about themselves: a creative side that they might never have seen if not for her book. Again, it is interesting to note that many of the people who have used her exercises would put themselves in Rothenberg’s “non-creative” control group. This chapter has presented several benefits of the use of metaphor in describing the creative experience. What if metaphor could also be used as a tool to help “ordinary” people access their own creativity?

An example that deepens the conversation on metaphor comes via software programmer and author Andy Hunt. In his blog post “L-Mode/R-Mode and DRM,” he wrote that he had heard a lot of positive comments about Edwards’ book, and noted that he and other self-described “technical types” have trouble drawing and engaging in other, non-linear types of thinking and being. He got a copy of the book and worked his way through the exercises. Hunt described his positive experience with the exercises and his pleasure at finding new ways of seeing, but noted that her adapted L-mode/R-mode language, at least for him, reminded him of his negative associations with the original

¹³Her website includes many “before and after” examples of the work that her students draw in the first day of class versus the fifth day of class, and the results are significant. To see those examples, go to: www.drawright.com/before-after

debunked research. He shifted her L/R designations to “linear mode” and “rich mode” as a means of thinking about the way his linear approach to the world seemed to suppress the rich mode of perception that Edwards presents.

Similarly, neuroscientist Arnie Dietrich and his colleagues dismiss the antiquated L-mode/R-mode model in their work on creativity. However, Dietrich introduced the term “downregulating” when presenting his research on combinant neural activity, where two modes of thought – deliberate and spontaneous – and two types of content – emotional and cognitive – combine and recombine in ways to create an environment where some types of thought are suppressed when others are in use (“Cognitive” 1020). Even if her science is flawed, the metaphor of Edwards’ tool gives students access to a process of downregulating that they find helpful.¹⁴

The inner game

In his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, tennis instructor Timothy Gallwey contributed another metaphor to describe the way in which someone can encourage that kind of downregulating process in sports. He observed that the way we originally learned to walk and talk were through using what he called “the intuitive capabilities” of the mind 42). Gallwey wrote that we can still harness this way of learning new skills as adults: it requires that we “unlearn” the habits that interfere with those intuitive capabilities. (He noted that, while he was talking about the sport of tennis, he was also using “tennis” as a metaphor.)

Using tennis as a sport and also as a metaphor, Gallwey described the frustration that many athletes (and non-athletes) express: “It’s not that I don’t know what to do, it’s

¹⁴Future references to this dynamic will use “L-mode,” and “R-mode.”

that I don't do what I know!" He wrote that, as a tennis pro, he regularly heard these complaints: "I play better in practice than during the match," "When I'm trying really hard to do the stroke the way it says to in the book, I flub the shot every time," "I'm my own worst enemy; I usually beat myself" (4).

He described his own development as a teacher, in which he learned that creating the environment for learning new skills must focus on helping the student develop what he called "relaxed concentration," where the feeling of "trying too hard" can give way to an experience of unconscious-consciousness that includes a rich feeling of "*not over-trying*" (7, italics his).

He related a series of events in coaching sessions that led him to the understanding that his players responded better, played well and more efficiently, if he talked less, gave fewer specific directives about the "correct" form ("Don't drop your shoulder during your backhand!"), and gave them images to work with instead. He described something very similar to Edwards' upside-down drawing. He had a student who was struggling with hitting the ball on the frame of the racket rather than on the strings; her overall form was good, but she somehow missed the center of the racket. After giving her a couple of suggestions that only slightly improved her form, he told her: "Focus your mind on the seam of the ball. Don't think about making contact. In fact, don't try to hit the ball at all. Just *let* your racket contact the ball where *it* wants to, and we'll see what happens." She hit nine out of ten of the next shots in the center of the racket. It was the tenth shot she missed, and when he asked what happened, she said that she'd thought, going into the last volley, "I might make a tennis player after all!" (12)

Gallwey examined this concept of self-talk, where we remind ourselves of the specifics (“Keep your eye on the ball!” “Keep your wrist firm!”), and asked: who are we talking to when we say these things? He noted that *I* am saying these things to *myself*. He used this dynamic to develop the metaphor of Self 1 and Self 2: Self 1 is the one giving directions—the *teller*—and Self 2 is the *doer*. He goes on to say that the challenge we face is that Self 1, the teller, is often busy telling Self 2 what to do while Self 2 is attempting to *do* something: in other words, Gallwey observed, the teller is attempting to *be* the doer. He goes on to say that the key to learning and playing better tennis—or better anything—is to improve the relationship between Self 1 and Self 2.

His approach to how to improve that relationship, or “get it together mentally,” involves learning several skills:

- 1) learning how to get the clearest possible picture of your desired outcomes;
- 2) learning how to trust Self 2 to perform at its best and learn from both successes and failures; and
- 3) learning to see “nonjudgmentally”—that is, to see what is happening rather than merely noticing how well or how badly it is happening. This overcomes “trying too hard” (13).

As a means of further identifying and defining Self 1 and Self 2, Gallwey explored humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow’s concept of “peak experience,” first described in Maslow’s book *Towards a Psychology of Being*, published in 1964. Maslow’s work focused on the concept of self-actualization, and the ways in which these peak experiences added significant value to people’s lives. He conducted a series of interviews, asking people to describe their peak experiences, and was surprised to find

that “ordinary people” expressed the same feelings and even used the same kind of language he’d found when reading the writings of the ancient mystics and their descriptions of religious ecstasy.

Gallwey noted that his tennis students also echoed some of the phrases of Maslow’s research: ideas like “in the groove,” and “effortless.” He wrote that the *doingness* of Self 2 directly connected to the ideas that came from Maslow’s conclusions: that peak experience is “free of locks, inhibitions, cautions, fears, doubts, controls, reservations, self-criticisms, “brakes”; and “non-striving, non-needing, non-wishing ... he just is” (Maslow 85).¹⁵

Gallwey described the way that Self 1 gets in the way of the “non-striving” of flow. It begins with what he called “complaints,” and he gave the example of “I’m serving badly today.” The complaining then focuses on a specific event (a serve, for example.) At that point, Self 1 often takes over and finds series of events (perhaps a few more bad serves, several missed returns, a problem with the backhand) and groups them all together. Finally, Self 1 “identifies with the combined event and finally judges itself” (19). The way awareness of an issue turns into judgment of the self is a difficult dynamic to override, especially since thinking about how to do that only adds to the power of linear thinking, and further disrupts the “doing.”

It was the judgmental voice of Self 1 that Gallwey wanted to quiet, and described that process as “*unlearning*” what he called the “human inclination to judge ourselves,” as a means of freeing Self 2 to learn and act in free and spontaneous ways (17, emphasis his). Using the example of telling a student to watch the seam of the ball, he set up a system similar to that of Edwards: since it is impossible for most people to watch the

¹⁵Further commentary on Maslow’s research on “peak experience” appears in the next chapter.

seam of a tennis ball as it comes toward them, the notion turns off the gestalt of *looking* and allows a process that Gallwey named *seeing*, which he uses to create space to the in-the-moment-ness of Self 2.

He noted that doing this successfully once or twice can sometimes invite the return of self-consciousness (the “I might make a tennis player after all!” thought); the trick is in finding a place for Self 2 to repeatedly have the space to do what it needs to do for the task at hand in that moment, with no series of thoughts connecting it to either the future or the past.

It’s easy to see the ways in which Gallwey’s Self 1 and Self 2 relate to Edwards’ L/R modes, and Hunt’s linear/rich ways of thinking, but it’s also interesting to note that he says that the key is to improve the relationship between those two voices, rather than attempting to learn methods of bypassing the suppressive, linear, L-mode voice of Self 1: to learn when it’s Self 2’s time to act rather than Self 1’s time to think.

The use of the word “act” in that last sentence was deliberate. *The Inner Game of Tennis* is often used in theatre departments and programs as a text for acting classes. Even though Gallwey goes on in the second half of his book to apply his ideas specifically to tennis, his metaphor of two selves, the thinker and the doer, is a useful metaphor for the actor. It’s ironic that, while contemporary research in the field has long since left behind the L/R dual-mode model of the brain when framing the creative experience, it is the popularizers like Edwards and Gallwey who offer useful metaphors on how to find and explore that experience. It’s also interesting to note that, while Edwards’ book is focused on the creative process of making art, it is Gallwey’s text on tennis that is used by actors.

CHAPTER III

SPORTS

You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen.

— Eugen Herrigel

Introduction

The global popularity of sports is reflected in part by the amount the money that flows into athletics at all levels.¹⁶ This cultural investment in sports is also reflected by the sports-watching public's interest in seeing the highest level of achievement by their favorite teams or individual athletes – meaning that some of the money brought in by athletes is funneled into research on athletic excellence and how to reach it.

There is very little public interest in any kind of formal research on that kind of achievement on the stage. Actors give interviews about their work (sometimes including comments on preparation and rehearsals), and that is often enough for the people who go to see movies and plays. It is fortunate – and ironic – that the research known as “sports performance” is easily applicable to performance in the theatre.

When researchers discuss the dynamic in which an athlete is playing to the best of her or his capabilities, they regularly use the word “performance” —“peak performance,” “optimal performance” —as a means of referring to the “doing-ness” of the task at hand. Tim Gallwey's use of the Self 1/Self 2 metaphor in tennis provides a good example of the

¹⁶The Marxists show up here as well, in the monetizing of play.

way in which acting and sports can be considered in the same light when considering potential obstacles or negative self-talk that can get in the athlete's or the actor's way. Research on athletes being "in the zone" and their reported experience of "peak performance" offers further connections that can be useful for the actor striving to find creative flow.

Sports performance theorists and researchers contribute concepts that have specific applications to acting, including optimal performances and experiences; calibrating the skill/challenge matrix by identifying opportunities for action; clarifying goals as a means of keeping your mind in the game; creating muscle memory; utilizing the mythical "as if" that is part of sports; approaching the work through an integrated body-mind-spirit process; questioning the idea that effort necessarily involves struggle or pain; and transcending technique to find the "artless art" of flow.

Optimal experiences and performances

The dynamic of being "in the zone" is the subject of a co-authored book, *Flow in Sports: The Keys to Optimal Experiences and Performances*, by sports psychologist Susan Jackson and creativity researcher Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, in which Jackson used the body of Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow as a tool for examining the experience of athletes through extensive interviews. They write that the phrase "optimal experiences" in the title of the book refers (like Gallwey) to Maslow's concept of "peak experience," and the intrinsic value those experiences offer the athlete at any level of participation: their research demonstrates that there is value is not just in winning, but in the *doing*.

The authors were struck by the fact that the athletes were using the same language as Maslow's ecstatic ancient mystics, as well as the ideas communicated by

Csikszentmihalyi's Big C creators, to describe their experience.¹⁷ The feelings they expressed about their heightened moments in sports fell in line with the elements of creative flow reported by artists and innovators: a balance between challenge and skills; a merging of action with awareness; clear goals; a sense of unambiguous feedback; a heightened concentration on the task at hand; a feeling of effortless control; a loss of self-consciousness; a transformation of the sense of time; and the autotelic nature of the experience itself. In other words, optimal *experiences* were an integral part of optimal *performance*, and the flow state was possible through immersion in sports just as it was in the arts and other types of creative endeavors.

However, the people who described those moments of transcendence and flow weren't limited to professional or Olympic-level athletes: even novices in a sport described having those experiences. In other words, "optimal" doesn't necessarily mean "objectively superior." Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi set out to investigate how someone whose skills in a sport were low could reach "the zone."

Calibrating the skill/challenge matrix and opportunities for action

They found that the first step in creating an environment for that kind of experience at any level of play was to examine the skill/challenge matrix in more detail

¹⁷It is interesting to note that Csikszentmihalyi was, from a young age, interested in the concept of human happiness, and the idea of living a happy life, following his experiences as a child living in Europe during WWII. After reading extensively about art and philosophy, he discovered his interest in using psychology to research the dynamic of personal fulfillment almost by accident. As he related the story at the opening of a TedTalk, he was on vacation at a ski resort: the snow had melted and he didn't have enough money to go to a movie, and instead decided to attend a lecture as a pleasant—and free—way to spend the evening. He'd never heard of the speaker, but was struck by the way the man spoke about a mystical foundation of happiness and self-awareness, about personal transcendence, and the ways in which people sometimes projected their own shadowed feelings onto the post-war world. After listening to the lecture, Csikszentmihalyi found that this interesting scholar had written extensively on these ideas – and that the name of the lecturer was Carl Jung.

and to fine-tune it for each event (41). Part of this involves defining the specific challenges of the task; and they wrote that, in sports, the word “challenge” is “really shorthand for a broader concept, which might be expanded to what they call “opportunities for actions” or “situational demands.” They referred to Csikszentmihalyi’s original research, noting that flow is most likely to occur when both challenge and skills meet at a point slightly above a person’s average levels (36).

The authors also outlined the benefits of sports as a means of building skills and investigating challenges—even *creating* challenges (41). This is best accomplished through incorporating what they call the “predefined challenges” as a foundation: rules, necessary equipment, the time spent in performance, and the size and shape of the playing field. Athletes can rely on these constants, and construct consistently higher levels of challenge as they gain skills related to each. The process of consistently investigating the details of these challenges gives the athlete the opportunity to fine-tune their own skill/challenge matrix at any point in time, and on any given day.

Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi wrote that there are three primary ways that sports can provide opportunities to identify, create, meet these “opportunities for action,” and create an environment for the flow state by adjusting the relationship between skill and challenge. The first challenge is simply the fact that our bodies are more interested in comfort than in physical exercise – we have to meet the challenge of pushing ourselves off the couch if we want to achieve flow. The second is finding ways to improve: through competition with others, or through defining their idea of their own “personal best,” and pushing past it. This drive to improve is also connected to the autotelic nature of flow: the athlete feels encouraged to find new challenges because it was pleasing to meet and

surpass the previous one. Third, and finally, all sport involves some element of risk (as the authors note, “to one’s ego, if nothing else”). In some sports – rock-climbing for instance – the risk is more obvious, but you can still injure yourself on a short run around a quiet neighborhood. This is a question of degree, not of kind: one could die falling from great height while climbing, while the real risk of injury while jogging is unlikely to lead to death. In both of these extreme cases, and in all examples in between, one is required to face the possibility of hurtful failure. Rising to meet the challenge set by taking risks increases confidence, and can increase the possibility of finding “the zone” (38). Sports are so conducive to flow in part because they never fail to provide challenges: small shifts on either or both sides of the skill/challenge matrix always offer new opportunities.

Keeping your mind in the game

There is a different type of risk to the athlete explored by Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, unassociated from the risk of life and limb: the quadrant of the matrix in which both challenge and skill levels are low, a space that can result in apathy toward the task at hand (37). This is the quadrant that occupies the space exactly opposite to the area in which flow is most likely to occur. When describing the way in which the “apathy quadrant” can affect athletes Jackson notes that, in spite of having high-level skills and in spite of facing a significant challenge that they are prepared for, athletes are still in danger of falling into a state of boredom and low energy when “much of the waiting between events, suiting up, or traveling between meets will also produce that feeling of apathy (37).

Athletes create their own systems for keeping their minds “in the game,” as far away from boredom as possible, and as spectators we regularly observe at least one of

those techniques: the use of noise-canceling headphones among athletes is so ubiquitous that we hardly notice. Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps suited, warmed up, ready to compete, and wearing a hooded parka and headphones while waiting for his event is an image we take for granted. LeBron James and other NBA players walk into the arena wearing headphones so often that they drive the economics behind the development and sales of headphones (James is one of the athletes featured in ads for new iterations of Beats by Dre headphones; James has also shared that he curates a different set list for every practice and every game) (Du Lac). In a CBS interview with American Olympic luger Katie Hansen was asked about her pre-competition “dance-off”: she said she relies entirely on dancing to Beyoncé before her events to get her where she needs to go.

However, even if we don’t know what they’re listening to, the suggestion that it’s “just listening to music” misses the way athletes use headphones and music as a tool for staying in “the zone” of flow. With Katie Hansen’s Beyoncé dance-off, it is not just about Beyoncé or the dancing: it’s about a ritual of preparation that people of all kinds use as a tool to find the “sweet spot” of flow.

Athletes in extreme sports, where long periods of exertion, exhaustion, and pain are a given part of the challenge, create ways to find the feeling of flow that will carry them through and rise above the pain. For instance, extreme distance swimmer Diana Nyad, known for her record 53-hour, 111-mile swim from Cuba to Key West, accomplished when she was 64 years old, has shared her “playlist” of the 68 songs that she sang in her head while swimming, both in training and during the Cuba-Florida swim itself.¹⁸

¹⁸You can find that list here. <https://blog.ted.com/diana-nyad-epic-playlist/>

At a Ted Talk after her swim, she described one example of the way she used music as tool to stay focused on the moment while distancing herself from the pain. At one point, she sang her favorite song, John Lennon’s “Imagine,” one thousand times. To use Csikszentmihalyi’s language, that was an achievable goal, and one in which the positive feedback of ticking off each repetition of the song carried her through nine hours and forty-five minutes of open-ocean swimming. Jackson writes that that kind of repeated positive feedback must be “unambiguous,” and states that this feedback/goal loop is what keeps athletes going. Nyad’s external world was filled with pain and exhaustion, yet she was able to set those physical feelings aside while still participating in an event that required every bit of physical skill she possessed.

Nyad’s use of music to stay above the pain also helped her meet the challenge of distance. Before the swim, she asked her team to agree to a rule that they would never tell her how many miles were left. Since that number, and the time spent eating through those miles, could change at any time—based on the weather, the powerful currents of the Gulf Stream, the danger from box jellyfish and sharks, adjustments to the protective gear she was wearing—she didn’t want the shifting qualities of time or distance to be the goal: swimming one stroke at a time was her goal. In many ways, her swim also illustrates Rosenberg’s model of the chaos versus order of the Janusian process. Nyad had had to repeatedly rise above the chaos of the way in which her body responded to the constant pain and exhaustion in order to reach her goal; her long-term, planned use of music created a place of order in her mind.¹⁹ Other athletes, such as basketball player Ryan McMahon (see below), use similar methods to create a zone where the focus is

¹⁹Diana Nyad is the *only* athlete, of any age or gender, to ever have completed this swim. It’s also important to note that this was her fifth attempt at the swim and that her first attempt was in 1970, when she was in her 20s.

completely on the *doing-ness*, and not on the emotional and psychological pressures – the internal and external voices of Self 1 – that can distract them from that process.

Repetition and creating muscle memory

As with Nyad’s one thousand repetitions of “Imagine,” breaking down larger, physically and mentally challenging goals into the kind of smaller, concrete tasks that provide immediate positive feedback is a way to gradually increase the level of challenge, and to push oneself to the limit of one’s skills: a place where you are most likely to find the kind of flow that will carry you toward success, however that is measured. One way to meet that challenge is to break down each small element of a task: consistent and exact repetition can help the athlete develop a ritual resulting in a dynamic called “muscle memory.” Muscle memory is also called “procedural memory,” where a series of physical movements are repeated so often that the familiarity of them takes over and we are no longer required to think about what we’re doing (because if we do think about it, the Self 1 steps in). The best example of this is riding a bike: once you’ve mastered the series of physical tasks that keep you from falling over, they become so familiar that, years later, the small adjustments required for balance fall into place quickly when your body recognizes the task and simply *does* it (Wu, et al, 1690).

As another example, Ryan McMahon, a basketball player for the University of Louisville, has a 94% rate of hitting free throws—a percentage of success that far eclipses those of his colleagues. He has a very specific ritual at the free-throw line that is constructed so that sinking the shot is no more important than any other step in the process. His ritual begins the moment the referee hands him the ball, and he follows precisely the same actions every time: a specific way of moving to the free-throw line,

specific ways to turn the ball in his hands executed an exact number of times, a standard number of pre-shot dribbles, all executed in the same way. By the time he shoots, it's simply the final step in the muscle memory sequence he has designed for himself, and everything leading up to that point is what has him locked in to the zone: the ball going into the basket is some ways the least important part of the ritual. Jackson describes this dynamic as another way of “merging the mental with the physical processes,” and she notes the “unified consciousness” that results from a creating a structure where action meets awareness (30).

Jackson continued her research on flow in sports, conducting further phenomenological studies, based on interviews and case studies focus on athletes. As part of that research she also created a measurement tool, the Flow State Scale, adapted from the original questionnaire that Csikszentmihalyi used to gather data from Big C creators. This research instrument, the results of the research, and potential applications for actors are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Sports, play, and the “as if”

Writer Andrew Cooper examined the feeling of “unified consciousness” that occurs in the state of flow during sports in his book, *Playing in the Zone: Exploring the Spiritual Dimensions of Sports*. Using Csikszentmihalyi's research on happiness, the quality of life, and the experience of flow, he described the characteristics of that feeling: “deep concentration, highly efficient performance, emotional buoyancy, a heightened sense of mastery, a lack of self-consciousness, and transcendence” (21). Cooper's book is focused largely on the last element of the list—transcendence—and he relies as much on

psychologist Abraham Maslow's descriptions of the "peak experience" as he does on research on flow.

Maslow set out to research psychological self-actualization, beginning with a focus on seeing his patients as complete human beings and identifying the positive elements of their lives, rather than seeing them through the lens of the neuroses that his colleagues relied on—in his words, these other psychologists and psychiatrists were looking at their patients and only seeing what he referred to as "a bag of symptoms." His theory of a "hierarchy of human needs" illustrates the struggles that people face: basic physiological needs for food and shelter; the need for safety, and the need for love and belonging. Beyond those, people need respect and esteem, where they have a firm sense of who they are in the world. The top tier of the hierarchy is that of self-actualization, and Maslow maintained that having a series of peak experiences was the greatest indicator of self-actualization and psychological health.

While Cooper's book is situated in the world of sport, he used the reports of athlete's feelings when she or he is in "the zone" to examine what the early Christians described as the religious "ecstasy" of the deep spiritual experience: a state in which the sense of self falls away in the face of God. He says that his book is ecumenical in its approach, and it is unusual in that it focuses on the ecstasy of the fans as well as that of the athletes (3).

Cooper noted how often commentators and others use what he called "mythic language" when describing what unfolds on the playing field. His use of the term came to him via Joseph Campbell's writings on the power of myth in our lives. Cooper paid particular attention to the way Campbell presented the concepts of play and games.

Campbell stated that play is an essential component of all human cultures (as well as, according to recent research, of at least some animal cultures), in which we are allowed to live in a “borderline realm” through the mythical mimicry of the “as if.” We play “as if” the rules of the game are real, and as if breaking those rules—or losing the game—has great weight, a dynamic that also allows us to laugh at ourselves. If you’ve ever seen a devastated fan immediately following a tight game when her or his team lost, you can see how the “as if” works: we invest so deeply in the game that our team’s loss is our loss, and the team’s ebullience with a win is also ours (Campbell in Cooper, 52).

Cooper argued that, since sports seem to require a level of myth, the language used to describe them must also reflect that mythic quality:

Mythic language insists itself upon sport. The realm of sport requires a mode of expression adequate to its intensity. Sport needs dramatic language that brings to light the perennial themes it enacts. It needs extravagant language that evokes awareness of the sublime and frightening dimensions of the human experience it displays. It needs humorous language that deflates its pretensions, mirrors its absurdities, and delights in its ridiculousness, the method of sport is play, and so sport requires that its mode of discourse must be playful. Like myth. (52)

Cooper’s use of the phrase “extravagant language,” and the way it deflates pretension, evokes the kind of hyperbolic sports announcing that we’re used to.

This exploration of the spiritual and mythic side of sports directly relates to the spiritual, “as if,” role of theatre in some cultures (including Ancient Greece, the foundation of Western theatre, where the disruptions of Dionysius came from a god breaking the social and spiritual rules developed by humankind). His commentary on play and the “as if” relate specifically to Pope’s types of games, as well as the use of the

“magic if” used by Constantin Stanislavski and his actors in developing their roles in a play.²⁰

Body/mind/spirit and merging effort with awareness

While Cooper analyzed transcendence in a context that he called “ecumenical,” the spiritual side of sports is more often connected to some of the meditative practices of Zen Buddhism (frequently in the case of the martial arts), where the emphasis is on training the mind as well as the body.

Self-help author, former gymnast, and student of the martial art Aikido, Dan Millman used the concept of the “psychophysical,” which he described as a “whole-body athlete, who demonstrates unity in all his actions” (156).²¹ His book, *The Warrior Athlete: Body, Mind, and Spirit*, outlines the way in which his readers can achieve the “unconscious-consciousness” in both sports and life (Jackson’s concept of “action-meets-awareness”). His focus is not on flow in specific times, events, or actions, but is rather an outline for maintaining the open ease of flow in everything we do.

An idea Millman returned to several times is the idea of “making friends with failure.” It is not enough, he said, to simply learn to tolerate failure: you must instead learn to embrace it, *appreciate* it (his emphasis), for what it can tell you. He asserted that, once that shift in thinking is made, failure “ceases to distract you” (52). He observed the effortless actions of animals at play, and the process of learning that infants engage in,

²⁰Stanislavski’s “magic if” will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

²¹While I believe this book has use in terms of connecting the work of SITI Company to sports, it is far from being a scholarly text, nor is it a particularly well-known popular book (unlike Edwards or Gallwey). The author has a “Life-Purpose Calendar” featured on the first page of his website, and has written close to twenty books on similar self-help themes. While there are other popular writers on sports performance who might present a clearer description of the dynamics described by Millman, this book was recommended to me by SITI Company member Leon Ingelsrud. Ingelsrud finds themes and ideas in the book to be relevant to SITI’s work and his experience of it, and I am attempting to follow that path.

where there is no sense of failure because the action itself is detached from an expected outcome.

Millman discussed concepts of Zen without specifically calling them such: embracing failure, letting go of expectations of the possibility of perfection, allowing yourself to “be” or “inhabit” the tool or action you are engaged with (59). He related his own experience after retiring from gymnastics: he decided to start running as a means of staying in shape, and he became increasingly frustrated with the level of physical and psychological misery he was feeling as he ran, even though his times improved. A friend asked him why he didn’t slow down a little and enjoy himself. He said, “it had never occurred to me to slow down to a comfortable pace. My temperament had been set on ‘suffer.’ If I was hurting, I assumed I was doing myself some good” (162). While Millman’s story is rooted in athletic endeavor, it calls to mind the concept of the “tortured artist” —a connection discussed further in the following chapter.

The “artless art”

SITI Company, with training methods that have one foot in the East and one in the West (and with one method, the Viewpoints, that is fundamentally improvisational within a very specific set of rules), has a unique connection to both sports and games. As Millman and others have noted, in Japanese culture, the divide we often see between art and sport can disappear entirely, when something Westerners might consider a sport—archery, for example—is identified as an art and has its own established aesthetic. Practice and study of this art under a master not only trains the body, but also trains the mind.

As SITI's Ingelsrud found Millman's text significant to his work, my own experience with SITI Company training is closer to that of the book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel.²² I will introduce the book here, and discuss the elements I associate with SITI training and performance methods —along with applying it to *Steel Hammer* —in the following chapters.

The author of *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel, was a German philosophy professor who taught in Tokyo following WWII and, while there, studied archery under a zen master as a means of gaining insight into the nature of Zen mysticism itself. The book recounts his experience of that six years of study. The introduction to the book, written by Deisetz T. Suzuki, frames the endeavor in this way:

One of the most significant features we notice in the practice of archery, and in fact of all the arts as they are studied in Japan ... is that they are not intended for utilitarian purposes only or for purely aesthetic enjoyments, but are meant to train the mind ... [a]rchery is, therefore, not practiced solely for hitting the target ...

If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an “artless art” growing out of the Unconscious (vii).

The first part of Herrigel's account is full of what Millman called “suffering” —a result of trying too hard. Early on in his study, Herrigel understood that he was attached to the outcome, even though his teacher insisted that one could “shoot well” and still completely miss the target (60). What's more, he was frustrated with the sequence of the teaching where, for the first year of study, releasing the arrow was the least significant part of the sequence, and there were many lessons that didn't involve the arrow, or even

²²I have discovered, since beginning this dissertation that, like Gallwey's *Inner Game of Tennis*, *Zen and the Art of Archery* is also sometimes used as a textbook in acting classes.

the bow, at all. When, mid-year, he was given instruction in correct breathing, as a means of knitting together the individual components of the complete action of drawing the bow and shooting the arrow, he was frustrated at not having been taught the sequence of breathing first, before anything else – the exercise had made a big difference in the way he thought about the actions. He expressed this frustration to the translator who was present at all of his lessons. His translator responded by saying, “Had he [the master] begun the lessons with breathing exercises, he would never have been able to convince you *that you owe them anything decisive*. You had to suffer shipwreck through your own efforts before you were ready to seize the lifeboat he threw you” (23, italics mine).

The type of “shipwreck suffering” Herrigel described continued as his lessons progressed. When he asked why he wasn’t improving, and expressed his increasing frustration (to what he calls “the point of danger”), his teacher noted that “you do not wait for fulfillment, but brace yourself for failure ...[t]he more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in one and the further the other will recede ... [y]ou think that what you do not do yourself does not happen” (30-31).²³

Herrigel concluded his observations of his own process by discussing the deep personal changes that were the result of practicing what he called “the artless art.” He looked back on his periods of frustration and confusion and said, “I passed through the hardest schooling of my life and ... I gradually came to see how much I was indebted to

²³I have included these lengthy quotes from this book because the practice of Zen is such a dense course of study; the descriptions directly from Herrigel present these ideas much more carefully than I can through any kind of paraphrasing of the concepts. What’s more, some of these dynamics he describes are a part of the structure and study of SITI’s Suzuki technique—an experience that can be difficult to describe.

it. It destroyed the last traces of any preoccupation with myself and the fluctuations of my mood” (61).

This preoccupation with self and emotion is something that SITI training is constructed to minimize or even remove from the equation entirely when it comes to their creative work. The physical qualities of the training are similar to that of Herrigel. The Suzuki training is particularly demanding, unfamiliar, and resistant to any kind of shortcut or holding back; the Viewpoints require an immersion in the moment—there are infinite elements in both practices to fine-tune and uncover. The techniques themselves are not art, but they both come from and return to the “containers” of a play, or plays. They are practiced for other reasons and, as Herrigel’s translator pointed out, practice can provide something *decisive* that the actor may not at first understand. This dynamic is a significant area of discussion in Chapter 7.

The challenge of assessment

The field of research and commentary on sports, flow, and the athlete presented in this chapter began with long-range research studies, moved through accounts about and from individual athletes, and ended with a discussion of the practice of Zen. This final section returns to research, and the search for a tool that can help document these ideas about flow across different areas of endeavor.

In the article, “Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Optimal Experience: The Flow State Scale,” in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, Susan Jackson and co-researcher Herbert Marsh noted the “difficulties of applying empirical methods to phenomenological experience” when it comes to flow, and the way that dynamic limits research on ideas associated with flow: motivation, peak experience,

peak performance, and enjoyment. They went on to frame the importance of ongoing research in the field: because the flow state is something that is aspired to by elite athletes but is also attainable for novices, there are significant benefits that can come from defining the experience itself and creating specific tools to find it (“Development,” 17).

Their Flow State Scale (or FSS) asks respondents to rate their experiences from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on a 5-point scale; there are 36 questions in the instrument. The questions are based on the larger body of phenomenological data and commentary on flow, and include, “I was challenged, but I believed my skills would allow me to meet the challenge,” “I did things spontaneously and automatically without having to think,” “I had a feeling of total control,” “I found the experience extremely rewarding,” and “I was not worried about what others may have been thinking of me.”²⁴

It is important to note that the opening statement of the FSS is open-ended: the questions are associated with an “event” rather than a clearly defined athletic experience (as neither athletics or sports are included in the frame of the instrument, even though the questionnaire was given to athletes). The questions could be asked of anyone about an endeavor that engages them, including actors on their experiences in training, rehearsal, and performance. A full review of the FSS questions posed to athletes demonstrates the value of phenomenological accounts when defining flow: the structure of the scale relies on them. Because the scale is open to all kinds of respondents, it also emphasizes the characteristics that these heightened moments of the flow state in sports (and, in the case of Herrigel’s account, a sport-like endeavor that is not a sport) share with the descriptions of flow reported by “creative” people. Finally, it is also a tool for the individual taking the questionnaire – by reviewing the questions, actors can more fully interrogate their

²⁴The questions that make up the scale appear in Appendix II.

own experiences as a means of identifying flow and considering ways to create an environment where it is more likely to occur.

Summary

This review of the ways in which the flow state can be encouraged and found in the physical world of sports has profound implications for the actor—there are many methods of training that, like SITI Company, feature the physical far more than the psychological or emotional. While research has demonstrated that the psychological “keeping your mind in the game” element of sports performance is a vital element of finding flow, the practices that support that mind-over-matter quality are cognitive decisions associated with making physical choices rather than—as Herrigel pointed out—actions guided by mood or emotion. Calibrating the skills/challenge matrix is a cognitive task, not a psychological one; Diana Nyad’s one thousand repetitions of John Lennon’s “Imagine” is a cognitive task specifically chosen to distract her from feelings of exhaustion, pain, and fear. Herrigel had to find a way to transcend his confusion and frustration to find limitless ease in archery: something that, for him, was connected to the spiritual rather than the purely physical. A similar focus on a repeated series of physical actions seems to be the way that basketball player Ryan McMahon brings each action of a free throw—up to and including the shot itself—into balance, where no one action is more important than another, outside of the rarified world of Zen archery.

CHAPTER IV
THE ACTOR IS PRESENT

What are we doing when we let the dead speak through us?
— Anne Bogart

Introduction

In making the transition from creativity theory to discussing the creative world and work of the actor, it is necessary to outline the primary methods of actor training that came into being in the 20th century, review the points where acting is discussed by creativity theorists, and examine the ways in which a more recent development in the field of creativity studies – collaborative creativity – might provide a stronger platform for considering the experience of the actor, *since it approaches the subject from an entirely new perspective.*

There are many ways to present the important theatrical movements of the 20th century, but since this introduction must be brief, these theorists, directors, and actors will be discussed in light of what their methods can offer to this conversation about SITI Company. Constantin Stanislavski; Lee Strasberg and the actor training he developed, called the American Method, or Method Acting; Antonin Artaud; Jerzy Grotowski; Bertolt Brecht; Japanese Noh actor Zeami; and Joe Chaikin and his Open Theatre

company are the ones whose work informs the work of SITI in some way.²⁵ Because SITI Company methods are also based in the performance lineages of Japanese theatre, the work of Zeami – father of traditional Noh performance theories – is also included.

It is helpful to approach contemporary methods of actor training using SITI Company director Anne Bogart’s notion of actors working to “creating fiction together” in rehearsal and performance (*What’s the Story* 17), especially as the concept provides room to examine goals along with methodology: what kind of fiction is it, how is the audience to receive it, how are the actors involved in embodying it and reaching those goals, and finally, how do they train to do that?

Denis Diderot

In his essay, “The Paradox of Acting,” published in 1758, aesthetician and author Denis Diderot raised a question that has direct bearing on these ways of looking at the creative world of the actor: is the work of the actor internalized – in that the actor really feels the emotions of the character – or are they externalized – where the actor uses what Diderot called “mimicry” to portray the character. Diderot questioned whether or not great actors were swept away by the emotions of the character they’re portraying, or whether he or she remains unmoved by the chaos of those emotions (198). He set up an opposition: is acting feeling and instinct, or craft and skill – and which is preferable? Diderot maintained that enacting the role through highly skilled mimicry was superior, and that all true emotion was on the side of the spectator, not the actor:

It is we who feel; it is they who watch, study, and give us the results ... [t]he actor’s whole talent depends not, as you think, upon feeling, but upon rendering so

²⁵ These are also the artists and theorists most frequently referenced by Bogart and other company members, in person (through lectures and classes) and in their writing.

exactly the outer signs of feeling that you fall into the trap. He has rehearsed every note of his passion ... [after a dramatic performance] his voice is gone, he is extremely tired; he changes his clothes or he goes to bed; and he feels neither trouble, nor sorrow, nor depression, nor weariness of soul. All these emotions he has given to you. The actor is tired, you are sad; he has had exertion without feeling, you feeling without exertion. Were it otherwise, the actor's lot would be most wretched on earth; but he is not the character he represents ... the illusion is all on your side (198-199).

A similar question is indirectly raised when comparing Western traditions of acting versus those of the East (and in the case of SITI, particularly the acting traditions of Japan) when it comes to whether the actor is *representing* or *presenting* a character for the benefit of the audience.²⁶

Constantin Stanislavski

Any examination of contemporary Western acting must begin with Constantin Stanislavski: his impact on acting and actor training methodology in the 20th and 21st centuries cannot be underestimated. With the rise of Russian Realism at the end of the 19th century, he realized that, in order for actors to portray a new psychological realism onstage, they needed a way to better understand and interpret these elements of human behavior and experience; as a result, he developed the first systematic approach to actor training in Europe. His goal was to build a structure of training and rehearsal that would support the actor's creative work of developing the world of the character: "My lifelong concern has been how to get ever closer to the so-called 'System,' that is to get ever

²⁶In order to present the work of these theorists and artists in as concise a manner as possible, and in ways that provide structure for discussing their influence on SITI Company. Since the introduction to each of these theorists and performers must be brief, I have utilized some long block quotes as a means of letting them speak directly for themselves.

closer to the nature of creativity” (in Carnicke, 23). This system offered the opportunity for exploration while giving the actor sophisticated tools that would give them the means to perform with consistency and confidence (*Actor’s Work*, Benedetti, xv).

As a part of this system, he looked to the power of the unconscious, noting the complexities of harnessing something fundamentally unknowable. His response to this was to find ways to fine-tune the body and qualities of perception – a considerable challenge.

An actor is under the obligation to live his part inwardly, and then to give to his experience an external embodiment. I ask you to note especially that the dependence of the body on the soul is particularly important in our school of art. In order to express a most delicate and largely subconscious life it is necessary to have control of an unusually responsive, excellently prepared vocal and physical apparatus. This apparatus must be ready instantly and exactly to reproduce most delicate and all but intangible feelings with great sensitiveness and directness (*The Actor Prepares*, 14).

Fundamentally, his early work was to “reproduce feelings,” as a means of creating characters so full of life that they would stay in the mind of the audience long after the performance had concluded. In terms of placing Stanislavski’s work within the larger commentary on the creative process of the actor, it is interesting that he noted the specific dangers of an actor hoping and waiting for inspiration:

If this inspiration does not turn up then neither you nor they have anything with which to fill in the blank spaces. You have long stretches of nervous let-down in playing your part, complete artistic impotence, and a naïve amateurish sort of acting. At such times your playing is lifeless, stilted. Consequently high moments alternate with overacting (Stanislavski, *An Actors Work*, 9).

If this is so, what alternative was available to the actor?

Stanislavski worked to develop a system that would give the actor a rich technique that could summon true emotion – “real life” – on stage. His training techniques could also provide a kind of subtle physical and cognitive safety net – fine-tuned through the psychological study of a character - should that emotion prove elusive. Over time, he became interested in the work of the psychologist Theodule Ribot, and Ribot’s theories about the connection between body and mind: Ribot claimed that “emotion cannot exist without a physical consequence.” Stanislavski’s exploration of the nature of “realistic” acting increasingly focused more on the psychology of a character as expressed through physicality rather than through pure emotion; this eventually became known as his System of Physical Actions (Carnicke, 6).

In his introduction to a new translation of Stanislavski’s *An Actor’s Work*, Declan Donnellan related a story that illuminates Stanislavski’s quest for psychological truth and emotional life on the stage. In the early days of Stanislavski’s theatre ensemble, the Moscow Art Theatre, one of the actors brought his dog to rehearsal every night. The actors would rehearse scenes from the play, and the moment they stopped speaking from the playscript and began talking about what they had been rehearsing or about their plans for the next rehearsal, the dog would get up and move to the door, ready to leave; he knew rehearsal was over, even if no one else was moving toward the door or gathering their things to go. Stanislavski realized that the dog could easily tell the difference between their stage voices and movements – when they were acting – and their conversational voices and movements – when they were not. This led to an early goal for rehearsals that contributed an important theme to the development of Stanislavski’s

System: fool the dog. If an actor was behaving truthfully (a word Stanislavski regularly used), then the dog shouldn't be able to tell the difference between the text of the play and general post-rehearsal conversation between actors.

One of Stanislavski's best-known tools for helping his actors find that truthful place within the fictional world of the character is known as the "Magic If." When considering the "given circumstances" of the character – information about who the character is, where they come from, or the nature of their relationships with other characters in the play, for instance – the actor uses their own experience as a starting point, asking "What if?" "What if I were this person, in this circumstance? What would I feel, or say, or do?" Stanislavski described the experience of the exercise in this way:

When I give a genuine answer to the *if*, then I do something, I am living my own personal life. At moments like that there is no character. Only me. All that remains of the character and the play are the situation, the life circumstances, all the rest is mine, my own concerns, as a role in all its creative moments depends on a living person, i.e., the actor, and not the dead abstraction of a person, i.e., the role (quoted in Benedetti, *Life and Art*, 338).

The "Magic If" gives the actor the opportunity to use the familiar to create fiction. When Stanislavski says "there is no character, only me," he is not playing himself on stage with the given circumstances of his own life laid over those of the character. Instead, he has used his own experience to fully insert himself into the world of the character, so that we no longer see Stanislavski: we see a living – fictional – person.

Lee Strasberg and the Method

Stanislavski's early work on creating "emotional truth" on stage through relying on the psychology of the actor to build the psychological and emotional world of the

character was highly influential: a theme that many Western (particularly American) actors and acting teachers came to draw from. In the years following the 1920s appearance of the Moscow Art Theatre on the American stage, actor training in the US became increasingly focused on variations of what finally emerged as Method Acting. Different from Stanislavski's System of physical actions, the Method, particularly as developed by Lee Strasberg (of the Group Theatre, and later the founder of the Actors Studio) situates the actor in the theatrical moment via his or her own personal experience. As Strasberg noted in his book, *A Dream of Passion*, about the Method:

The soul of the character you're playing comes from your own emotions, but some actors question it because they become overly emotional. The exact opposite should happen. The actor should learn to control these emotions to use them on stage. The real problem is not that an actor may become hysterical, but that the actor may have difficulty feeling the same emotion fully, again and again (27).

It is this concept of generating and then controlling emotions that is defining feature of the Method.

The most significant and well-known element of Method training is an exercise called Emotional Memory, where a powerful personal experience from the actor's life is paired with a similar emotional experience of the actor's character in a play. In his description of the exercise, Strasberg said that best memories for the work should be "decisive events that have conditioned us and were influential as our highest and most moving experiences ... the most intense experience you've ever had in your life" (29). In preparation, and/or in rehearsal, the actor works to remember every sensory detail about the event: time of day, the temperature, what they were wearing, what was around them

(furniture, pictures on the wall, apple trees), using “I am” statements: “I am hearing ... I am seeing ...” This detailed recollection is a way of “sneaking up” on the emotion: “Never try to remember the emotion. The less you worry about it, the better.” Finally, the actor makes use of the summoned emotion to speak the lines of the scene. This exercise is repeated over time, with the goal of melding the real emotion with the fictional situation. Strasberg said: “I believe that emotional memory is the key to unlocking the secret of creativity that is behind every artist’s work, not just the actor’s” (28).

The Method is still widely taught today. While it has proven over time to be a more useful tool for film actors, many stage actors continue to study it in undergraduate and graduate theatre programs, as well as in other studio classes and workshops. While talented actors trained in the Method can bring incredible emotional intensity to the stage, the actor’s experience of character can be limited to the personal (Brustein, 1). An actor with a trained imagination can hope to embody anyone or anything; an actor with a trained memory can only hope to embody someone rather like that particular actor.

Jerzy Grotowski and the Poor Theatre

Jerzy Grotowski’s work in experimental theatre and actor training in Poland in the latter half of the 20th century took Stanislavski’s concept of “physical actions” in a completely different direction. His exercises were physically relentless, with the goal of pushing the actor beyond their natural physical limits in the service of eliminating the ego in the creative process (Wolford 201). Because of the intense physical aspects of Grotowski’s training and the Anti-Realism style of his theatrical productions, it seems unusual that he would be in any way an heir to Stanislavski. Yet he maintained that he was enormously influenced by Stanislavski’s assertion of the inseparable connections

between the physical and the psychological, saying that Stanislavski's work was "[a] key that opens all the doors of creativity" (*Poor Theatre* 193). However, because Grotowski's productions didn't call for the kind of "realistic" character development Stanislavski's actors were engaged in, his method of actor training focused on a fearless interrogation of the physical self of the actor; an interrogation that allows the creation of something perhaps closer to the Noh idea of *essence*.²⁷

In his book recounting his experience as a student of Grotowski, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*, Richard Thomas noted,

In the work of Stanislavski, the "character" is an entirely new being, born from the combination of the character, written by the author, and the actor himself ... [i]n the performances of Grotowski, however, the "character" existed more as a public screen which protected the actor. The actor *did not identify* with the "character" ... The "character" was created through the *montage* and was mainly destined for the mind of the spectator..." (98, italics his).²⁸

Grotowski's approach to actor training focused on breaking through old models of creative inspiration: the exercises he developed were designed to free the actor from any and all inhibitions – inhibitions that would prevent the expression of the raw, honest communication of the physical moment. While he insisted that his exercises were not a practical means for any actor to achieve creative freedom (that must come from each individual artist), his approach seems to offer the actor opportunities for deep insight into the interrelatedness of mind, body and emotion. Again, Richards:

²⁷This is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

²⁸The *montage* that Thomas refers to is a tool used by Grotowski and his actors to develop a work. A *montage* was usually created through combining pieces of different texts, physical motions, and sounds, that together expressed some kind of theme or larger idea. It served as a structure or a kind of primary text that the actor or actors could return to as they experimented and created a role.

It became clear to me that there probably existed the possibility of developing a right functioning, where each mechanism, keeping its place, helped the whole. For example, the body would look to remember its process, the mind would either speak “Yes,” to encourage the body, or evoke some precise memory or image that might help the body in its search. The emotions, then, left alone, might become less afraid to react to that which the body and mind were doing (68).

It is interesting to note that, in Richards’ description, Grotowski’s work shares the idea of giving emotion space to rise by not paying direct attention to it with Strasberg’s concept of sneaking up on emotion when it’s not looking as a means of capturing and using it, and even uses the idea of “precise memory or image” as a part of that process. However, Strasberg uses that emotion to feed the psychology of the actor, where Grotowski uses it to fill the body – as a vessel – with a visceral, unnamable energy that is communicated directly to the spectator.²⁹

Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty

Antonin Artaud was an actor, director, playwright, poet, and theorist, whose work in the early 20th century whose work was developed directly in opposition to the parallel movement toward realism at the time. He was concerned about the rising popularity of film, and felt that theatre was in danger of losing its vitality as an art form that could effect change due to what he called its “decay.” By trying to emulate film, theatre was in danger of losing one of its most powerful components: the intimate connection between actor and audience in the present moment.

²⁹It is interesting to note that Grotowski never used the term “audience”; for him, the people who came to see the play were *spectators*, a term that he felt gave them more responsibility for their part in the theatrical event. He also created works that surrounded the audience, sometimes forcing them to move, or work hard to see the actors and the action of the play. For instance, his play, *Akropolis*, was set in a concentration camp: as actors moved over and under parts of the set, spectators would find themselves craning their necks in order to see the suffering of the people in the play more clearly (Allain, pg).

Artaud felt that the theatre around him was dedicated to the bourgeois desire to be entertained, and to see a recognizable, realistic reflection of “self” on stage – a self that was engaging in familiar activities, and speaking in a familiar language. In his essay, “No More Masterpieces,” he wrote:

It is idiotic to reproach the masses for having no sense of the sublime, when the sublime is confused with one or another of its formal manifestations, which are moreover always defunct manifestations ... [f]ar from blaming the public, we ought to blame the formal screen we interpose between ourselves and the public, and this new form of idolatry, the idolatry of fixed masterpieces which is one of the aspects of bourgeois conformism ... [w]ritten poetry should be read once, and then destroyed (762).

He was heavily influenced the writings of Freud on the raw power of the Id, and the way in which Freud explained that the Ego and Super-Ego worked to suppress the dark, even animalistic elements of human action. Artaud wanted to crush that suppression, and make a visceral, even frightening, kind of theatre – what he called the Theatre of Cruelty – that could “release the demons that it was the normal function of social conventions to repress” (Gordon, 277). His goal was to create theatre that would shake the audience so brutally and so profoundly that the spectator would be forever changed because of the experience.³⁰

If Shakespeare and his imitators have gradually insinuated the idea of art for art’s sake, with art on one side and life on the other, we can rest on this feeble and lazy idea only as long as the life outside endures. But there are too many signs that everything that used to sustain our lives no longer does so, that we are all mad, desperate, and sick.

³⁰This discussion of Artaud’s work relies on what might seem to be hyperbolic language: theatre is described as brutal, violent, profound, destructive, crushing, chaotic. Those words are chosen deliberately, as they accurately reflect the dramatic tone and intention of his writing.

And I call for *us* to react (“Masterpieces” 762, emphasis his).

The language of his theoretical writings is sometimes violent, disorienting, dense, self-contradictory. However, the passion of his work brought the energy of the Dionysian to a theatre that, by the beginning of the 20th century, had, he felt, long been buried in the Apollonian. Artaud rejected the work of playwrights and the reliance actors had on their words, and set out to explore language without meaning – a language of pure sound – and the language of the body as a way of capitalizing on the immediacy of live performance and destroy the conventions of “traditional” theatre. He wanted to generate a passionate, but directed chaos – a chaos that was violent, but not entirely anarchic. His ideas about the physical forms that could be created by the actor were tied to specific goals as to how they would affect the audience, forcing them to see the darkneses that they repressed, regardless of the toll on the actor. As he wrote in *The Theatre and its Double*: “The actor should be like the martyr burning at the stake, still signaling through the flames” (13).

In his essay “La parole soufflé,” philosopher Jacques Derrida concluded that Artaud, in his desire to annihilate the theatre in order to save it, was driven to replace what is generally considered to be theatre – a mode of representation – with something that might be considered “pure performance” – a mode of theatrical *presence*. This presence is generated not as a means of reflection on human beings as they are, so that the audience sees themselves on stage, but instead reflects the parts of humanity that terrify us.

With his writings, Artaud triggered something that became much larger than theatre: postmodern thinkers and artists of many kinds speak of his influence on their

work, from philosophers like Derrida and Giles Deleuze, to punk rocker Patti Smith and performance artist Marina Abramovic. He is an unusual addition to this list, in that his approach to acting and making theatre was never codified or structured in a way that would support other actors following in his footsteps. What's more, he only produced one piece of theatre: a radio play that was so controversial that it wasn't aired until years after his death.³¹ Instead, Artaud explored the theoretical concept of performance as overwhelming, vital, and arresting *presence*, and rejected the notion of the value of an "art for art's sake" theatre (763). His effect on contemporary performance is still powerful and inspirational: it is less of a "how-to," and more of a "why?" Artaud's focus was on the responsibility of artists toward their audiences – the "desperate, mad, and sick" – and he calls "for *us* to react." His writings attempted to drive actors and the people who make theatre to hurl themselves into the heart of what we collectively and culturally fear, and make theatre that will change the world.

Zeami, monomane, and hana

The forms of traditional Japanese theatre, particularly those associated with traditional Noh theatre, could not have less in common with Antonin Artaud: where Artaud is explosive and destructive; Noh is delicate and subtle. However, both have great power and a fundamental place on the contemporary stage: their work brings together otherwise disparate forms of actor training and performance, and creates connections between those forms that continue to drive the work of training, rehearsal and performance.

³¹This work, "To Have Done with the Judgment of God," can be found in its entirety here: surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html

Noh theatre came into being in the late 14th century Japan, when the earliest ideas and movements of the form were created, recorded, and aesthetically explored by theorist, playwright, and actor, Zeami Motokiyo. Zeami wrote extensively on two concepts that, through contrast, help us consider techniques and goals of Western acting as a whole, and SITI Company in particular: *monomane* and *hana*.

Noh theatre relies on the concept of “transmission,” where specific characters within plays, and the quality of certain types of roles in general, are directly handed down – transmitted from a Noh master actor to a student: the student must learn to precisely copy the master in every detail, and no room is left for individual “interpretation.” However, this transmission involves much more than simply imitating words and movements, and moves beyond Western notions of imitation to an aesthetic practice that is much more subtle.

In order to understand Zeami’s writings, especially as they relate to Western theatre, it is necessary to look closely at the differences in terminology and interpretation of ideas; the concept of imitation in Western theatre is the best place to begin. In *The Poetics* Aristotle wrote on what he called *mimesis*: creating a perfect copy of an external form; holding the mirror up to nature. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the concept of *mimesis* is limited to the literal, something that can “stand in” for the original. He wrote on the pleasure we take in seeing imitation: “If you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some other such cause” (55).

It is widely assumed that actors imitate. The question of what is being imitated by the actor, and how it is being imitated, runs through performance theory. Diderot raised

the question of whether actors “imitate” through outer form (mimicry) or inner content (what he called “sensibility”). Stanislavski and Strasberg looked to ideas of external (physical actions) or internal (emotional memory) focus as a way for their actors to bring a character to life. Grotowski and Artaud explored the dynamics of physical and vocal intensity to create a vehicle for challenging what an audience expects to see imitated on the stage.

In his treatise on the nature and goals of acting, Zeami used the word *monomane*, which means the imitation, not of a particular person, but rather the imitation of *essence* (Quinn 95). The essence that the *Noh* actor strives to portray on stage isn’t psychological or emotional, or in any way representational – instead, it draws heavily on the quality of *spirit*, as communicated through the body. For example, a *Noh* actor playing an aged character would never fall back on physical clichés such as a trembling hand, a wavering voice, a stooped posture: these would lack beauty and charm: also known as *hana* (more on this below). Instead, the actor would perform slightly behind the beat of the music, thus capturing both the infirmities of age and the poignancy of “trying to keep up” (Hare 101).

In order to bring true *monomane* to the stage, an actor must, over the course of his life, study the concept that Zeami called *hana*, or “the flower.” He wrote, “First of all, one must understand the conception that, just as a flower can be observed blooming in nature, the flower can be used as well as a metaphor for all things in the *noh*” (98). As each flower has its season, and each flower blooms, loses its petals, and then blooms again, the actor must use this metaphor to deepen and expand his skills so that he is ready to perform – not for a single production, but for the rest of his life.

In the traditional training process of transmission, the student doesn't learn to represent the object – an old man, for instance; instead, he performs what he has learned. However, it is the development of *hana* over time that will set his performances apart: it elevates the performance from one of rote repetition to something “sublime.” The Noh actor isn't responsible for a creative interpretation of the role – instead, he is required to train his body and mind to present the essence of a character in a way that will charm the audience.

A real flower is the one that seems novel to the imagination of the spectator. This is what I meant when I wrote earlier that only after an actor “will have practiced assiduously and mastered the various techniques will he be able to grasp the principle of the Flower that does not fade.” Indeed, the Flower is not something special unto itself. The Flower represents a mastery of technique and through practice, achieved in order to create a feeling of novelty. When I wrote “The flower blooms from the imagination; the seed represents merely the various skills of our art,” I had the same principle in mind (99).

While the flower “blooms from the imagination,” is it not the creative imagination of the actor, but the creative imagination of the audience; instead of communicating that a character is angry or driven to tears by emotion, the transformative practice of *hana* presents the character to the audience as a gift of something new – “novelty” – to the spectators. The principle is to evoke the greatest possible response using the most minimal possible signal.

In order to make the connections between Zeami's centuries-old teachings and his impact on major movements in modern and postmodern theatre, it is helpful to consider a historical frame. Noh theatre uses the structure of “houses” to transmit performance lineages; early on, these houses consisted of families, and the technique was passed from

fathers to sons. World War II disrupted these lineages when, in post-war Japan, the practice of traditional Japanese art forms was banned; some Noh houses didn't survive the ban, and those that did practiced in secret. Also, during the period of time immediately following the war, Western theatre began to make its way onto the Japanese stage. Shakespeare had been read and even adapted and performed before the war, but the Realistic approaches to theatre that first appeared at the turn of the century in the West, flourished in the new "Shingeki" theatre style of post-war Japan, proving especially popular with new young audiences.

In this period, the eldest sons of the Kanze family – the core of Japan's largest and most prestigious Noh School – became interested in those Western styles. These men, Kanze Hisao and Hideo, studied with Jean-Louis Barrault; became friends with Bertolt Brecht and Eugene Ionesco; and organized study groups to study various Western approaches. Their research into these forms led them to make connections that still resonate in contemporary actor training methods and performance styles (Carruthers).

As part of his own study of the nature of performance, Jerzy Grotowski visited the Kanzes, spent time with them, and saw Hisao perform. He was struck by the juxtaposition of delicacy and power of their stage presence, and invited them to join him in Poland for a collaborative work (Acari 7).³²

The Kanzes were equally interested in Western forms of performance. They became so interested in the concepts and work of Constantin Stanislavski that Hisao learned Russian so he could read his original texts, rather than reading him in translation

³² The Kanzes agreed, but Hisao died before they made firm plans for the project.

(an example of their commitment to direct transmission of the craft of acting). Hideo also visited Germany to meet with Bertolt Brecht.³³

A final point of interconnectedness: as part of his interest in Japanese theatre, Grotowski established contact with Tadashi Suzuki – a relationship that initially resulted in Suzuki serving as translator for the Japanese publication of Grotowski’s book, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Acari 7). They stayed in touch, with each having the opportunity to observe the productions of the other. Grotowski also met Suzuki’s primary actor, Kayoko Shiraishi – the person who inspired the physically strenuous forms that are the foundation of Suzuki training (much as Grotowski’s primary actor, Ryszard Cieslak, inspired many of the physical techniques that are the foundation of Grotowski’s work). Theorist and director Antonio Barba collected images, displayed side-by-side, that show distinct similarities between a style of walking Grotowski’s actors used in his seminal production, *Akropolis*, and the qualities of a particular style of walking used in Noh theatre, *suriashi*. Elements of the *suriashi* walk are also a significant part of Suzuki training, called “language of the feet” (Acari 9).³⁴

Zeami and contemporary Western theatre came together in the work of the Kanze brothers and, later, Suzuki Tadashi. Zeami’s ideas regarding the nature of *hana* are woven into the work of Grotowski, along with that of American actor and director Joe Chaikin, whose Open Theatre laboratory workshop investigated new methods of using movement and sound to establish stage presence in ways that directly connect it to concepts of creative flow.

³³ Brecht’s interest in Noh went back to the 20s; he learned Japanese in order to read Noh texts (Carruthers).

³⁴ The connections between Zeami, Noh theatre, and the work of Tadashi Suzuki are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Joe Chaikin and the Open Theatre

When actor and director Joe Chaikin first moved to New York in 1955, he was caught up in the world of the Living Theatre company, led by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, and studying what he called in an interview with actor Liz Diamond, “naturalistic stuff.” He said, “I’m not crazy about naturalism on the stage. An actor is an interpretive artist. They can take their talent further” (web). In order to create a space for that kind of experimentation and interpretation, he left the Living Theatre and founded a theatre company, eventually called the Open Theatre – the name being a testament to the exploratory nature of their work and an open invitation to participate in ensemble theatre-making.

In that same interview, Chaikin said that he started the Open Theatre as an eclectic way of “solving problems” of performance that he felt he wasn’t solving for himself through either acting or directing. He was disappointed in what he called the “smugness” of acting teachers who maintained that their naturalistic, psychological approach to theatre was appropriate for any play, classical or contemporary: he saw this as putting significant limits on the imagination and skill of the actor, and also on the nature of theatre itself and its potential impact on the world.

Chaikin studied Method acting for a number of years, and had roles in some notable productions by the Living Theatre.³⁵ While he acknowledged the benefits of Method acting, he also critiqued what he felt were significant shortcomings.

Here, concentration and relaxation are emphasized. The text is disregarded and the actor is urged to show only what he is feeling at the moment. Improvisations that seem like

³⁵Almost all members of the Open Theatre had also studied Method acting before joining the ensemble. Some, including Chaikin, continued that work alongside their participation in the Open.

psychotherapy are freely used, as is self-hypnosis ... [m]y professional objection to this training is that it prepares the actor to play alone – he is completely locked out of any ensemble experience (*Presence* 66).

Rather than relying on psychotherapeutic techniques, he defined the first step of the actor as finding an “empty place where the living current moves through him unformed.” If the actor prepares by filling that empty place with emotions, then he is overwhelmed by “his internal life.” Chaikin maintained that the result of working to summon emotions is *confining*, the opposite of the creative freedom an actor can find: “all this [emotion] functions against discovery” (*Presence* 66).

Actors in the Open Theatre explored how the actor could, as Chaikin phrased it, “express the inexpressible”: much as Zeami spoke of *monomane*. Ideas about character, movement, and the presence of the actor on stage were explored and developed through laboratory-style workshops.³⁶ The ensemble included actors, playwrights, directors, musicians – even theatre theorists who came in to observe and discuss the work. They constructed performances based on large themes – myths, death, and the nature of sleep and dreams – and generated a different kind of focus for the actor. Chaikin said, “Generally our character work is unusual. We do characters who have the qualities of life or death, who are suspended or grounded; we play ‘states’ and ‘things’ as well as people. We want to know how to play Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and the others who write about the man *not* in the street” (Diamond, web; emphasis his). In his book, *The Presence of the Actor*, he noted,

A good place to start is by rejecting authorities on character. In this time of high specialization not one specialist is an authority on living ... [t]he notion of

characterization as understood in our American theatre is archaic and belongs with the whole hung-up attitude about the “other.” Characterization formerly has been simply a set of mannerisms which disguise the actor and lend atmosphere (17).

As a way of moving beyond those “sets of mannerisms,” he, along with the members of the ensemble, created theatre games often consisting only of breath, sound, and movement – with little or no text. These exercises focused entirely on the concepts of improvisation and transformation, giving the actors a place to explore shifts that took them away from traditional concepts of “acting,” and “character,” and into an organic, transitive space of *presence*, which he characterized in this way:

This “presence” on the stage is a quality given to some and absent from others ... [i]t is a quality that makes you feel as though you’re standing right next to the actor, no matter where you’re sitting in the theatre ... [i]t’s a kind of deep, libidinal surrender which the performer reserves for his audience (20).³⁷

The games give the actor a frame for finding and exploring that space of “surrender.”

The “sound and movement” technique, or approach to work, was a building block for collaboration in training, and for building the kind of “devised theatre” that the Open became known for. A common game was to put actors in pairs, and ask the first actor for a strong physical and/or vocal action—a “statement”—that wasn’t representative of some aspect of daily life, nor an expression of inner emotion. The second actor was asked to

³⁷In that same interview, Chaikin named actors Ekkehart Schall, Ryszard Cieslak, and Kim Stanley as examples of actors with powerful *presence*. It is interesting to note that these three actors are tied to the work of, respectively, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, and Lee Strasberg. These actors are people who were not only practitioners of the work but in many ways came to define it, like the theatre practitioners interested in the work of Zeami and Noh theatre (and in whom outstanding Noh actors were interested). This particular group of actors, associated with such disparate techniques and styles of performance, is particularly notable when considering the quality of stage presence as part of the creative experience and expression of the actor.

respond spontaneously, re-creating the energy (though not the form) of the first “statement” through sound and movement of their own. The result is a “transmission of energy and a passing of kinetic material” that can bring the actors together in a form of theatrical communication that wasn’t based on character, or dialogue (Passolini, 4). Sometimes these moments that came into being during the games would serve as the foundation for longer improvisations on the themes that spontaneously emerged. The games are infinitely variable, and can be played by one or many actors at a time.

Chaikin noted that the heightened nature of the kind of theatre they were creating required a great deal of the actor: staying in an open place of creative flow for long periods of time, in rehearsal and performance is demanding.

There is that level on which we live where we deal with obtainable information and assumptions and we exchange with one another the currency of data. Then there is that other level, from which we also act, where there is no possibility of fixing conclusions or exchanging facts. In that creative stage the actor is in a bafflement which has no sophistication and no information. He has suspended his personal armor and is without what we know as an organized identity. But it is on this level that it is most possible to meet him (*Presence* 26).

The way that he described the stripped-down place of creativity, where the actor has no armor and no information, and where “organized identity” disappears, sounds as if it could be frightening – however, the feeling of “selfhood” falling away is something described by people who have experienced flow. The dynamics of the Open Theatre games, constructed as a way to develop and expand the skills of collaboration and spontaneity, and build a sense of stage presence, actually create a solid environment for encouraging creative flow: the games have structures, rules, and goals, and an actor can find a balance between skill and challenge. Finally, while the games can be intense and

abstract, because they're not based in raw emotion or psychological excavation, they are also fun and engaging – worth playing in and of themselves.

Bertolt Brecht

From the outside, it might seem that Joe Chaikin's work with the Open Theatre has little or nothing in common with the German Anti-Realism of Bertolt Brecht. Chaikin explored a kind of mystic organicity, while Brecht created an entirely cognitive and analytical method of both creating and watching theatre. Yet their work shared a focus on the power of stage presence, and on theatre's ability to effect change using the actor's presence as a way to connect – and confront – the audience with challenging themes and ideas.

Director and theorist Bertolt Brecht's work came with him to America when he was trying to escape from the Nazis during World War II. His concepts of theatre and performance were in direct opposition to the Realism of Stanislavski and the Method. Brecht's theories and artistic practices were based on his belief that, while the world is dark, it is possible for people to change, and theatre is a powerful vehicle that can initiate that change, forcing the audience to examine their own lives as well as the world in which they lived. Yet what he saw around him was theatre based on narratives that were designed to entertain people, stories that lulled them into a sense of ease and distraction from the realities of life. Brecht wanted theatre to foster an environment of inquiry and criticism, and he developed a concept of "alienation," or "estrangement," that "purged [the theatre] of everything 'magical,'" and that eliminated what he called the "hypnotic tensions" of Realism, with its fixation on presenting something to the audience that seemed like an "ordinary, unrehearsed event" (*Brecht on Theatre*, 136).

He called this dynamic of alienation the “A-effect,” and, in his 1940 essay, “Short Descriptions of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation [Estrangement] Effect,” he outlined the goal and the mechanisms by which it worked. He eliminated the theatrical “fourth wall”: his actors often directly addressed the audience. They also narrated their own actions, sometimes in the third-person. For instance, in the beginning of Brecht’s play, *Measures Taken*, four characters known only as “The Four Agitators,” say, in unison, “We came from Moscow as agitators . . . we spoke of the nature of our assignment. This is what we said”) (*Measures*, 9). It was vital for the actor to remain present in the role, not merge with or disappear into the character.

This is not to say that Brecht tried to eliminate the concept of empathy from his productions; he wanted the audience to care about what they were seeing. However, his actors elicited empathy in ways that didn’t rely on the audience psychologically relating to their own realistically reflected lives. Instead, he likened the empathy generated through use of the A-effect, to the dynamic of someone – not an actor – who, in describing an event, might act out elements of the event as part of communicating what had happened. He gave the example of someone describing an accident they had witnessed: they might show how close people were standing to one another, or alter their voice to express some of the emotions of the event – even with this non-theatrical structure, the listener could still feel empathy for the victim of the accident.

One of the most significant tools for an actor developing a role using the A-effect approach is known as the *gestus*: Brecht described this as a combination of physical gesture, quality of movement, facial expression, and sound or language; it can also incorporate props or parts of the set (*Brecht on Theatre*, 136). The *gestus* is used to create

meaning and context through the physical work of the actor; it can also be used to remind the audience that the person on stage isn't an individual character as much as an archetype of person – a rich bureaucrat, a soldier, a girl. Brecht wanted the *gestus* to carry the same ease of recognition as a well turned line of dialogue. The most well-known of *gestus* of Brecht's work is the "silent scream" of Mother Courage when she holds her dead son in her arms. Rather than getting caught up in pity for her loss, we are forced to think about the kind of person who cannot weep aloud for her dead child ("Theatre of War"). The actor who originally played Mother Courage – Helena Weigel – and who created that *gestus*, said that the goal is that audience react "like thinking human beings," rather than being swept away by the emotion of a dramatic moment, unable to consider what they just saw (BBC, web).

It is interesting to hear Joe Chaikin's description of Brecht's work; he played the lead role in Brecht's *A Man's a Man*, at the Living Theatre (to great acclaim). He said this about his experience with the A-effect, and Brecht's Epic Theatre:

Brecht wanted his audience to be actively interested students at a finely worked-out epic classroom, where teachers of the same subject who had different points of view would argue out the lesson. The lesson is to be charged with entertainment, allegories, songs, impersonation, humor, clever, always-visible theatrical invention, and a unique kind of secrecy as a constant current during the whole event (*Presence* 36)

Chaikin also noted that American actors struggle with the A-effect because "our actors understand involvement only to be involved with the feelings of the character" (*Presence* 38).

Brecht's influence on contemporary theatre is so significant that it has become mainstream. The costumes in the stage musical, *The Lion King*; the first scene in the film "The Big Short," where the action of the movie begins, and then Ryan Gosling steps in, looks straight into the camera and begins talking to the viewer; the writing and staging of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*: all are straight out of Brecht. His ideas brought a new kind of freedom to the stage, and his techniques have continued to influence the ways in which actors train and theatre companies develop productions.

Summary

The collection of theorists and artists presented here are all part of the foundations of the work of SITI Company; their contributions to the possibilities of theatre also continue to inspire and drive SITI's work in new directions.³⁸

Some of this influence appears in the techniques and tools SITI actors have adopted and adapted. They rely on the careful textual analysis associated with Stanislavski's System of physical actions; Grotowski's *montage* that braids movement, sound, and the text together in the body of the actor; the physical condensation of Brecht's *gestus*, where choices about the body provide content for how the audience should consider the action of the play; and the kinetic transformation process of Chaikin's Open Theatre ensemble. They consistently seek ways to deepen methods of creative collaboration, and have an ongoing commitment to developing methods of practice that lead to *hana* on the contemporary stage: the powerful presence of the actor.

Another point of connection between these pivotal modern and postmodern artists and thinkers is that of theatrical goals: what kind of story is on the stage, how is it being

³⁸ In a recent post-performance talk-back, SITI actor Ellen Lauren said, "Sometimes all I think about is Brecht."

told, and what is the purpose of putting it there in the first place – why must *this* story unfold on *this* stage, right *now*? Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski wanted to make theatre that would change the world; Chaikin, Stanislavski, and Zeami experimented with ways to communicate something essential about the human experience, using the fundamental elements of body, mind, and spirit.³⁹

SITI Company’s statement of philosophy as stated on their website includes a list of concepts that are vital to their work. While the full list will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, these particular ideas inform their relationships with the thinkers and artists that have influenced them:

All great life-changing work made for the theatre has historically been made by companies;

The theatre is proposing to the world alternate ways for a society to organize itself;

The theatre is a gymnasium for the soul;...

The art of the theatre rests upon the art of the actor...
(web).

While there are many points of connection among these theorists, it is the philosophy of a theatre that “rests upon the art of the actor” that ties SITI so closely to these particular predecessors.. These connections to SITI will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

³⁹Strasberg’s Method is deliberately left out of this list of connections; instead, the Method stands as something that SITI (like Grotowski) pushes back against on all levels: methods of training and performance, and overall theatrical goals. This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V
CREATIVITY THEORY, ACTING, AND COLLABORATION

I wanted to continue to scare myself.
— Helen Storey

Introduction

There is little creativity research that applies directly to the experience of the actor. What's more, the research and commentary that is readily available is often misdirected, vague, or focused on a specific kind of acting – almost exclusively acting associated with Realism – where the research is presented in a global fashion, applying it to acting as a whole. As seen in the review of prominent styles of acting and goals of actor training, different approaches to acting have developed in response to new genres of theatre, with new responsibilities placed on the shoulders of the actors. However, a new branch of creativity theory, that of collaborative creativity, provides flexibility in its application that is useful when considering all types of acting, especially given that acting is always fundamentally collaborative. Even if there is a single actor and a single spectator, acting can only exist in collaboration.

To situate acting within current creativity theory, is it important to look at research focused specifically on acting. The first step is to review the work of two authors who are published and respected in the domain: Keith Sawyer and Jill Nemiro. While there are other publications on specific elements of acting and creativity, these are two of

the most widely referenced, due at least in part to the fact that they attempt the most comprehensive coverage of topics related to acting.

Research on creativity and acting: Sawyer

In his book, *Explaining Creativity*, researcher and consultant Keith Sawyer has written about the cultural myths of the creative person and creative process (including that of the tortured genius, toiling in isolation. Of more importance to this project is Sawyer's work in which he explores what he sees as the creative process of acting within the larger domain of creativity studies.

Like sports performance theorist Susan Jackson, Sawyer also began his research on creativity with Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi. He applied Csikszentmihalyi's concepts of creativity, creators, and creative flow to his own interest in the dynamic of improvisation. Initially he was focused on the improvisational nature of jazz music performance. In a 2016 interview, "Between Structure and Improvisation," Sawyer said that, as a novice jazz musician who had learned to read music when studying classical piano, he found himself intimidated by the blank page, the *tabula rasa*, of improvised jazz – a musical form that begins merely with a very simple melody and an indication of the key signature in which it is to be played; the elaboration of that melody is the creative work of the musician. Over time, he came to understand that jazz was not a mode of completely open improvisation, unrelated to any kind of rules or structure. Instead he found that there is always an underlying "generative," identifiable structure that provides a framework for the way the musicians.

Sawyer's ongoing research on improvisation is based on a model of collaboration, in which a group of artists are working together, at the same time, toward the same

creative goal. He argues that much of the work in the field of creativity is focused on the individual, and neglects collaborative work.

What may be different about my definition [of creativity] is that I think about both individual creativity and group creativity. For me, if it is group creativity, then the group is generating something new that they haven't generated before, and that the measure of whether it's creative or not is also collective ... by the group, the members of the ensemble, or the audience (Punya web).

However, his definition of creativity involves the concept of novelty (“something new that they haven't generated before”), which presents a potential problem when applied to acting, which requires actors to repeat performances. What's more, his assertion that the measure of whether or not something is *creative* – or, again by his definition, original—is something assessed by the audience is limiting.⁴⁰ Audiences are well-equipped to assess their subjective experiences, but is very risky to ask them to define a thing on the basis of a group impression. Does the decision require a simple majority, or a two-thirds vote? For instance, if an audience of drunken real estate developers, or an audience consisting of distracted teenagers, fail to respond to a critically-acclaimed performance of *Oedipus Rex*, does that mean that – for one night, at least – the play ceases to be a tragedy? Finally, how could an audience actually know whether something is, in fact, creative? All they can say for certain is how they experience it.

Over the past fifteen years Sawyer has expanded his writing on improvised performance to include the creative work of stage actors; he has consistently included or featured actors and acting in a number of his publications. Yet, he consistently conflates acting with comedic improv, and makes arguments about both improv and acting that are

⁴⁰The problem with the idea of “novelty” as applied to acting, and the concept of relying on the assessment of an audience in creative work, are both discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 6.

untrue.

Fundamentally, he maintains that improv presents the most complete picture of the creative work of the actor, because improv is original in a way that acting is not: he states that improv is “making new,” but acting is about interpreting the original work of someone else (*Explaining Creativity* 247). It is important to note that Sawyer has said that he has never acted in a play, and he has never taken an acting class. He reports that the closest he has been to the experience of the actor is when he played piano for an improv troupe while in college, where he was happy to use his interest in improvisational jazz to observe the process of comedic improv (*Explaining Creativity*, 243).

That the impressions of a piano-player stands in for research on the creative process of the actor results in an extremely skewed picture of what acting actually is, what it requires of the artist, and the nature of creativity and creative flow in the specific context of acting. He is one of the most frequently-cited authors in the field. Improv and stage acting are notably different in terms of training, in the experience of performance, and in the goals of the performance itself.

For instance, in his analysis of the sequence of the actor’s creative work – training, rehearsal, and performance – he has misinterpreted the ways in which the fluid balance of skill and challenge can create an environment for creative flow. He cited research on the differences between actors’ heart rates during performance versus their heart rates at rest – the measured heart rates associated with performance were higher – as an indication that performance is “facilitated” and “improved” by nervous energy, even stage fright: energy that he maintains is not present in training or rehearsal. He goes on to say:

Actors are faced with a task that would be too challenging for most of us, but they've mastered the skills necessary to perform the task. *They don't experience flow in rehearsal because that's not challenging enough.* They have to seek out the additional pressure of live performance (*Explaining Creativity* 250-251, emphasis mine).

This is a simplistic view of a complicated dynamic, and suggests causation where there is only (loose) correlation. What's more, many actors feel that much of the generative "creative" work is done during preparation and rehearsal. While creativity is required of the actor in performance, it has to more to do with addressing issues of repetition – what actors sometimes call, "keeping it fresh" – particularly in a long run.

It is true that, at a certain point close to opening night, actors and directors often talk about the production "needing an audience"; there is also a general sense of when a production is "ready" for an audience (and, of course, a sense of when a production is really *not* ready for an audience). However, that has more to do with the dynamic that *every* play ultimately requires an audience – a play cannot be complete without one – and the rehearsal process moves in that direction, and at some point development requires the feedback of observers. The requirement of an audience to meet the fundamental definition of "theatre" is different from his notion of actors "having to seek out" an audience as some kind of jump-start for the skill/challenge matrix. What's more, his conclusion that an actor cannot reach a state of creative flow in rehearsal because it's not challenging enough seems dependent on never having been in rehearsal.⁴¹ The process and experience of rehearsal – where, for instance, an actor might rely on Stanislavski's System, or the Method, or Brecht's A-effect when creating a character – requires that the

⁴¹He also wrote that improv actors do very little in the way of training and rehearsal. The improv actors I know – and sometimes rehearse with – would be very surprised to hear that. It's not just stage acting that he's underestimating.

actor find their own balance between skill and challenge, different from the balance required in performance. In terms of the heart rate study, actors working using the techniques of Grotowski or Suzuki most definitely experience elevated heart rates, and can also find flow within those physically demanding approaches to the work – and that’s true for the training in those methods as well as rehearsal.

Flow can most definitely be experienced during rehearsal because all the elements that come together to create an environment for flow are in place: well-defined goals, a method of continuous feedback, a balance between the level of challenge and the level of skill, and a task that is intrinsically rewarding. Csikszentmihalyi noted: “The best moments usually occur if a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult or worthwhile” (*Creativity* 110). Rehearsal in any of the acting traditions previously discussed—Stanislavski, Strasberg, Grotowski, Artaud, Brecht, Chaikin, and even Zeami—can stretch an actor’s body and mind to its limits as a part of accomplishing something, during both rehearsal and performance.

Goals, feedback, the balance between challenge and skill, and the quality of intrinsic rewards are present in *both* rehearsal and performance (and while Sawyer doesn’t mention it, this is true for training as well): but those elements are defined differently in each of those environments. To Sawyer’s earlier point, part of the feedback loop in performance comes from the audience. While he defines that dynamic as the audience determining whether or not something is creative, the accurate picture is whether or not the audience is – to use actor terminology – “with you.” Whether in a comedy or tragedy, the audience’s contribution to the play is something that can be felt by the actor without paying specific attention to it, but Sawyer’s concept of “creative

success” as defined by the audience limits theatre to what the audience already favors, and ensures that they are never confused or made uncomfortable. Additionally, waiting (and hoping) for the *approval* of the audience can actually ruin the atmosphere conducive to flow, as it results in self-consciousness on the part of the actor rather than supporting an experience of the sense of self disappearing within the task at hand. This is the Self 1 and Self 2 dynamic described by Gallwey – where cognition gets in the way of *doing*.

In Sawyer’s *Explaining Creativity*, he devoted a full chapter to the creativity of acting (there are also chapters on visual art and creative writing, along with a chapter on “business creativity”).⁴² In his discussion, he wrote about the historical significance of theatrical improvisation, specifically *commedia dell’arte*. He incorrectly maintained that theatrical improvisation had all but disappeared by the 19th century (also noting incorrectly that no *commedia* scripts have ever been found). He went on to write:

It wouldn’t be until 1955 that improvisation returned to the theatre scene. Chicago inspired an improvisation revolution in modern theater that has influenced directors, playwrights, and actor training. Chicago-style improvisation is widely considered to be America’s single most important contribution to world theatre (*Explaining Creativity*, 246)

This is simply demonstrably untrue; Method acting is far more widely studied and influential world-wide than Chicago-style improvisation. Sawyer’s arguments related to acting paint a misshapen picture: they are based on his fundamental misunderstanding of the process and experience of stage actors because of his limited view through the lens of comedic improvisation, and his incomplete “knowledge” and examples of theatre history and performance theory, especially the Method. When discussing why actors might turn

⁴²The Marxists are not wrong on this point of monetizing creativity. Sawyer is one of hundreds of people writing and giving workshops designed to increase and harness creativity in the workplace.

down a role because of the emotions that portraying the character might require, the fear of “losing oneself” in a character, he was able to cite only an example of a British actor who was let go from a production in which he was playing Hamlet after the actor started talking about demons and about seeing his own dead father: that is not a creative danger of acting – that is mental illness (*Explaining Creativity* 251). Other examples can be cited. When the cast of Peter Brook’s *Marat/Sade* began to develop symptoms of the mental illnesses they were portraying eight times a week, that proved to be the result of the internal, psychological approach they took. Also significant here is this *Washington Post* headline from April 2, 2019: “A drama student got ‘into his character.’ Then, he stabbed two people, police say” – the clue is the phrase “into his character,” which is a widely-used Method-derived concept in present-day America. All of these are examples of Method-style acting taken too far, rather than of some inherent aspect of the art of acting.⁴³

Intriguingly, he is the theorist closest to Diderot in his analysis of what an actor does. For instance, he discusses a rehearsal practice where actors are taught “how to make their dialogue sound natural” by studying and reproducing transcripts of actual conversation – these transcripts include details like the musical pitch of a specific word, or the precise length of a pause.⁴⁴ This is as extreme a focus on external form as one is likely to find.

However, Sawyer is correct when he talks about the power of games,

⁴³ Another example of the public’s perception (and the cultural influence) of Method acting was the foundation for a sketch in a recent episode of “Saturday Night Live,” when Emma Stone played an actress trying to “get into character” for her two-line role in a porn film, where she catches her husband cheating on her with her godson.

⁴⁴ While Sawyer discussed this exercise as if it is part of standard actor training, I have never known or even heard of anyone who used it.

improvisation, and play in acting; he simply puts them in the wrong context. They can be a significant part of training and rehearsal (as with Joe Chaikin's work with the Open Theatre, or SITI Company's Viewpoints), not just for a specific role or a specific production, but because of the way they allow actors to identify and strengthen skills and increase the level of challenge in rehearsal as well as performance.⁴⁵

Finally, when discussing his research on creativity, he made the point that, while other researchers study the individual, he feels that that neglects one of the most significant tools available to creative people: the energy of the ensemble, where people working together, toward the same goal, can bring something to life that is bigger, sometimes better, than what one person could create on their own. To assume otherwise minimizes the potential power of collaboration as a creative tool. The dynamic of collaboration in acting is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Research on creativity and acting: Nemiro

One of the reasons Sawyer's work is so widely read is that there are very few research studies on the creativity and actor; what's more, some of those studies seem misguided (the previously referenced study on elevated heart rate among actors, with its conclusions that stage fright must be necessary for actors to create; another dealing with the concept of "possession" – his word – the concept of an actor who is "taken over" by their character). Like Sawyer, their works are taken seriously among researchers, and referenced as reliable sources.

Another author who is regularly referenced is Jill Nemiro, a psychologist with an interest in acting, primarily as it pertains to group learning in education. Having written a

⁴⁵The improvisational qualities of Viewpoints are discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

single study on acting, she then wrote the entry on acting in *The Encyclopedia of Creativity*. Creativity expert and psychologist Mark Runco served as Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Encyclopedia; as researcher, author, and editor, he is considered to be one of the top researchers and theorists in the field of creativity studies.

Runco introduces the Encyclopedia itself in this way:

The Encyclopedia of Creativity is intended for use by students, research professionals, and interested others. Articles have been chosen to reflect major disciplines in the study of creativity, common topics of research by professionals in this domain, and areas of public interest and concern. Each article serves as a comprehensive overview of a given area, providing both breadth of coverage for students, and depth of coverage for research professionals (xvii).

Based on this description, the entry on acting is written by research professionals of significance in the domain, and is held to a standard of “depth of coverage” for other research professionals.

Nemiro’s entry on acting is odd and confusing. Like Sawyer, she wrote as if she has comprehensive knowledge of performance theory, though her content doesn’t confirm that. For example, in her summary of modern acting theories she mentioned Artaud, and then went on to describe what his “actors” were doing – impossible, since Artaud had no acting company – rather than saying that he was (sadly) only ever a theorist.

In her entry, Nemiro refers several times to a study about the experience of acting: the study is her own, and a review of the study reveals that her research on acting rested on interviews with only three actors, a notably small sample size (Sawyer also regularly self-references). It is important to note that these two authors who rely on their own work as source material underline the significant problem: there is very little research focused

on creativity and actors. In addition, the available research seems to rest on a small number of contributors who are neither well-read nor experienced in acting and/or making theatre, yet who have somehow been recognized as experts in the field, largely because there is so little research available.

While Nemiro references Brecht and Artaud, she ultimately makes no distinctions about the ways in which actors in each of those traditions always approach their work; she conflates both the A-effect and Artaud's raw physicality and sound with Stanislavski's System and the Method. Her definition of acting reads:

Actors strive to perform in such a manner as to make fiction believable, not as facts, but as a pleasurable, entertaining theatre experience.⁴⁶ Good acting demands that an actor is convincing in the part, and convinces the audience that she is the character being portrayed. Thus, acting is *more than mere simulation or pretending* (1, italics mine).

However, she began the entry with a short list of terms and brief definitions: acting, actor, character, imagination, improvising, pretending, spontaneity. There, she defines acting as “*Pretending* to be a character (someone other than oneself) ...” (1, italics mine); she is inconsistent about whether or not she believes that acting is pretending. She goes on to define “pretending” as, “substituting for reality.” Her definition of “character” is equally confusing: “That which a person or thing really is; the physical expression of a person in a play or drama” (1).

What her writing makes clear is that, while apparently discussing stage acting as a whole, she is only speaking of psychological Realism. The best illustration of this is a question that she used when discussing what she calls “the delicate balance” between the

⁴⁶Artaud, Brecht, and Grotowski – along with people who create work using some of their ideas and techniques, either directly or indirectly – would be surprised by this definition.

actors and the characters they portray on the stage: “So, how, then, during performance can actors achieve the creative outcome of portraying a believable character and still maintain their own personal identities?” (7) This is not a question that applies to the Brechtian actor.

Nemiro closes the entry with references to Robert Benedetti, a renowned expert on Stanislavski, as a means of answering her own question: “What lies ahead for the young actor of the future?” (8) She maintained that “actors of the future will be able to look forward to a diversity of acting styles, a theatre of variety and multiplicity of forms.” However, while this is most likely true, her interpretation of Benedetti’s vision of the future rested on his book, *Seeing, Being and Becoming*, published in 1976 – suggesting that her commentary about the *future* of acting actually refers to *now*. This misplaced focus demonstrates that her understanding of the creative work of the contemporary actor is limited by both her lack of expertise in the area of performance theory as well as her significantly small research sample size of only three actors.

A field of creativity research that more successfully presents and explores acting is that of collaborative creativity; a field which addresses the heart of the creative work of the actor.

Creativity and collaboration

Analysis of the creative process has ranged from our culture’s “creative types” – artists, writers, composers – to the creative process of individuals in other areas: scientists, engineers, philosophers, and mathematicians. Yet in these investigations the primary focus has remained on the individual, doing independent creative work. When considering the creative process of performers – musicians, dancers, and actors – people

who regularly or always work with others – a model based on the creative isolation of the individual presents an incomplete picture. Furthermore, work on the dynamic of flow generally omits what is sometimes a vital piece of the environment for flow: other people. Michael Jordan couldn't have hit all those 3-pointers in such a short period of time if his teammates hadn't recognized what was going on and passed the ball to him to begin with. Part of flow is having the right tools for the job, and the effective toolbox almost always includes collaboration in some form.

When creative people are asked about the ways in which they work, they frequently mention people with whom they collaborate: partners, fellows, teammates, assistants, colleagues, mentors, students, family members (Csikszentmihalyi, Runco, others). What's more, these responses about collaborators often come from people who might be more easily classified as independent creators, such as scientists, writers, and painters. This dynamic stands in contrast to the concept of the tortured artist: “no one else could possibly understand” (an idea so culturally established that we make jokes about it).⁴⁷ There is likewise the American cultural concept of the rugged individual, working alone and against great odds, and doing so with grit and ingenuity.

There are, of course, many artists who work entirely on their own – though that idea of “alone” might also undermine the contributions, solicited or not, from the work of others (“standing on the shoulders of giants” is an example); or from unexamined sources (the way in which teaching and interactions with students and mentees can spark new

⁴⁷The research in the field of mental illness in the arts focuses on that kind of extreme emotional and mental distress. There, the focus is appropriately on the diagnostic elements of mental illness, which feature self-reported feelings of isolation and the experience of being unimportant and detached from others, sometimes to the point of suicidality. This is a very real and serious area of psychological study. However, the focus in this conversation is the *cultural* concept of the artist toiling in misery and isolation, and not the topic as it appears in research in clinical psychology

ideas, for instance; an idea discussed later in this chapter). “The rules of the game” that support creative work can be expanded when looking beyond a recognizable “team” structure.

Csikszentmihalyi’s original set of questions for his research on creativity, creative flow, and Big C creators doesn’t include the word “collaborator” or “collaboration” (*Creativity*, 393-397). It does include the list “mentors, peers, colleagues”: the list appears in a series of questions about whether or not they would *advise* someone (as a mentor/peer/colleague) who is new to the evaluative structure of the field, where the value of work is assessed. The question reads, “(Concerning the importance of field) Would you advise mentors, peers, colleagues?” (*Creativity*, 394). There is another section specifically focused on peers and colleagues, but only as they relate to personal identity and success. That section of the interview includes the following questions: “At any time in your life, have your peers been particularly influential in shaping your personal and professional identity and success?” and “In what way(s) have colleagues been important for your personal and professional identity and success?” (*Creativity*, 395). The interview does include a question about how new ideas are generated that references the contributions of others: “Where do the ideas for your work generally come from? Reading? Others? Your own previous work? Life experiences?” The only question specifically focused on collaboration is, “Do you prefer to work alone or as a team?” (*Creativity*, 396). However, the interview doesn’t seem to specifically invite detailed responses about a collaborative relationship where ideas flow freely back and forth, where the creative endeavor couldn’t have come into being with just a single person.

Surprisingly, in the Jackson/ Csikszentmihalyi research on flow in athletes, discussion of the concept of “team” focused entirely on quotes from athletes talking about ways that the team energy being “off” affected them, rather than on the dynamic of working together on the field (Jackson, Csikszentmihalyi, 97, 105).⁴⁸ As a result, even in an area of research often focused on endeavors where a number of people must work together to create a cohesive team, the experience of an individual working directly with others isn’t fully explored.

How collaborations work

A review of research conducted with the goal of examining how collaborativity works, what’s involved, and who engages in it reveals what a small proportion collaborative creativity represents in a growing field. There are a few collaborative groups that have been directly studied in some detail, but not many, and rarely over any length of time. In fact, this is where this project enters the conversation: working together for the past 26 years, SITI Company has long offered a unique opportunity for the study of collaborative creativity.

The work of collaborativity researcher Vera John-Steiner offers some parameters about the nature of collaborative groups: who is in them, what encourages people to collaborate, and how these collaborations work. Her research suggests that true creative collaboration requires a high level of democracy because creativity requires specific goals. If the people in the group don’t all share the same focus, collaboration suffers. This

⁴⁸Even the idea of “team spirit” – so fundamentally a part of athletics that it’s assumed to always be in place – doesn’t appear in the book as part of the environment for flow in sports performance.

notion of democratically shared goals provides a method of assessing elements of collaboration (204).⁴⁹

The structure of groups reflects varying levels of democracy, different types of people involved in the collaboration, and the types of goals established. First, there may be a group of people who are involved in the same project, but who have no input into the nature of the project, its direction, or its outcome: an example of this is the dreaded group project at work, where all employees of a certain type or under a certain manager work together. This is a group in which little creative collaboration exists, because the goals come from the top and so cannot be shared or negotiated by the members of the group (192).⁵⁰

Researchers Dorothy Miell and Karen Littleton invited an artist, former fashion designer Helen Storey, to present her own collaborative process as a case study in their book, *Collaborative Creativity*. Storey's work illuminates the benefits that can result from deliberately shifting from independent creative work to work that exists within a structure that initiates and encourages extensive, democratic, and open-ended collaboration. She was an award-winning fashion designer who decided to move away from a traditional hierarchical creative structure and away from work contained within the field of fashion. This structure, in her field, involved multiple people at many levels, and where she, as designer, was at the top; others working on the design projects had significant creative responsibilities, but not equal input into the process or goals. After determining that interdisciplinary collaboration was what was most interesting to her, she

⁴⁹ John-Steiner developed a research instrument, the "Collaboration Q-Sort," to assess the similarities and differences in collaborative structures.

⁵⁰ The final structure in the list, where the goals of creative collaboration come from the top, and the participants have little or no input, is an example of the Marxist notion of monetizing creativity, as it is the most-often implemented type of creativity training in the workplace (Runco, Sawyer, others).

invited her sister, a biologist, to join her in designing a project and bringing it to fruition. The case study focused on the most unique quality about her work: she first chose to pursue collaboration in general, not collaboration on a specific project. Once she found collaborators, she then worked with them to determine the nature of the work they would pursue together. Her approach to collaborative work is ongoing and is the basis of the Helen Storey Foundation. This is the Foundation's mission statement:

The Helen Storey Foundation seeks to inspire new ways of thinking, by instigating cross-collaborative art, science and technology projects. These investigate human creativity and ingenuity, and apply it in a socially responsible framework. Public access and engagement from all sectors of society is key (web).

The ongoing success of her work, her ability to continue to bring together new groups of collaborators, her commitment to the investigation of creativity, and the strong parallels between the ways in which she talked about these processes all provide context for the ways in which the members of SITI Company actors talk about their work, discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Storey left fashion because she wanted to work within new disciplines, new areas, but didn't want her lack of training or knowledge to limit the effect of a project. To encourage the kind of collaborators she was interested in working with, people working at the top of their own fields (Csikszentmihalyi's Big C creators), she had to set up the process in a way that would interest experts in these other disciplines: her collaborators had to be able to come into the project on equal footing. In order to include others, she had to let go of the nature of the project entirely; then, once a team had been formed, they could create the project and its goals together. "Otherwise collaboration is merely

something where you could just pay them to fulfill something you can't do and that is not true collaboration" (42).⁵¹

She mentioned the "nerve" required to give this kind of collaborative process time to work:

The process [of these big collaborations] determines the outcome, and I don't like to speed that up or cheat it. There is an awful lot of holding your nerve required when you do that, but it is the most enjoyable bit really; when your mind comes up with something and you haven't got a clue where that came from or where it will lead ... [t]here was no overall planned structure to the process of creative collaboration that made sense; the whole thing was run on instinct (41).

She spoke here of trusting in time, running on instinct, and enjoying the creative ride that the collaborative experience offers, and went on to say that one of her primary goals for building these collaborative networks was that "I wanted to continue to scare myself" (42).

Storey's open-handed approach to finding collaborators in a broad range of fields resulted in creative work generated through an entirely unpredictable process, with equally unpredictable results; as she noted, a scary – but exhilarating – experience. This example details the way in which it is possible – and valuable – to place emphasis on the creative process, not just the creative product: the *doing-ness* is as important as whatever it is that comes from it (and sometimes that result might be nothing). Joe Chaikin's Open Theatre ensemble worked together for two years before they even decided to name the company, and it was only after that that they began producing work specifically for

⁵¹As an example of their work, one Storey Foundation project began with several meetings of the 70 of collaborators, from disciplines as diverse as biology, technology, and fashion. They decided together to focus on the concept of clean air. The result of that particular collaboration was the creation of a pair of wash-and-wear blue jeans, made with fabric that was embedded with tiny air-cleaning vehicles.

performance; there is a reason that both Chaikin and Grotowski used the word “laboratory” in describing their methods of working.

The open-ended idea of collaboration is also a part of theorist Rob Pope’s commentary on the structure of play and games.⁵² In his examination of the importance of play and games in the creative process, Pope defined the differences between “finite” players and “infinite” players and the reasons they play: “‘Finite players’ play competitively, *for themselves*, to a desired or required end. ‘Infinite players,’ on the other hand, *play with and for others; they play co-operatively* and with *no determinate ends in view* (123, emphasis mine). In order to be an infinite player, to invite creativity and creative flow through the structure of the game, you *have* to play in collaboration.

Playing with and for others, with no determinate ends in view, seems to be the creative structure Storey put in place so she could continue to scare herself; finite playing sounds like the hierarchical creative work she left behind. Her work as an independent designer was creative (even Big C Creative), but she seems to prefer the creative experience of infinite structure, the place where you have to have patience and nerve.

After fifteen years of immersing herself in these deeply collaborative endeavors, she reviewed her experiences, and found a series of consistent themes associated with the work: a shared motivation for collaboration; working across disciplines; the ability to assess and recognize the value of the project; facing the fear of failure when taking big risks; creating relationships of trust, intimacy and mutual vulnerability; finding ways to collaboration without assuming a “leadership” role; ownership, where each participant feels the significance of their contribution; and identity and personal growth (42). Of the last, she noted the impact of collaboration on how she sees herself within the work, and

⁵²Previously discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

feels that it has helped her grow as a person, “because you risk yourself as a person. I think collaboration makes you braver” (49).

That this concept of practicing bravery as a skill that can be learned in a collaborative environment is significant. Artists and innovators of any kind risk failing when they send their work out into the world. The dynamic of a creative collaboration, where the group itself is responsible for assessing the value of a project, creates a kind of safety net: while every artist is vulnerable, it is easier to be vulnerable together, to share the risk. However, bravery is also part of the process, not just an external dynamic of sharing the result. The collaborative creative vulnerability doesn’t mean that everyone in the group has to agree all the time – room for dissent is an important element of the collaborative environment when the goal is creating something bigger than what any individual within the group might produce. With those ground rules in place, agreed to by all members of the group, it can be easier for an individual in the group to take a risk and speak up, trusting that they won’t be shut down. Careful listening and the willingness to “leap before you look,” as E.M. Forster described it, are both skills that can boost creative courage. Finally, in a collaboration, members of the group can be inspired by what they see as bravery on the part of another person – the value of courage as a means of upping the ante: again, focusing on the creative process and not the result.⁵³

Storey goes on to say this about identity and growth:

When you work with others there is an endless negotiation about your own power and how much you should have, or how much of it you don’t have and you wish you had. I think when you have been through a number of collaborations you realize how much of a distraction that is to the work at hand. The key moments are

⁵³The necessity of courage as part of the creative collaborative process as it applies to SITI Company is discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7.

far more important than having any identity. Having less of a personality is actually more enabling. Through collaborative creativity you overcome the need to have a personality, which is amazingly freeing. (49)

Sometimes there are questions about the connections between “self” and “character” in theatre, where there are sometimes conversations about actors “losing themselves” in a role – most especially when it comes to the Method. However, the idea that taking collaborative risks can be a means of freeing the actor from *worrying* about her or his personality is a powerful one, and worth considering when developing the structure of the creative environment and the nature of the work.

Collaborative structures in theatre

Generally speaking, some version of the hierarchical model is the norm in almost all theatrical productions: someone in authority chooses a play, holds auditions, and casts the actors. The director guides the actors through rehearsals according to his vision of the play and overall production. The actors (ideally) all want to be there, and they often have much more creative input, even as it applies to some of the goals of the production, than the members of the business-model group work project: the actors aren’t just completing work as assigned, nor are they usually put in a creative group they have no interest in joining. However, in most productions the actors aren’t on equal footing with the director; while the actors might determine some of the ways in which their character is realized, they may not carry much (or any) weight in the larger decisions about the production. In other words, the traditional theatre model is still a hierarchy that works against a fully collaborative approach to goal-setting.

The hierarchical model of the theatre, with either the director and or the playwright at the top, obviously creates great works – though it is interesting to note that

many of these productions are still discussed because of a particular actor's work: Richard Burton's *Hamlet*, for instance. However, there are theatrical collaborators that make use of different kinds of collaborative structures, including some of those discussed above.

Relationships among collaborators

Collaborators can extend creative work in new ways; adding new individuals and their domains to the mix means they can bring in new dynamics, both in terms of their knowledge and skill, as well as the "rules" of their own creative field (the world of fashion design versus that of biology, for instance). As a result, different types of collaborators change even the nature of the game itself.

However, there are social parameters than can either inhibit or support the creation of something new through working with others. Research demonstrates that short-term collaborations, especially those with collaborators who have been *assigned* to a group, often fall victim to the pressure of conformity – a "strain for consensus" that often means that the process doesn't ever get off the ground (John-Steiner, xv). Likewise, some groups are hindered by competition between two or more of the individuals; competitive demonstrations of skill create a kind of unofficial hierarchy not in line with the goals of the collaboration.

It is when people choose to work together and deliberately find ways in which their skills and ideas complement one another, that they are able to build a platform for successful collaboration. Artist Helen Storey ascribes this to a choice – and the ability – to be "mutually vulnerable" (47).

The Group Theatre

In her book *Creativity and Collaboration*, creativity researcher Vera John-Steiner explored the ways in which collaborative work can produce a “new mode of thought” that could not have come into the world otherwise: its emergence and establishment is entirely dependent on what happens beyond the reach of any of the individuals involved (68). The text analyzes, across disciplines, historical collaborations in light of contemporary creativity research on collaboration.

Her review contained a section on artistic collaborations, and included a review of the work of the Group Theatre. Founded in 1931 by directors Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg, the Group was dedicated to “[t]he development of playwrights, artists, repertory and the rest only as they lead to the tradition of common values, an active consciousness of looking at and dealing with life” (*Fervent*, 41); they intended to create what they called an “artistic organism.” The ensemble was committed to producing new and innovative plays by American playwrights – plays with an emphasis on contemporary social and political issues. The members of the ensemble were equally committed to taking and teaching acting classes as a part of their immersion in the work, where they continued to develop and refine their interpretation of the then-new practices of Stanislavski, which later became Strasberg’s Method. The ensemble included playwrights and directors as well as actors and, over time, the distinctions between classes and rehearsals blurred, as exercises like Emotional Recall generated energy and ideas that inspired new scenes and characters in plays. As a result, the distinctions associated with different parts of a traditional theatrical hierarchy, with directors and playwrights at the top, also started to blur.

In John-Steiner's review of the life of the Group, she noted several themes that echo some of the topics of research in collaborative creativity, including the concept of leadership as it applies to a democratically structured ensemble; the dynamic of unacknowledged hierarchies; methods of collaborative self-interrogation; and the balance of the individual versus the group in different levels of decision-making. There is also the potentially destructive dynamic of unacknowledged hierarchies: if the structure of a collaborative group is not consistently assessed, there may be subtle shifts in the allocation of responsibilities as the group grows and changes over time. This can result in an individual, or a small group of individuals within the company, being put into what should be a leadership role, but with none of the agency that is necessary for that role. This dynamic is a significant part of why the Group Theatre was unable to survive as a collaboration over time (89).

An event that occurred at the midpoint in the life of the Group theatre was of particular interest in its relationship to established research on collaboration. During the first five years of the Group, the growth of the company stalled: the actors in particular felt burned out by the financial and administrative jobs they had taken on. There was a constant need for fundraising, as the ensemble had no sponsors, and the actors felt it was necessary to mount more productions. Other kinds of fundraising, along with the day to day running of the company, required managing, and the actors were taking other paying jobs to keep the theatre running.

In response to this situation, the actors formed a committee and drafted a letter to the directors of the Group – Clurman, Crawford, and Strasberg. The letter stated that, while the directors were most definitely responsible for founding the Group, and setting

its creative work in motion – it could not have happened without them – it was increasingly the actors who were taking on more and more of the necessary financial and administrative work, often to the detriment of their creative contributions (the reasons they'd joined the ensemble to begin with). It was clear that the directors were not stepping in to make changes, and so the actors maintained that they should be the artists responsible for moving the ensemble forward: the original hierarchy of the ensemble was no longer viable.

The responses to the actors' demands on the part of the directors were mixed: Crawford and Strasberg stepped down, and only Clurman remained, working with the actors in a dramatically different collaborative structure. John-Steiner notes that it was the actors who took on the responsibility for deconstructing the original hierarchy in order to challenge the hidden hierarchy underneath: one where – by choosing to focus only on the creative work, ignoring the larger working structure of the Group – the directors had all but abandoned the way in which the company actually functioned.

John-Steiner stated that this dedicated examination of the structure of the group – not just on the creative results of the ensemble – was an example of what researchers called a global “mindfulness” – the ability to see and collaboratively work through challenges associated with all aspects of a collaboration: a dynamic that can reinvent and move a collaboration forward, or that can signal the end of the group if changes cannot be made. What's more, it is change that can only come from within the collaborative group; it cannot be imposed from the outside. By re-defining the organizational structure so that it incorporated all aspects of the collaborative responsibilities, the actors were able to

save the Group Theatre; the company continued to produce groundbreaking work for another five years.

The life of the Group Theatre and its ability to reorganize itself so successfully was of interest to John-Steiner because of how closely the dynamics of the ensemble mirrored contemporary research on successful creative collaboration. The example of the collaborative structure, practices, and goals of the Group Theatre, as well as its ability to re-invent itself – all while continuing to generate significant creative work – is also significant in light of this particular case study about SITI Company; there are many parallels.

SITI came together based on shared artistic goals; as the nature of the company expanded, incorporating teaching along with performing, the organization of the ensemble demanded change – especially since it was the actors themselves who were suddenly both teaching and performing. The company realized that, in order to stay true to their aesthetic goals, the structure of the company must be mindfully restructured and reorganized. This shift in organization to incorporate teaching is seen in the list of themes that are part of their statement of philosophy. As mentioned previously, the company is committed to the concept that “the art of the theatre rests on the art of the actor.” However, another vital element of their philosophy is the importance of teaching and training: “A balance between teaching, learning and doing is critical in an artist’s life” (web). SITI Company acting classes, intensive trainings, workshops, and other training projects are run almost entirely by the actors. While a few of SITI’s training opportunities include most the actors in the company, much more of the training and teaching is carried

out by one or two members who travel to universities and organizations all over the world to meet and work with students.

Intriguingly, this dynamic – that of teaching and mentoring – is also directly tied to research in another topic in the field of collaborative creativity: the generative creative power in the teacher/student, mentor/mentee relationship.

The importance of teaching

Research on the nature of creative collaboration has shown that teaching and mentoring can significantly enhance both the quality of collaboration and the “outcome,” whatever that might be (John-Steiner, 1965). For someone involved in a collaborative community, stepping outside that community of peers to teach means revisiting and reassessing the goals and practices of the original collaboration itself. Teaching requires identifying the most important elements of the ensemble’s praxis, and characterizing specifics about the relationships between those elements. Based on the interconnectedness of those relationships, the teacher must also determine the order in which they should be taught, as well as deciding on the type/s of feedback required for each element and the manner in which that feedback should be communicated. What’s more, the ensemble itself must weigh the potential gains and losses that are part of stepping away from the original creative goals of the organization in order to teach. Finally, if the goal of teaching is financial support for the ensemble, that can define the teacher/student structure in a specific, more limited fashion. However, if the goal is more inspirational, more about sharing methodology as a way to bring students into all levels of the creative practices of the company, in order to encourage growth on both sides of

the relationship, that decision can create something more equable that can then include, even feature, collaboration.⁵⁴

Again, this topic of research in collaborative creativity is particularly important in relationship to the development of SITI Company as a creative ensemble, but also in terms of the reach of their methods. Many hundreds of students train with the company or with specific members of the company every year (much as Strasberg's Method spread across the world as a result of his students moving on to teach what they had learned). In a number of their classes, SITI Company members train alongside students, serving as models for the complicated forms and ideas of their training and rehearsal practices, but also as a means of staying connected to the larger dynamic of their commitment to the company. It also presents the opportunity to extend the nature of their ensemble work when SITI actors teach together. The consistent process of breaking down the specifics of the practices in order to teach them is then its own form of collaboration – one that can also generate creative ideas that would not necessary have come to light with a single person. Finally, it is connected to the dynamic illuminated by the Group Theatre actors: that of mindfulness, and of consistently reviewing the structure and goals of the ensemble, and making adjustments when the practice differs from the stated goals.

Inspiration as collaboration

Another concept that research in collaborative creative work addresses is the reframing of the concept of “inspiration” – in terms of being inspired by the work of another – as a one-sided collaboration; this collaboration can reach across both

⁵⁴SITI Company relies on those mentor/mentee relationships when building their productions. More details on how this type of collaboration is incorporated into their work appear in the following chapter.

disciplines and time. However, a creator who has been inspired in this way often discusses the dynamic by using ideas and language associated with collaborative works, including the concept of having created something that the artist couldn't have made independently. Helen Storey noted that she may have one idea, and her collaborator another: "The ideal scenario is that you come up with the third idea that neither of you could have thought of on your own" (Storey, 48).

This shift of the idea from that of creative "connection" to one of creative collaboration is perhaps particularly important for actors, since the playwright whose work they are performing may be – as, for instance, with Shakespeare – long dead. However, it is also a useful concept when considering the multi- and interdisciplinary nature of theatre, especially when voices from "outside" the theatre make substantial contributions through a one-sided collaboration. The Open Theatre's play, *Terminal*, is an example of this dynamic: along with sharing their own thoughts and feelings about death with one another, the company invited a mortician in to speak frankly about his work. It is unlikely that the mortician returned to his work in a theatrically-inspired way, but Chaikin related the strong effect that meeting had on the way in which the piece continued to develop (*Presence*, 88). This type of collaboration is frequently a part of SITI Company's work: for example, their adaptation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was based on their study of neuroscience and the scientists with whom they spoke directly.

Summary

It is clear that the way in which acting is currently framed within the larger domain of creativity research is incomplete and sometimes misdirected. What's more, the way in which actor's experience of creativity is expressed in this research has focused much more on the actor as an individual than as a part of a larger collaboration. Not only is collaboration required of the actor (if nothing else, at least between an actor and a spectator), the collaborative environment and the relationship between the collaborators can be structured in a way that encourages creative and personal growth, and a sense of the value of her or his contribution to the project.

The structure and artistic goals of SITI Company have been developed, over time, to support that kind of collaborative environment in training, rehearsing, teaching, developing new works, and performing. Storey's themes of successful collaboration are part of these systems: shared motivation; interdisciplinarity; assessment of value; big risks and the possibility of failure; relationships of mutual vulnerability; facilitation of collaboration; ownership; and personal growth. The ways in which SITI fits into this model of meaningful creative collaboration is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI

SITI COMPANY

The theatre is a gymnasium for the soul.
— SITI Company

This chapter introduces SITI Company: its directors, Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki, as well as the structure of the company, and the ways in which the company defines its work. The dynamics of their creative collaboration is presented through interviews and writings from the artists of SITI, with a focus on the actors. Finally, their collaborative structure is analyzed against the research in the larger field of creative collaboration.

SITI Company was founded in 1992 by Anne Bogart, Tadashi Suzuki, and several other artists who were committed to a process that would “redefine and revitalize” contemporary theatre in the US. Their emphasis was (and remains) on training as a means of developing and deepening the actors’ skills, building creative collaboration, and fostering relationships that support their goals of international cultural exchange.

When SITI Company introduces itself via its website, the introduction begins in this way:

SITI Company is an ensemble-based theatre company whose three ongoing components are the

creations of new work, the training of young theatre artists, and a commitment to international collaboration (web).

It is only after presenting their goals that they briefly note their history:

SITI was founded in 1992 by Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki to redefine and revitalize contemporary theatre in the United States through an emphasis on international exchange and collaboration (web).

That short statement is the only information that appears on their (very thorough) website about the way in which the company was founded. The site includes a production history from their first production in 1992 up to present day; descriptions of their major works and works that are currently touring; bios of the company, including technical and administrative members;⁵⁵ blogs written by several company members; information on training, workshops, and lectures; along with other significant information. That the website contains so much information, and that so little of it is dedicated to the way in which the company was founded suggests that SITI's focus is more on the *doing-ness* rather than the specific point in time where that action began.

As a result, SITI's emphasis on the actors and their methods of training and collaborative creative work will be paralleled here.⁵⁶ Several books have been written by and about both Bogart and Suzuki and about their experiences that lead to the development of the training and the company. However there is comparatively little written on the ways in which the SITI Company actors have continued to develop and

⁵⁵ It is important to note that this list of members includes designers, technicians (such as stage managers) and some of the administrative staff as being SITI Company *collaborators* rather than satellites. SITI seems to have considered the history and structure of other companies – like the Living Theatre, which suffered a major setback by underestimating the importance of those contributions – when building their own.

⁵⁶ The brief introductions to co-founding directors Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki given in Chapter 1 will be expanded in this chapter, but only as they directly relate to the ways in which their history and previous work led to the development of their companies and their training and rehearsal methods.

refine those techniques in ways the directors could not have foreseen or shaped on their own.

Anne Bogart

Anne Bogart's creative history beyond her own education and work in theater strongly reflects her experience of the world of dance. While studying theatre at Bard College as an undergraduate, she had the opportunity to work directly with the postmodern choreographer Aileen Passloff, and was so taken with Passloff's dance compositions that she eventually started referring to her own directing as "composition." Though she was never a dancer herself, she attended classes, watched rehearsals, and saw productions by such troupes as the Martha Graham Dance Company, Merce Cunningham, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, and the Judson Church Dance Theatre.⁵⁷

She called the list of the companies and individuals in theatre that have influenced and shaped her work "a mashup," which included contemporary and avant-garde artists such as Richard Forman, Bread and Puppet Theatre, Klaus Michael Gruber, Maria Irene Fornes, Robert Wilson, JoAnne Akalaitis, Richard Schechner, and Ariane Mnouchkine. Most specifically, she pointed to the work of Brecht, Joe Chaikin and his Open Theatre, Artaud, Zeami, and Grotowski. In different ways, these artists all influenced her interest in relying on the body of the performer as the primary means of theatrical

⁵⁷Bogart regularly mentions trying to "understand dance from the inside." This is what led her to attend classes taught by some of the most significant New York-based dance companies in the final decades of the 20th century, even though – as she makes clear – she was (in her words) a horrible dancer.

communication; at least as strong, if not stronger, than the text (blog, Dec 8, 2015).⁵⁸ She studied approaches to “acting for the stage that combine vaudeville, operetta, Martha Graham and postmodern dance,” and was particularly interested in the ways in which these came into being in the United States.⁵⁹ She was also invested in exploring the physical forms of dance and vaudeville, along with the heightened theatrical qualities of operetta and opera as a means of breaking free from the domination of Method acting in theatre. She noted that while the Method can have a place in film, in theatre it “created an unfortunate stranglehold of emotional indulgence” (*Director 78*).

The work of those directors and movements also influenced Bogart’s interest in the structure of theatrical collaboration and the process of creating a company. On meeting Ariane Mnouchkine, director of Théâtre du Soleil, and – as Bogart described her – the “woman I admire most in the world,” Bogart asked her “What about this company thing? ... [a]nd she looked at me really sternly and said, ‘What are you going to do without a company? Don’t get me wrong. It’s a pain. People leave and break your heart and the hardships are constant. It’s always a problem. But what are you going to do?’” (“What’s the Question,” blog). In that moment, Bogart said that she realized that all of the great productions she had ever seen had been produced by an established company, and she then determined that she would work with one. After a single season as Artistic Director at Trinity Repertory Theatre, she realized that she would have to actually build her own company, with like-minded artists, rather than simply walk into one shaped by other people.

⁵⁸This focus is clear in all SITI productions; each show has its own balance between the body and the text – *Steel Hammer* relies heavily on the physicality of the actor.

⁵⁹The way in which SITI uses the phrase, “gymnasium of the soul,” is part of this dynamic, and it comes through both Viewpoints and Suzuki methods of training.

She was given the opportunity to further investigate the dynamics of the actor's body on the stage when she was invited to teach at NYU. There she met and collaborated with Mary Overlie, a choreographer who had developed a method designed to help both choreographers and dancers when composing and performing a piece. Overlie called this method the Six Viewpoints: space, time, shape, movement, story/image, and emotion. Bogart and Overlie worked with the Viewpoints together on several productions, and Bogart started to adapt the dance-based Six Viewpoints into a tool more specifically for actors. The elements of Bogart's adapted Viewpoints were: kinesthetic response, tempo, duration, repetition, shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography (Landau 20).⁶⁰ Bogart was particularly taken with the way in which the practice of Viewpoints gave the actor and director a specific, shared vocabulary to work with that went beyond the text.⁶¹

Another concept Bogart explored leading to her work with SITI was that of bringing everyone involved in a production – director, actors, designers – together to brainstorm ideas about constructing and staging a show: a process she called “lateral thinking” (*Director* 140). While many of the production plans that emerged through these sessions of lateral thinking were far too expensive for a young group of artists to implement, she was pleased by the rush of ideas and especially by the imagery created by the collaboration. The combination of new ideas, a non-existent budget, and little rehearsal time, forced what she called “creative solutions,” and resulted in productions full of “presence and energy” (*Director* 151). The results of this atmosphere of generative

⁶⁰Over time, Overlie has made it clear that she feels that, in many ways, Bogart and SITI Company “stole” the Viewpoint concept, even though they consistently credit her as the originator of the Six Viewpoints in the dance world.

⁶¹The ways in which the Viewpoints work in training and rehearsal are presented in more detail in the following chapter.

yet pressured creativity, led her to consider the goals of the actor in rehearsal, and the relationship between the director and the actor. After hearing another director ask several times if an actor was comfortable during rehearsal, she wondered if the actor's comfort was in conflict with her own experience of the creative power of pressure and obstacles. She determined that her job was to "set up purposeful resistances," and to create an atmosphere that would bring different perspectives – sometimes in conflict with one another – to the work (*Director* 151).⁶² What's more, this process was one she felt could be most effectively utilized within the structure of a company.

At this point, Bogart had worked with several actors that she was interested in creating more work with; she invited them to join her and, after a few productions that featured those actors – and gave them the opportunity to start exploring the Viewpoints together – they founded SITI Company. Once the company was established, they were invited to bring one of their productions to the theatre festival founded by Tadashi Suzuki. He and Bogart had met previously and discovered their shared interests in the type of theatre they were interested in making, the collaborative process that was the foundation of that process, the focus on the physical presence of the actor, and the necessity of consistent methods of training and rehearsal that could develop and strengthen the actor's awareness and use of that powerful tool.

Tadashi Suzuki

Tadashi Suzuki began his work in theatre as an actor in a national university student theatre organization, Japan's Waseda Free Stage Drama Society. However, after a few productions, he realized that the kind of Realism the troupe was focused on

⁶²It is important to note that her ideas regarding discomfort and obstacles as they relate to the actor are very different than those that are part of the structure of Method acting.

producing was not what interested him. He was also frustrated with their inconsistent approach to actor training (Allain, *Practice* 95). After shifting his interests from acting to directing and relocating to the Waseda Little Theatre, Suzuki began to explore ideas that most interested him: working within an ensemble, creating plays by combining pieces of disparate texts, and exploring the dynamic of physical acting.

In his book, *Culture is the Body*, he described what he saw as the shortcomings of “realistic” acting. While he was interested in some of Stanislavski’s ideas, he was less than impressed by the way in which those ideas were adapted and used – especially the adaptations associated with the emotion-based system of the Method. He called Stanislavski’s book, *An Actor Prepares*, “one of the most illuminating books ever written on acting.” However, Suzuki went on to say: “it is also one of the most widely misunderstood,” and led to “the notion of acting as a reproduction of daily life, or rather an imitation of human beings in everyday life” (35).

Even actors from Stanislavski’s Moscow Art Theatre left him unimpressed: when the actors playing the sisters in Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* wept on stage during their final scene, they were commended by his teachers as great actors. He maintained that “the ability to cry when speaking certain lines is not necessarily a sign of good acting” (*An Actors Work* 39).

Suzuki was surrounded by the work produced in Japanese *shingeki* theatre: Realistic theatre that produced shows that were “a depiction of daily life – a theatrical expression of something that actually happened or could have happened” (9). He went on to discuss the problems with using any version of “realistic” acting, creating theatre that “could have happened”:

The subject of theatre is endless in scope ... for much contemporary theatre, Stanislavski's Method has definite shortcomings. When preparing certain works of Noh, Kabuki, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare or the Theatre of the Absurd, it is futile to implement a method based on emotions experienced in reality or on the individual psyche underlying a character's actions. What is the inner life of a ghost? Do gods have an inner life? ... Can such inner states be believably recreated onstage? ... insisting that the primary goal of acting is to make the human behind the language tangible tremendously confines its potential (42).

He maintained that, in performance, an actor isn't (and should not be) experiencing "everyday" psychology or emotions. Instead the actor experiences (or can experience) "the euphoria and revelation of being onstage in an artificial environment – what we could call a specific 'stage awareness'" (37).

Suzuki developed his methods of training to help the actor find and achieve this "stage awareness," and looked to the non-realistic traditions of Noh and Kabuki theatre as points of inspiration. He wrote that:

Noh and Kabuki actors don't view acting as an expression of the human interior. They focus instead on developing certain physical sensibilities and experimenting with them in performance ... [these sensibilities] have developed from unique physical discoveries – sensations that cannot be traced back to everyday life. In this kind of theatre, spiritual sensitivities and aspirations are pursued physically, much like they are in dance(44).

He maintained that the ultimate goal of traditional Noh performance was to: "create something not possible in daily life – a fiction which the audience engages through the actor's body," in direct opposition to theorists to like Diderot (44).

Suzuki noted that his understanding of the concept that the spectator is responsible for co-creating the fiction – "engaging" – came not solely from traditional Japanese forms of theatre, but also in part from his interest in the work of Grotowski,

Artaud, and Brecht. While all three of those theorists approached the active relationship between the actor and the spectator in different ways, they all relied on this connection happening through the body of the actor, and with the goal of engaging – in some ways, forcing – the spectator as co-creator, collaborator, in the making of theatrical fiction.

Suzuki was particularly interested in Grotowski's concept of *via negativa*.

Grotowski explained that the search for “real” theatre (as opposed to Realistic theatre)⁶³ consisted of subtracting, stripping away the layers of artifice – the set, lighting, costumes – resulting in a performance model he called “Poor Theatre.” Suzuki took the Poor Theatre model to heart, quoting Grotowski definition: “theatre is what takes place between spectator and actor” (*Towards a Poor Theatre*, 19). However, he added another layer that he felt must also be an integral element of theatre that should not be stripped away or underestimated: the quality of space. He wrote, “I believe theatre is not only what takes place between spectator and the actor, but what occurs in the specific place where spectator and actor coexist” (*Culture*, 34).

He was very aware that the actors he saw on the contemporary stage – those relying on Stanislavski-based techniques – were not prepared for the kind of exhilarating “stage awareness” he was seeking; they were perhaps even less prepared for holding the spectators responsible for active participation in the event; he only saw that on the Noh stage.⁶⁴ As a way of identifying the kind of acting he was looking for, he referenced the delicate moment of Zeami's “Flower,” and wrote,

My concept of acting, by contrast, struggles to create a kind
of *eternal* flower or continuity – a style that weaves the

⁶³Grotowski referred to this as “Poor Theatre.”

⁶⁴In terms of identifying his specific relationship to the performance aesthetics of Noh theatre, it is important to note that, while he read Zeami, he also saw the Kanze Hisao and Kanze Hideo perform, and invited them to participate in an international theatre festival he sponsored at his theatre in Toga, Japan.

physicalities of contemporary reality with those that inspired classic theater like Noh and Kabuki. While my work with the Suzuki Company of Toga has often been compared to Noh and Kabuki, in fact it is a hybrid: bridging the classic and contemporary to illuminate problems of our time in the imagination of the audience (100, emphasis his).

As a means of focusing on the physical presence of the actor and building the kind of collaborative, devised work that interested him, he founded his own theatre company, the Suzuki Company of Toga.

Immediately prior to founding Toga, Suzuki had produced a groundbreaking work with the Waseda Little Theatre: *On the Dramatic Passions II*. This production featured a new actor, Kayoko Shiraishi, in the leading role of a woman driven mad while imprisoned by her family. In her performance, Shiraishi, with no training or experience in acting, captured the powerful physical presence Suzuki had been searching for. Her work on stage became the foundation of the Suzuki method of training; he hoped that her natural “stage awareness” would be, in some way, *teachable*.

When asked about her work in the show and her raw physicality, Shiraishi said:

I remember my childhood days in great detail. I was born in Tokyo. In my neighborhood I was known as an eccentric and funny child. It was because of my "dancing." My body moved by itself. I tried to stop it, but I couldn't. So I kept dancing. I don't recall it as fun: It was more serious, like an urgent need inside of me to move (Kuriki, web).

Shiraishi was Suzuki's leading actor for years; her work was inspirational, and the collaborative relationship between Shiraishi and Suzuki was much like that of Ryszard Cieslak and Grotowski. Suzuki and Grotowski both knew what they wanted to see on stage, what their productions required on the part of the actor; Shiraishi and Cieslak were

the powerful, physically commanding actors whose exhilarating physical stage awareness served to communicate those ideas, demanding the engagement of the spectator.⁶⁵ Bogart herself has nine actors whose work embodies and inspires her own staging and way of working: the actor members of SITI.

Both Suzuki and Bogart note that contemporary actors lack consistent training: there are few consistent methods or forms and, what's more, formal university or conservatory training often separates acting classes from voice and movement classes, with voice and body in a "supporting role" to acting, rather than integrated with it (Hornby 237). Actors aren't encouraged to create life-long study habits: there's no parallel in acting for a violinist running scales and playing technique-based etudes every day, or an artist drawing gestures (Climenhaga 270). Because actors are ultimately dependent on at least one spectator – and usually upon other actors – it can be difficult to create a ongoing practice that is independent in the way that musical scales and drawing are. What's more, when the actor is cast in a play, there's no guarantee that the other actors have any kind of similar (or any) training background.

It is with those challenges in mind that Bogart and Suzuki determined to create their own companies; it is also what brought them together: a mutual interest in and respect for the other's work.

SITI Company

Founded in 1992 by a group of directors, actors, playwrights, and designers, SITI Company is one of the foremost theatre companies of the 20th and 21st centuries. It is not

⁶⁵This pairing of theorist/director and actors who innately understood the physical challenges of the work (and whose work then served as the foundation for training methods) was also the case for Bertolt Brecht, and his wife, actress Helene Weigel.

an exaggeration to say that their work, and most particularly their actor training and rehearsal methods, have impacted American theatre irrevocably, much as Stanislavski's System, and later, Strasberg's Method changed the ways in which stage actors approached, practiced, and evaluated their creative work. SITI's approach to theatre gives the actor a way to move beyond the emotional/psychological strictures of Realism and "realistic" acting, and the freedom and flexibility to work across genres with confidence. Their training methods also give the actor an opportunity to develop the skills necessary for collaborative creative work.

SITI Company's dedication to collaboration extends beyond the idea of working together on a singular project, to a dynamic in which the actors and other members of the company bring new projects to the table for consideration, and also help determine the direction of those projects. It is important to note that the founding members of SITI Company also included actors and, once the company was formally founded, other new artist-members – including actors, playwrights, and designers – joined the ensemble.⁶⁶

The members of the company have said that it is challenging to simply state the philosophy of SITI. Not only is SITI a collective of artists, each with their own individual take on the company and its work; but the work of the company is constantly evolving, growing and changing as it moves through time and responds to a changing world.

However, it is possible to point to a number of philosophical underpinnings that form the foundation of SITI Company's work, and are held in common. They present elements of the company's philosophy in this way:

⁶⁶Bios of SITI Company members, along with bios for the other *Steel Hammer* actors, appear in Appendix 1.

1. All great life-changing work made for the theatre has historically made by companies.
2. Theatre is proposing to the world, alternative ways for a society to organize itself.
3. The theatre is a gymnasium for the soul.
4. A balance between teaching, learning and doing is critical for an artist's life.
5. The art of the theatre rests upon the art of the actor.
6. International cultural exchange is impossible, therefore we must try.
7. Training is an essential and central component of a performing artist's lifestyle, not just their education (web).

The first element in the list, collaboration, is clearly something that drove Bogart and Suzuki to build their own companies, and to create an international alliance between the two. It is equally important to everyone who is a part of SITI Company. The company members clarify their dedication to collaboration, and all of the ways in which collaboration both challenges them and strengthens them and their work, in the statement that appears in programs for their productions:

SITI Company was built on the bedrock of ensemble. We believe that through the practice of collaboration, a group of artists working together over time can have a significant impact upon both contemporary theatre and the world at large. Through our performances, educational programs and collaborations with other artists and thinkers, SITI Company will continue to challenge the status quo, train to achieve artistic excellence in every aspect of our work, and offer new ways of seeing and of being as both artists and as global citizens. SITI Company is committed to providing a gymnasium-for-the-soul where the interaction of art, artists, audiences and ideas inspire the possibility of change, optimism and hope (program, *Chess Match #5*)

In a roundtable discussion with the members of the company, they elaborated on the importance of the training – both as a part of their work, and also as their development as artists: it is the backbone of what the company does and who they are to one another.

SITI actor Stephen Webber described one of the challenges of working together for so long:

One of the cons that was articulated to me [by a former company member] is that in any group, one plays a role. It's true in a family, and it's true in a work environment. The other members of that group count on you to play that role. And even it's the grump ... or the person who always plays devil's advocate ... you're counted on to be consistent in playing the role, good or bad ... ”
(*Conversations* 491)

Another member, Barney O'Hanlon, elaborated on that challenge:

One thing that takes work when you've been with a group of people for as many years as this, has been coming into a room and allowing yourself to look at them with fresh eyes. And I need to do something so that I can perhaps be perceived with fresh eyes (*Conversations* 492).

This dynamic is present in every performance: perceiving and being perceived with fresh eyes. In contrast, a Method actor would look inside, to their own psyche, trying to find a way to keep the *emotions* “fresh.” SITI actors can look outside, to one another, to “keep things fresh” – their responsibility to one another is *seeing*, not *feeling*.

This is also where inviting students or new collaborators into the training or different productions makes a difference. As psychologist John-Steiner's research suggested, a creative collaboration can be enhanced by working on several different levels, offering different perspectives to the work, bringing in the “fresh eyes” from outside in a way that can support the work of the original collaborators: this is a way in which SITI Company has developed naturally and organically over time and is part of its

success. What's more, the amount of training they offer brings in far more students and mentees than they would ever be able to accommodate as collaborators in productions.

In a 2001 interview with *Backstage* magazine, actors Ellen Lauren and Will Bond – both founding members of SITI Company – discussed the ways in which they were able to rely on their own relationship when creating and performing the 2-person play, *Chess Match #5*. The play is based on writings by and interviews with composer and musician John Cage, and has no plot. There are no recognizable characters: Bond is not playing a theatricalized version of John Cage, and the work is not biographical. They noted that the audience doesn't know the details of the relationship between the two characters, because it doesn't matter. Rather than falling into a Method-esque hole of detailing and trying to generate all the psychological aspects of a relationship that is fictional but emotionally deep, Lauren and Bond understand that it's not important to communicate a relationship to the audience: it's important to just *have one* – the audience will fill in the rest. Lauren went on to say that the audience senses warmth and curiosity and a kind of camaraderie because that's what they have (“Actors’ Dialogue”).

This is the kind of creative decision that would be much more complicated if the two actors were not regular collaborators, and if did not have such a long collaborative history with Bogart – a relationship of creative trust. Even in devising the play itself, they were able to rely on that history. Bogart described the way in which the show came together in this way:

But I will say that the genesis of this piece, even before John Cage ... I was upstairs in my barn. The two of you [Lauren and Bond] came racing up the steps and said, “We gotta do a show together! Just a show! The two of us!” And it's like, “There's a toaster, and a coffee maker, and

the two of us like going at each other!” And I was,
“Yeah...” (2019 post-show discussion).⁶⁷

In terms of the creative work of the actor onstage, in SITI, it’s about seeing something new, or rather, taking what you know about a person and working to perceive them with fresh eyes. It is that *action* of perceiving that is communicated to the audience, rather than any psychological underpinnings.

Bogart has spoken of what she calls the “alchemy” of this kind of creative collaboration:

[W]hen you go into a room with a group of people like this, and speak a world that you imagine, and for them to get this strange look in their face and start entering this world profoundly – that feels to me like flying. They can realize things that I can only suspect. And they realize it in sinew, in music, in sound, in voice, in interaction. I can’t do it outside of a company (*Conversations* 495).

SITI actor Leon Inglesrud describes the creative power of the company by referring to the dynamic where, if a number of people are asked to guess how many jellybeans are in a jar, and then take the average of those guesses, that average will usually be more accurate than any of the individual guesses,

[W]hich is just a way of saying that groups are smarter than individuals. That’s the way the brain works, it’s not one thing, it’s a network of neurons. I mean, every one of the members of this company is amazing in their own way as an individual. But as a group, we’re actually smarter than any of us. What that’s based on – and this is where it gets tricky – is that we don’t always agree...[t]hat makes us as smart as the entire group, when we have the grace to let that happen... [w]hen we’re able to create an environment that’s fostering a dissent that leads to a diversity of opinion, we actually make some really cool shit (*Conversations* 495).

⁶⁷*Chess Match #5* does, in fact, feature a toaster and a coffee maker.

Ingelsrud's comments on the importance of dissent in SITI's long-term collaborative structure – and his jelly bean model – reflect the research findings on short-term collaborators who have been assigned to a group (not unlike being cast in a play): they fall victim to the pressure of conformity, and rarely move beyond a strained consensus (John-Steiner, xv).

The training is fundamental to the structure of their collaborative relationship, not just to the way in which they work: it creates a shared vocabulary, but it also, over time, creates an environment of trust. Lauren noted that the company works within a hierarchy she describes as, “your responsibility as an actor is to direct your role, and the responsibility of the director is to direct the play.” Actor Tom Nellis added that the training is what makes that possible, because it “gives you the freedom to know who you are on stage, freedom to have aesthetic choices about how this thing might be better... [t]he training that we share is the conduit through which we can each direct our own role” (*Conversations* 498).

Collaborator Helen Storey (whose creative work was discussed in the previous chapter) shared a list of themes that appear in the powerful collaborative structures in which she works: a shared motivation for collaboration; working across disciplines; the ability to assess and recognize the value of the project; facing the fear of failure when taking big risks; creating relationships of trust, intimacy and mutual vulnerability; finding ways to collaborate without assuming a “leadership” role; ownership, where each participant feels the significance of their contribution; and identity and personal growth (42). She noted the impact of collaboration on how she sees herself within the work, and

feels that it has helped her grow as a person, “because you risk yourself as a person. I think collaboration makes you braver.”

The structure and practices of SITI Company demonstrate their understanding of and investment in each one of these ideas: their shared motivation stretches across twenty-seven years. They work across theatrical disciplines – actors, playwrights, designers, technicians, and staff – but they also work across artistic disciplines when they collaborate with dance and opera companies or investigate visual artists; they even reach beyond the arts, as in their collaboration with neuroscientists on their production, *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Their ability to assess the value of a project goes beyond waiting for opening night reviews; the duration of their collaboration gives them the opportunity to make assessments over time, and they’ve developed an environment where disagreement has value, and while that raises the chances for failure, it also fosters trust and the willingness to take risks (for example, on plays that include toasters, coffee makers, or neuroscience). To the best of their abilities, the company pursues a non-hierarchical structure; this is difficult when it comes to administration, but freeing and effective when it comes to rehearsal and the process of devising a play. Finally, while their productions play a vital role (pun intended) in the work of their company, it is the training methods – and the actors who teach and practice them – that are the foundation of SITI.

These training methods will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VII
VIEWPOINTS, SUZUKI, AND COMPOSITION

“Who’s Hamlet?”
— SITI Company

One of the challenges in writing – and reading – about exercises of any actor training method is that, by reading about it beforehand, the student actor has already taken in something about the desired “result” or “reason” for the exercise, placing them in a cognitive “This is why I’m doing this and this is what it needs to be” space: the opposite of what almost any acting exercise is about. What’s more, the SITI forms of training are hard to put words to because neither of them have any spoken text to begin with: the work is almost entirely physical until the actor reaches a much higher level of proficiency (it’s easy to get distracted with language). The practice of Viewpoints in particular is difficult to describe: its spontaneous nature is particularly ephemeral.

In response to those challenges, the descriptions of Viewpoints and Suzuki practice will include formal descriptions followed by notes on my own experience with and observations of those practices.

This chapter presents the three training methods developed, practiced, and taught by SITI Company: Viewpoints, the Suzuki training, and Composition.⁶⁸ These methods

⁶⁸In conversation with the members of SITI, the shorthand for referring to the Suzuki Method is “Suzuki.” They also shift from “the Viewpoints” to simply “Viewpoints,” and also use the term “Viewpointing,” or even say, “I’d like you to Viewpoint this.” Their usage will be used here.

are designed to be practiced together – the members of the company make it clear that these are woven together and complement one another in specific and necessary (ever “required”) ways – particularly Suzuki and Viewpoints. While Composition is a vital element of the training, it is focused on creating – also known as “devising” – productions. As a result, the ways in which Viewpoints and Suzuki training work together will be discussed before presenting the dynamics of Composition.

When SITI Company produced their first shows, they started a dynamic parallel to the theatre community’s reaction to Stanislavski’s Moscow Art Theatre tour to New York in the 1920s. Actors saw these productions and immediately recognized something powerful, something they lacked as actors – something that they really *wanted* as actors. The question that followed was, “Where can I learn how to do that?” While not as widespread as Stanislavski’s System, and its cousin, the Method, training in Viewpoints and Suzuki is now a standard part of university and conservatory offerings, and are often required courses for actors (also often for directors). Students can also train – and continue to train – directly with SITI at any of their workshops, especially through their 4-week Summer Intensive held in their “home base,” Saratoga Springs, New York.

Introduction to the training

Practice of the Viewpoints and Suzuki training are the foundation of SITI Company’s work: together, they develop presence, focus, strength, immediacy, and invitation in the actor. Both ground the actor in the moment through “concentration on the details of *presence*” – of *being*, rather than thinking or feeling (Climenhaga 291, emphasis mine). The structures of each help the actor – “shove” the actor is a more accurate idea – to move beyond any kind of intellectual analysis of the practice to

something essential that places them deeply in the *doingness*.⁶⁹ Suzuki practice has been called “vertical,” and the Viewpoints “horizontal” – Suzuki trains awareness of the powerful relationship between the self and the earth; Viewpoints trains awareness of everything around you. Together, they create an “intricate balance of specificity and openness, spontaneity and permanence (Climenhaga 291). This series of opposites – vertical versus horizontal, self versus outside-of-self, specificity versus openness, and spontaneity versus permanence – create an environment in which the actor always has something to push back against, both metaphorically and physically: a dynamic that leads to a powerful presence on stage.⁷⁰ What’s more, the training makes it clear that *presence* is a skill that can be learned, and that the practice of Viewpoints and Suzuki together provides a frame where skill can meet challenge, resulting in an environment conducive to creative flow.

The training also addresses what Bogart, Suzuki, and other members of the company have identified as a significant problem in contemporary theatre: the lack of an environment that supports life-long practice for the actor, not just preparatory training and then working whenever a show comes along.

The watcher and the watched

Before going into the details of the training methods, it is important to note that both Viewpoints and Suzuki are practiced in front of an audience: the class is always divided into two parts, with one part working and the other observing.⁷¹ This is, in part, because

⁶⁹The dynamic of Self 1 and Self 2 is reflected here.

⁷⁰It is also interesting to note that, as with the descriptions of creativity and the creative experience, Viewpoints and Suzuki are part of a pair, in opposition, but working together.

⁷¹In many training systems, the only spectator is the director, who has a different focus and different goals than that of an audience. Even in Stanislavsky or Method scene-study classes, the other students who might

they believe the actor should always be on stage, and that part of practice is learning to *inhabit* the stage at all times: not performing for, but *being with* the audience.⁷² The dynamic of the training is to always be mindful of the watcher, but the training also teaches watching, and that watching is never passive. Similarly Bertolt Brecht demanded an actively engaged audience. SITI Company training emphasizes an awareness of the *responsibility to engage* as deeply as possible with what the actors were doing – it is important for the actor also to practice the skills of the engaged audience. Bogart is fond of Paul Woodruff’s definition of the theatre: theatre is where human beings make human action worth watching, in a measured time and space; in discussing the responsibilities of the “watcher” and the “watched,” he also maintained that theatre provides something vital to the watchers: watching is a way to practice empathy (Woodruff 20). SITI’s training in *seeing* supports the necessity of *doing*: making human action worth watching, even if that human action exists without narrative or characterization.

It is also important for the actor to spend time watching as an artist. Open observation of the ways in which other bodies make use of Viewpoints and Suzuki is vital in deepening the understanding of the ways in which those vocabularies do and do not work on a personal level. It is equally important to use observation as a method of self-interrogation: to see the ways in which others sometimes omit, misunderstand, or actively avoid elements of both vocabularies, or the ways in which the vocabularies are used with energy and precision as a means of expanding awareness of what the actors

be observing the work are not given clear instructions on the difference between (and the responsibilities of) a fellow-actor, waiting to give a critique, versus someone who has come to the theatre to see a performance.

⁷²Intriguingly, this isn’t that far off from Stanislavsky wanting to fool the dog. The theatrical form and acting goals are different, but the concept remains the same: the actor must always understand their relationship to the audience.

themselves can focus on when engaged in doing the exercises. It is easy to see someone cognitively make and carry out plans in Viewpoints; it is also easy to see actors who use the physically demanding – sometimes grueling – Suzuki exercises as a workout at the gym instead of as a part of the practice of acting. Practice through observation can also open new doors, make new connections, and uncover new possibilities rather than just heightening awareness of limitations. Since both Suzuki and Viewpoints require immediate response rather than considered thought, the same is true for the watcher. Observation is the time to make repeated use of one of Bogart’s favorite questions: “What is it? What is it *really*?” when approaching the practices (*Conversations*, 381).

The Viewpoints

Books can be written about Viewpoints, and several have been. Of the three elements of SITI training, they are perhaps the most complicated to describe because they work with a vocabulary that is spontaneous, organic, and entirely ephemeral: they have no specific form, only parameters. Introduction of the basic vocabulary will be followed with further elaboration on each element.

The basic language of the Viewpoints sounds formal, even technical, yet the way in which the vocabulary is expressed through the body is entirely organic. There are four general categories of awareness: Space, Shape, Time, and Vocal Viewpoints.

The vocabulary of *Space* defines and describes the environment around the actor, including the elements of architecture, spatial relationship, and topography.

The vocabulary of *Shape* is based on the contour or outline of body of the actor, and includes both shape and gesture. Gesture is divided into behavioral – familiar social

gestures – and expressive gestures (which are similar to Brecht’s *gestus*) – abstract and symbolic.

The vocabulary of *Time* the way in which action unfolds, and includes tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition.

The final category of Viewpoints, *Vocal Viewpoints*, includes pitch, tempo, silence, repetition, and timbre. These Viewpoints were added by the company much more recently, and are only used much later in the training. Conservatory vocal training typically focuses on techniques such as articulation, breath support, and dialects; Vocal Viewpoints address issues of quality of sound and even words as abstract expressive elements.

In a Viewpoints exercise – especially for those who are new to the method – the director (or collaborators) may choose only one or two elements from the vocabulary to use for the first few minutes of practice: often kinesthetic response, and either spatial awareness or tempo.⁷³

Kinesthetic response is the backbone of the Viewpoints: it is an immediate visceral response in and to the moment – no planning, no hesitation: “[w]here you feel the appropriate action to take and respond before you have the chance to intellectualize the consequences of your action” (Landau 24). Someone walks past and without thinking, you follow them, only to immediately follow the next person who walks past.

Early in the exercise, most of those responses are based on the other people, or – more accurately – on the *awareness* of other people. It is not unlike walking quickly down a very busy sidewalk: people are beside you walking at different tempos, carrying

⁷³This explanation of use of the Viewpoints vocabulary will follow the sequence in which each element is introduced during a Viewpoints session, rather than in the order in which they are organized as a system.

different things, pushing strollers – and people are walking toward you in the same way. You see an opening and you step into it, weaving through the crowd, usually without even thinking about it.⁷⁴

We also have a strong everyday sense of spatial relationships, equally apparent in the sidewalk example: we assess whether or not we will fit through a space or risk running into someone; we also know how closely to walk next to another person. Another example is how we automatically understand how far and how close to other people constitutes standing in line at the coffee shop (sensing that someone is not “spatially aware” requires the question: “Are you in line?”) An exercise that focuses entirely on spatial relationships might be to put five actors on stage with the direction to create equal distances between them – impossible, but an interesting way to become aware of what distance means and how we perceive it.

When exploring the dynamic of tempo, actors are encouraged to choose extremes: either very, very slow, or very, very fast. The dynamic of tempo is an example of the ways in which a response can provide a feeling of “pushing back” – if everyone around is moving quickly, the response of moving slowly suddenly creates a new kind of energy and focus in the room.

Duration is another simple dynamic: just how long will you continue to choose to do the same thing? It may be that your kinesthetic response in the moment is simply, “More of that.” The loose focus of Viewpoints can make it easy to get pulled toward something new, rather than investigating what a sustained response might offer. A similar dynamic is repetition: you can choose to repeat something you’ve done, or you can

⁷⁴This is why we often laugh when we come face to face with someone and, instead of running into one another, you both step out of the way ... but in the same direction. It’s suddenly disorienting – and often funny – when our everyday Viewpointing goes awry.

choose to repeat something you've just seen (or heard) someone else do. Like choosing extremes in tempo, choosing a long duration or a lot of repetitions can shift the overall dynamic of what's happening on stage: but it's important to not let the idea of "I'm going to shift the overall dynamic on the stage" be the choice, because that's not a choice: that's a plan.

Architecture and topography are the two elements associated with Space, in addition to spatial relationship (discussed above). Architecture is an awareness of the qualities of the space – textures, the quality of light, or color – as well as the size and shape, letting that awareness affect your *doingness* in the moment. Instead of a kinesthetic response to another person, it's a response to the environment: your sudden awareness of a high ceiling may manifest in a sudden change in tempo, for instance. Topography is the map of the floor: some Viewpoints exercises are on "the grid," where you can only move in straight lines and at right angles. Other exercises are in "lanes," where actors are only working in parallel to one another, and forwards and backwards are the only topography allowed.

The elements of Shape – body shape and gesture (both behavioral and expressive) – can be difficult for actors who are new to the Viewpoints, in great part because the actors come into the work naturally focused on everyday body language. It can be easy to slip out of spatial awareness or complicated responses to architecture into something familiar. For example: gesture is the last physical Viewpoint I ever allow my university acting students to use, because an exercise that had been organic and exciting can easily turn into nothing more than people waving at one another: they abandon the abstract qualities of the Viewpoints and narrow the scope to something that is comfortable. This is

the opposite of Brecht, where there is the opportunity to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (physically deconstructing the elements of a friendly wave, for instance, and allowing it to turn into something entirely else): instead, it becomes making the familiar, familiar. The same is true for shape: instead of an “abstract” body shape (both arms straight up in the air, for example, or walking with one hip “leading” your movement forward), shape can be translated into something familiar: a limp, a Monty Python walk.

The Vocal Viewpoints are usually the last elements to be worked into a Viewpoints session. As with gesture, it can be easy to make the exercise about *text* and lose track of the *body* – the primary reason for Viewpoint training. The Vocal Viewpoints are most helpful when working with a specific text in other parts of the training – Suzuki or Composition – because they can lead to helpful discoveries. However, it is challenging to use text in Viewpoints as an element of a purely kinesthetic response, because the text already has some kind of story, point, or timing built into it that can be hard to resist (Landau, 21-24). Viewpoints exercises are not about developing narrative or character, but rather with elements of action.⁷⁵

These examples demonstrate that setting up any exercise designed to practice *open awareness* is difficult. The kind of attention to what is happening outside your head can sometimes open the door to self-consciousness rather than open-awareness of self and surroundings, which then results in the exercise becoming “performative” rather than organic. Sometimes addressing this can be as simple as pointing out the difference between attention and awareness: attention has a laser-focus; it has the quality of “tunnel vision.” On the other hand, awareness has to do with opening the focus so that it takes in

⁷⁵More on the concept of “narrative” as it relates to Viewpoints appears below.

much more – even just giving someone the phrase “soften your focus,” can be enough. Again, speaking as an instructor, seeing something like that happening – where an actor suddenly seems to be making very deliberate choices rather than simply responding – is a good time to add another element of the vocabulary, requiring a more complicated, multi-level awareness, where the number of things you can respond to in any given moment increases exponentially. This “overloading” of incoming information can help a student bypass the critique of Self 1, so they can find their way to the *doingness* of Self 2.

Sometimes Viewpoints are practiced with music. In formal trainings with the SITI Company itself, they often have Darron West, their sound designer, sit in and Viewpoint along with whatever is happening on stage – giving the actors on stage even more to work with (while resisting shifting from Viewpointing to dance). Sometimes, there is live music. Music and sound add another layer to the vocabulary – something to push back against (responding to a fast song with a very slow tempo, for example). Music can contribute a mood, which can color an exercise as a whole, bringing new things to the surface.

Entrances and exits are also an important part of Viewpoints practice. Actors sometimes tend to slide on and off stage, not entirely sure what they’re going to do until they get there. Practice of Viewpoints demands big choices: don’t just walk on stage – *run* on, or even run on and then immediately run back off. In training sessions for Viewpoints, it is common to hear a SITI member remind the participants: “Ask yourself: *Does this moment need me?* What does this moment ask of me?” The answer to those questions is sometimes a definitive “No” or “Nothing.” This is a good example of the *discipline* that Viewpoints requires – just because I *can* be on stage, doesn’t mean I

should be there. Waiting until you *know* the right moment to enter, and then knowing the right moment to exit strengthens not only your own awareness of the exercise as a whole in that moment, but also your understanding of what it means to generously share the stage, making strong choices that will contribute to what the thing is and what it will become. Bogart's question is a good thing to keep in mind: "What is it? What is it *really?*"

One of the most interesting dynamics of Viewpoints is how things can simply fall into place for the ensemble, not just for individual actors. The heightened awareness practiced by everyone onstage can result in everyone picking up on the same "energy" at the same time. It is not uncommon to watch several people who can't even see each other from where they are on stage respond in exactly the same moment to something that happened somewhere else in the room, with the same type of response. This often happens when several people on stage make the spontaneous decision to work with repetition, while interpreting that repetition in slightly different ways – but it can only happen when everyone on stage is working at the same level, making bold and specific choices. As that energy builds, the entire ensemble can shift, with some working with it, some working against it. There can suddenly be a sense of "alliance" or "obstacle" between the actors on the stage, one that can develop into a very loose narrative. Bogart describes these moments as "a balance of multiple possibilities sustained for a number of people" (in Cummings, 76).

Sometimes the awareness and choices in the moment spontaneously center on a specific person, or small group of people, and that energy invites something like story to emerge. The question SITI uses to identify and support these moments is, "Who's

Hamlet?” – who, at this particular moment, is the person that everyone is responding to in some way? Once a “Hamlet” organically rises out of the exercise, the responsibility of everyone else on stage is to support that moment of that particular Hamlet, until it just as organically falls away and shifts into something else that might or might not feature a different Hamlet. These moments also require that the Hamlet also recognizes that she is Hamlet without deciding to *be* Hamlet,⁷⁶ and then letting that Hamlet-ness fall away from them. “Who’s Hamlet?” is not about creating character – it is about inviting narrative. If any effort goes into *making* a story, or into continuing to *be* Hamlet, the exercise falls apart: it then becomes about imposing something rather than allowing everything and then responding specifically to what arises. These moments of narrative are delicate because they rely on everyone on stage understanding what is happening at the same time without hanging on to what is happening: everyone has to be working with Self 2 for it to come together. Since the Viewpoints are a shared vocabulary based in kinesthetic response, everyone on stage will be responding to each moment. Because they respond so quickly and freely to the stimulus, they and the audience associate the stimulus with the response. It doesn’t have anything to do with a decision – there’s no time for that. It’s about the way that the responses all fall into place and create a kind of narrative.

Viewpointing is not a game, but the elements of the Viewpoints do serve as a set of “rules” – they even identify the size and shape of the playing field. The rules of the game prevent the actor from having to practice something as undefinable as “stage awareness” in a space of *tabula rasa*. Because the vocabulary is so specific, the practice over time allows the actor to develop an equally specific level of awareness of each element, an awareness that becomes so naturally internalized that it works in the actor in

⁷⁶That pun is unintentional, but particularly satisfying.

the way that a pianist knows the exact stretch of the hand for a particular chord or interval and where that falls within the entire stretch of keys under their fingers.

In his discussion of the dynamics between creativity and “rules of the game,” theorist Rob Pope maintained that rules provide a necessary restraint and can stimulate what he called “playful creativity.” Rules – and in this case, the language of the Viewpoints and the specifics that are part of any individual Viewpoints exercise – increase the complexity of an experience and demand that the actor find a delicate balance between impulse and constraint. Flow is found in what Storey might refer to as the point of risk. Pope maintained that finding that point of risk, where skill meets a set of rules that shape goals and challenges, is vital. If there’s too little constraint, nothing happens: the environment is too rigid. If there are too few rules, the environment is haphazard – while flow may happen, it’s probably a happy accident. Flow lies in embracing the complexities that rules offer as a fundamental requirement of the creative experience. Constraint is not in opposition to creativity: it is necessary (Pope, 122).

Viewpoints can be seen as an infinitely flexible collection of rules; every new combination of those rules (including the combinations of people that are part of any specific exercise) can reshape the constraints, resulting in a richness of opportunities for the actor. One of SITI’s founding members, actor Barney O’Hanlon, regularly says, “I could study the Viewpoints forever, for the rest of my life, and I would never stop learning new things about them and about myself, I would never get bored.”⁷⁷ Not only does an actor gain an opportunity to train *awareness*, but – as with SITI’s goals for their training in general – Viewpoints also provides unlimited conditions for exploration, and

⁷⁷He also often says, “I will talk about the Viewpoints forever, so I’ll shut up now and we can work.”

self-examination. Like O’Hanlon, I love the Viewpoints, and would happily practice them every day. Not only are they engaging and challenging – they are also fun. Not “funny” – though that does sometimes happen – but fun.⁷⁸ Viewpoints are engaging, and reward curiosity. As such, the practice of Viewpoints provides the structure for one of the primary elements of flow: self-reinforcement. Since the experience of flow is pleasing in and of itself, the individual seeks out more opportunities for flow to occur.

One of the best descriptions of the difficult question of the effects of Viewpoints on the audience comes from neuroscience. While developing SITI’s production of *Who Do You Think You Are?* Bogart was immersed in study of neuroscience, and was particularly interested in the work of neurophysiologist R. Grant Steen’s book, *The Evolving Brain: The Known and the Unknown*. Bogart was introduced to him through a mutual friend, and she invited him to attend a training session and rehearsal. The actors were doing a long Viewpoints exercise, and at one point, Steen said, “What I am seeing on stage is how the brain works!” She later wrote to him and asked him to elaborate on that idea, and he answered with what she called “great detail and eloquence.”⁷⁹ Here is the narrative of his experience:

What I meant in my comment was that the way people related to each other on stage at first seemed random. But, as I watched, I began to discern a pattern and to see the rules governing those interactions. I didn’t know all of the rules – I know you explained them before the exercise, but it was all quite new to me and all that I remembered was that

⁷⁸ For a wonderful description of the way that Viewpoints feel in practice, please refer to Appendix III, in which the musician Questlove recounts an evening on a friend’s back porch, hearing and responding to music in the natural sounds around him.

⁷⁹ I am including his very long response as a block quote because he very effectively describes what it’s like to *watch* Viewpoints, rather than practice them.

there were explicit instructions – but as I watched carefully I could begin to infer those rules in action.

Subsets of people seemed to behave in different ways, as if they had interpreted the rules differently. As I watched carefully, it seemed that I could classify types of people-neurons as well as styles of interaction between them. Some people were awkward, some fluid, some people seemed to reflect back what they saw in the other person and some people seemed to have internalized the rules and made something different from them. In other words, the rules had been reinterpreted and the people-neurons were showing emergent properties that had not been built into the system in the first place.

Finally, connections were made and unmade between people, the way that neurons can interact or be quiescent. Sometimes an interaction would flare up and be quite active; sometimes an active interaction would slow and cease. Observing from the outside, one could only wonder at the separate motivations for the interactions.

It all began to seem like a microcosm of the brain, but one that could be understood eventually I am not convinced that the human brain can ever truly understand itself. We can certainly come to understand the plumbing and wiring—the perfusion of the brain with blood and the physical connections between neurons. But the emergent properties of the brain seem likely to defeat our understanding. I think we will need a

bigger brain to understand the one we already have (“Uninterrupted Connection,” blog).

After reading that response, Bogart went on to say: “Viewpoints is a practice of uninterrupted connection that requires skill, patience and sustained attention. Skill, patience and sustained attention can be acquired over time and with diligent practice (“Uninterrupted Connection,” blog). My experience of the Viewpoints – like that of SITI member O’Hanlon – is that I could practice them forever, there is always something new: investigating that “uninterrupted connection” is rewarding on a visceral level, and is a way to develop the skill of curiosity: “What happens if I ...?” Being inside a Viewpoints session is about letting the things I usually focus on – words and ideas, making sense of things, making plans, worrying about things – fall away, and immersing myself in pure responsive physicality. Practice of the Viewpoints is fascinating, and, like the origins of the word “fascinate,” it feels a little like being enchanted, in great part because I’m not *doing* anything; I’m just *reacting*. The “open gaze” or “soft focus” necessary for Viewpointing (very different than “spacing out”) feels very freeing, because my only responsibility is to each particular moment. I also maintain that, along with open awareness, Viewpoints requires (and teaches) curiosity.⁸⁰ The “decision” to do something isn’t planned – instead, it feels more like a spontaneous question: “What might happen if I do this?” followed immediately by a feeling of “That was interesting. What now?”⁸¹

What I might call the “global” or “pervasive” energy that occurs when a narrative rises inside a Viewpoints session is palpable. In his letter to Bogart, Steen described that

⁸⁰ For an example of how Viewpoints feel, see Appendix III.

⁸¹ Fostering a sense of curiosity is vital to Viewpoints: there is no “right” or “wrong,” as long as you approach them in an openhanded way rather than a way that is planned.

dynamic when he wrote: “In other words, the rules had been reinterpreted and the people-neurons were showing emergent properties that had not been built into the system in the first place.” This feeling of “emergent properties” is accurate, and my responsibility in Viewpoints is to consistently engage it: it requires pushing *thought* away, even while I might be probing an awareness of “Who’s Hamlet?”

This is even more true when the Hamlet is *me*. For instance, one of the texts we were working with during my summer training with SITI is Titania’s “These are the forgeries of jealousies” speech.⁸² The speech includes these lines: “The human mortals want their winter here/No night is now with hymn or carol blessed” – it’s easy to see how I ended up as the Hamlet. However, while the speech may make that sound very literal, it was preceded by a series of vocal “volleys” (for lack of a better term) that began with someone saying something like “the forgeries,” and then that unrolled from there. Specific words or phrases from the entire speech appeared – “rushy brook,” “thou hast disturb’d,” “as in revenge,” “the moon,” “originals,” or “the mazed world,” for instance – we all knew the whole speech, and it was a kind of “Titania free association,” with whatever popped into our heads. The words and phrases bounced back and forth across the stage as we moved – and our open awareness allowed the text to be a response to movement, or movement to be a response to the text. Repetition of both phrases and movements fell into place, and the structure of the speech – the way Titania sets up a dynamic of opposites to make her point: what *should* be happening versus what *is* happening (“hoary-headed fronts/Far in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,” for example) also affected the energy on the stage. It was a surprise to everyone when the phrase “hymn or carol blessed” popped up, just as every other piece of text was a surprise,

⁸²Text is more often used in Suzuki training; more on that appears below.

something new to respond to. When someone else repeated the phrase, there was a sudden awareness of *Carol* on stage, and the feeling on stage shifted from the darker qualities of Titania's speech to something that I'd describe as "delighted," "or celebratory," in response to the discovery of *me* in the text. I felt that focus unfold around me in a physical as well as a verbal way (I think there was a brief flurry of repetition all around the stage of whatever physical Viewpoint I was investigating, and then another responding to however I had responded). It was difficult to not let the Hamlet-ness turn into actual Carol-ness; it's a fight to not become self-conscious. However, one of the things I love about Viewpoints is the sense of "pushing back": to respond to speed with stillness, to respond to a feeling of spiraling with angularity, and I found a way to push back against Hamlet, creating a tension that was not about rejection – as a means of keeping it from being *about me* – while still accepting being Hamlet. The "tension between" was based in directly engaging with the dynamic rather than passively allowing it to happen. My Hamlet went on for about a minute, and then just as quickly as I had become the Hamlet, it slipped away.

This is a very literal description of something much more complex and ineffable that usually happens in an entirely non-verbal way, since the primary language of the Viewpoints is non-verbal. It's also difficult to capture the way in which it was spontaneous rather than planned, because *after the fact* it frequently *seems* planned. It's also important to note that narrative in Viewpoints isn't tied to emotion – it's tied to the quality of movement. To say that Titania's speech was "dark," and the "Carol-ness" of that moment was "light," implies an emotional content that wasn't really there. Emotions are always present because we are psychological beings who are always in some kind of

emotional state, and as a result, they automatically “color” what happens on stage. If the audience feels an emotion, it is not because it was planned and manufactured on the stage (as with the Method), but because the spectator interprets what they see in their own emotional response. Again, as with the apparent “planning” discussed above, these reactions occur in the viewer, not the performer, and afterward, not during the activity. As the neurophysicist Steen noted, “Observing from the outside, one could only wonder at the separate motivations for the interactions.”

Sometimes Viewpoints exercises are structured in very specific ways as a means of generating specific ideas about staging, character, or relationships (and these exercises can be focused on a specific part of a play).⁸³ For instance, I was in a Composition exercise that included three women who needed to be in relationship to one another – the relationships had to be strong, even though the piece we were creating would leave those relationships (and even the “characters” we were playing) undefined. The setting was a park, with two benches at a right angle to one another. The director asked for a five-minute Viewpoint session for the three of us with the following vocabulary:

- We could walk, sit, or stand;
- At any given moment in the exercise, one person (no more than one) should be sitting (though it should not always be the same person);
- One person should always be still (it should not always be the same person);
- Two people needed to be in constant contact with the bench (the person who was sitting at that moment, plus another who could not sit);

⁸³Members of the company make clear that plays are not about Viewpointing; instead, Viewpoints are a powerful tool in building a play.

- Anyone can choose to sit, stand, touch the bench, or let go of the bench at any time;
- No one was allowed to leave until the very last moment, at which time, two actors must leave the stage quickly, while the other remained still.
- The only vocal element in the vocabulary that was allowed was a sigh, and we had to include three sighs – no more, no less.

This was obviously a complicated exercise for us, one that demanded a heightened level of awareness: if I'm sitting and someone else sits, I must stand. I can also chose to stand, or let go of the bench and walk away – and somehow need to track those things without counting or tallying. How many sighs have there been? What happens in the last moment when two of us must leave the stage quickly, and one must remain still? Finally, we were working with themes and ideas from *Antigone*, but we needed to make sure that no one in the exercise became the “designated” *Antigone* or *Ismene*.⁸⁴

Practice of the Viewpoints develops valuable skills for actors who work in any style of theatre, classical, Realism, or Anti-Realism. The whole set comes alive with Viewpoints – anything I see or hear serves as an invitation to response (of course, I'm going to respond in context), and so I have the opportunity to create that same “aliveness” in myself – resulting in stage *presence*: there is never a moment where I am *waiting* to respond.

A way to develop this vibrant presence is through what I might call a “small” (even “micro”) Viewpoints exercise – one I could set up for myself (or expand to include other actors who might be interested in giving it a try). For example: sitting on a sofa or

⁸⁴The ways this kind of focused Viewpoints exercise is used in staging will be discussed further in the following chapter on *Steel Hammer*.

chair on the set doesn't have to be passive. Instead, I can devise a small Viewpoints exercise and only use the vocabulary elements of duration or repetition: my response to anything that happens on stage or anywhere around me makes room for *choosing* in each moment to *sit* – which is very different dynamic than sitting because the blocking calls for it, and standing when I'm "supposed" to. It creates a *now-ness* that is active and energized. The same dynamic can energize dialogue: I bring in the Vocal Viewpoints as a point of response.

I have found that using Viewpoints on stage is also emotionally freeing: I am not responsible for "generating" emotions for the audience to *see*. Instead, I can create a lively physical world that the audience can *interpret*.

Before moving on to an examination of Suzuki training, it is important to note that actors are drawn to Viewpointing in part because it feels good, and it is easy to connect to a collaborative creative place when practicing. However, the practice of Viewpoints alone isn't SITI training; the Viewpoints must be paired with Suzuki training: an actor cannot truly harness the power of Viewpoints as a means of creating presence on stage without also understanding Suzuki.

Suzuki

The Suzuki Method of actor training is physically demanding and extremely rigorous. It is exceptionally focused on strengthening the core of the actor's body with movements that repeatedly challenge the actor's control of that core by throwing him or her off balance in sudden and dramatic ways, and, as with Viewpoints, requires a heightened level of attention to detail (Allain, *Theatre Practice*, 93). The training creates extreme strength and precision; onstage that translates into a focused and palpable stage

presence, and works as a means of specifically focusing the gaze of the audience (Allain, 96). In practice, the work is so demanding that the actor must repeatedly push the psyche aside in order to pursue a relentless “questioning of the body,” a process that uses the body to focus the will, much like Herrigel’s experience in *Zen and the Art of Archery*.

While the physical forms of the practice are dramatic, one of the results is the skill of stillness – a very different idea than “relaxed.” Ellen Lauren, one of the original members of SITI Company, and a person Tadashi Suzuki has named as one of the few Master Teachers of his methods, describes the tenets and effects of the work in this way:

Be still on stage. Risk commitment to stillness. It is good for you and better for the audience. Stabilize your center of gravity as if braking against some force, so that the stillness is born of directing energy forward against some fictional resistance. Both the problem and the solution are self-generated. Bring consciousness to your feet and legs ... Compose the energy of your body, breathing and voice around the center of the space, through which you communicate your idea to your focus. (Lauren, 63)

Her words evoke the expression of power that SITI actors bring to the stage in their work. Yet the training is designed to constantly test and aggressively disrupt that stillness and challenge that power. Leon Ingulsrud, a member of the SITI company who originally studied with Suzuki (and often served as his translator) before becoming part of SITI Company, regularly directs sessions of Suzuki training. When correcting the physical form of some students during a training session, he said: “This is actually physically impossible. What I just asked you to do defies gravity. So it’s not just physically impossible for you guys, it actually defies the laws of physics. And so, consider: what questions are you asking your body when you attempt to do it anyway?” (2013 training).

This is true, regardless of how long the actor has been practicing Suzuki training: the body is different every day, and so the ability to question it is constantly present.

Other members of the company say similar things about the ways in which the Suzuki training offers impossible challenges as methods of inquiry and insight about basic issues of control. Again, Lauren expresses the concept of self-interrogation within the training when she says:

The specific tests of this training are designed to replicate the extraordinary conditions of being on stage ... [m]ovement is done to create the sensation of *not moving* ... the problems that arise in practicing the training are one's personal obstacles, visible or unseen. The training provides a tangible way to diagnose these problems ... [i]t is critical to have some objective criteria against which to measure the self....” (Lauren 63, italics mine).

Since sustaining flow requires a continuing advancement of the level of challenge as one's ability expands, Lauren's comment shows how Suzuki helps to accomplish that.

Suzuki training begins as a way of connecting to the earth as a point of awareness and attention (creating a vertical energy, where Viewpoints is horizontal): it focuses on the breath, the center of the body, and the placement and grounding of the body. Like Viewpoints, Suzuki training has a vocabulary, but – like Viewpoints – that vocabulary falls short of describing what is actually happening.

The focus of the practice is almost entirely internal, where an explosive, forceful energy is created and then is entirely controlled at the same moment. While the actors work independently, side by side or in lines, part of the form is also moving with precision and in synch. The work is precise, and its few improvisational elements are highly structured, unlike Viewpoints (Climenthaga 293).

Scholar Paul Allain has written extensively on the forms of Suzuki practice. In describing the goals of the training, he said:

Suzuki's way of shaping the actor opens up many questions about what the performer is training for and how it might be conducted. His process is demanding, precise, and extremely technical, but paradoxically this allows the trainee great freedom. The performer is working on himself rather than a character ... [t]he external form is fixed, but the imaginative focus is not prescribed other than engagement with a presupposed audience (*Practice* 96)

The concept of a “presupposed audience” is vital to the practice of Suzuki and, like Viewpoints, training always happens in front of spectators and is *for* the spectators (even when those spectators are fellow students), even when the focus of the actor is internal. As Inglesrud mentioned, the exercises are, as they are described, impossible to perform, and are designed to be so: they demand an enormous amount of energy, precision and power, and there is no time for thought.

As a means of illustrating these complicated dynamics and considering the relationship between Suzuki and Viewpoints, it is will be helpful to discuss several specific Suzuki exercises, chosen because they most clearly illustrate principles of the training: Stomping Shakuhachi, Seated Statues, Slow Ten Tekka Ten, and Basic Number Two.

Stomping Shakuhachi

This exercise is the best-known element of Suzuki training, and encapsulates the primary goals of the training. While the premise – about four minutes of stomping, followed by about three minutes of slow movement – seems straightforward, the work itself is grueling and infinitely rewarding.

The exercise begins with stomping: moving through the space while stomping the feet in a rhythm determined by music (usually at a rate of about one stomp per second or less, depending on the music chosen – there are several “standard” songs for stomping). The image is a paradox: *drive* the entire sole of your foot (with no emphasis on either the heel or the toes) down through the floor, toward the center of the earth, yet the energy is not dissipated when the foot hits the floor. Instead, the contact with the floor happens almost instantaneously with driving the knee *up* in a specific preparation for the next stomp: the energy is never “released” – it remains constant. As with all Suzuki exercises, it challenges balance and the idea of a “resting” body: the body is never at rest in any of the forms. Instead, it is always prepared for immediate action.

While stomping, the arms are held loosely by the sides, with the hands gently curled, as if holding a pole that is horizontal to the floor.⁸⁵ The upper body remains upright, and is not engaged with the driving motion of the feet; the up and down energy of the stomp comes from the core of the body.⁸⁶ The focus is on the relationship between the feet and the floor (as it is in many of the exercises). Suzuki instructor John Nobbs described the focus as “embracing the ground at high energy,” rather than on simply hitting the ground (2013 training).

Four minutes of quick stomping with constant effort and detailed attention to each movement is exhausting, and requires extreme endurance, and can feel isolating, even while moving with and around other actors on the stage. In fact, the actor must maintain awareness of everything and everyone in the space. During one training session, SITI

⁸⁵Sometimes poles – about five feet long – are used in this and other exercises, requiring another level of attention necessary to keep them in a specific place without straining.

⁸⁶In Suzuki training, the core is the area near the solar plexus, which the Japanese call the *hara*.

actor Will Bond, who was leading, said, “If you see someone who is struggling, stomp near them” in order to give them some of your energy.⁸⁷ This means that, while the focus is primarily internal, it also expands to include other actors in the space, much in the way that Viewpoints require open awareness.⁸⁸

The second part of the exercise begins the moment the stomping ends. When the stomping music stops, all the actors drop to the floor. Because of the demands of the stomping, it is easy to assume the action is a “collapse” to the floor (and a collapse feels very welcome at that point). However, the directive is *not* to collapse; instead, it is to fall to the floor while still retaining all the energy built up through the stomping. It is not a release – it is a crystallization. While the stomping music is quick, loud, and brassy, the Shakuhachi music is slow and mournful, played by a single Japanese flute.

Using the energy just summoned through the stomping, the actor slowly rises from the stage floor, without the use of their hands – it is a slow moment of gathering and centering, and then slowly pushing up to standing without straining. Using that same powerful energy, each actor slowly moves to the downstage edge of the playing space, with the same attention to the powerful connection between the floor and the soles of the feet. Each actor should arrive at the edge of the stage at the same moment, exactly as the music ends. (This is true even if you don’t know the music; the same is true for the collapse at the end of the stomping music: both those moments should occur in perfect unison with the ensemble.) Only as the last note of the flute dies away does the actor “end” the exercise, gently releasing the focused energy it created. Because of the

⁸⁷Remarkably, this helps.

⁸⁸This is another example of the way that SITI practices focus on both/and rather than on either/or. Even though the forms of Suzuki are precise – and there are “right” and “wrong” ways to do them – since they are ultimately “un-doable,” they lack a definitive yes/no across the board.

intensity of the exercise, the group movement together downstage has a dramatic quality to it, but it is important to resist the pull of that and remain neutral, with a gaze focused on the horizon.⁸⁹

Seated Statues

This dynamic of building, holding, and controlling explosive energy is part of every Suzuki exercise; Seated Statues uses the body in a different way. There are three positions in Seated Statues. The exercise begins with the actors seated on the floor, knees drawn up tight to the body with the feet slightly off the floor, and the arms loosely wrapped around the knees. The head and back are lifted, with the face slightly tilted toward the floor (position 1). It is important to begin the exercise by *controlling* balance from a slightly precarious position: remaining still while exerting effort is how energy is generated in this part of the form. One of the elements of the form is the idea of revealing the core of the body to the spectators.

The second position brings the legs straight out in front, with the soles of the feet facing the audience; the back is straight, and the body leans backwards; the arms are held loosely at the sides, elbows bent. The hands are relaxed with fingers curled slightly in – again, as if holding a pole parallel to the ground.

The third position is, in a way, improvisational. The foundation is shared with the other positions of the form: balanced on the buttocks, back straight with a backward lean, neck and head relaxed. Upon a shouted command or bang of a pole on the floor of the stage, the actor moves into a random “statue” form – that form can take any shape, but it

⁸⁹At one of the training sessions Leon Inglesrud said it was important to be careful and guard against “serious actor face with serious emotions” at the end of the Shakuachi. The incredible effort just expended (or perhaps your despair at having just endured it and your relief at finally making it to the end?) shouldn’t show.

must be executed immediately and converted to stillness and easy balance just as quickly. The changes between positions are both precise and explosive: the chaos is quickly controlled.

Over time, repetitions of the exercise tend to demonstrate one's movement habits, because there's no time to think or plan the form of the "statue": as a result, the actor habitually throws up the left arm, or moves the legs into similar patterns with each different command for a statue. This gives the actor the opportunity to interrogate the body as a means of expanding the repertoire of movement by discovering, then eliminating habit. As with Viewpoints, the emphasis is on *doing*, not planning, and the nature of the exercise – where commands to shift to any of the three positions can come very quickly – eliminates time for thought. The commands to shift to different positions can also come very slowly, leading to a tendency to relax into a pose, rather than building and retaining the kind of explosive energy the changes require, and the physical commitment to utter stillness in maintaining each position.⁹⁰

The Statue exercises, both Sitting and Standing, sometimes incorporate text (as with Viewpoints). However, the vocal goals in Suzuki are different from those of the Viewpoints: speaking is not in any way about "interpretation." Instead, it is about speaking from the core of the body, without strain: the body becomes an open vessel for their physical creation of sound (2013 training). After a series of quick commands that take the actor back and forth between the first and second positions and a series of different statues that constantly challenge balance and stamina, the command "Speak" comes from the person running the training. The actors speak in unison, maintaining an

⁹⁰The Suzuki exercise Standing Statues works in the same way: often a "foundation" pose of relaxed alertness, but with two other poses from which a statue can originate – a deep squat or a full extension up onto the toes, both with heels together. Please see attached images at the end of the chapter.

energized stillness in the body. The command to shift to another pose can happen in the middle of the sentence; when the command to speak is given again, the text is picked up from the last word previously spoken.

The word “command” is important in Suzuki training: the sessions are serious, and are not a collaboration – they are run entirely by one person. Suzuki sessions are conducted more in the style of a martial arts class – there’s no talking, and even if you’re watching other actors work, there is no place for note-taking or review: you know it or you don’t, you do it or you don’t. The kind of easy camaraderie that is part of Viewpoints is nowhere in the room in Suzuki training.

Slow Ten Tekka Ten

The Slow Ten (as it’s usually called) is most closely associated with the slow, focused energy of the second half of the Stomping Shakuhachi exercise: an investment in energized stillness, where the body is pushed slowly into motion.

Walking is so habitual that we don’t even think about the way we manage balance and gravity when we do it. In the Slow Ten, the quality of moving forward is interrogated and changed. The “slow” in the name of the exercise suggests that it is exactly that: slow walking. However, in the Slow Ten, the emphasis is on pushing *against* forward momentum; taking the fast, explosive energy of the Statues or the powerful connection between the foot and the floor in Stomping and channeling into a stillness-in-motion (Lauren, web).

The Slow Ten divides the working group on stage in half – half on one end of the stage, and half on the other. Each group faces the other, and adjustments are made so that, as the actors move toward one another at the center of the stage, they will pass between

the two persons they're facing. Everyone begins moving in unison, but the emphasis is not about everyone staying in step – instead, it is about moving forward at the same speed, creating a consistent, slowly moving wall of energy. There is a feeling of pulling backward while moving forward; the walk should be as slow as possible.

The relationship between the feet and the floor is vital – and while the Slow Ten is not a Noh theatre practice, the way attention is paid to the quality of the connection of foot and floor is definitely related. Each step engages the entire foot, shifting from the heel as it first touches the ground, through the sole of the foot, and then the toes are the last to have contact as the foot leaves the floor. The foot is lifted slowly and the body must easily balance on the foot that is still in contact with the floor.

The arms are loose, bent slightly at the elbow, again with the hands slightly curved, as if holding poles that are running parallel to the floor. The upper body is also relaxed but controlled, and the core of the body moves on a plane parallel to the floor. Instead of “stepping forward,” the focus is on a gradual shift of gravity that keeps the core energized and keeps the body from moving up and down or from side to side as would happen in “regular” walking when we shift our weight from hip to hip to take our weight and control our balance. The movement forward in the Ten should be steady, unrelated to how many steps that might require. The gaze (and this is true in all Suzuki work) is firmly fixed on the horizon, not diffused, and not directed to or at anyone or anything. Even so, you are moving in tandem with the people on either side, and you will reach the edge of the side of the playing area at the same time.

During a training session, one of the SITI Company members, Akiko Aizawa, described the expansive focus of the exercise as “pulling the space behind you” – your

forward momentum is always engaged with what is behind. To make the weight of that idea clear, it is not uncommon to be asked to carry another actor draped over your shoulder as you walk, while still focusing on the relationship between your feet and the floor, moving your center of gravity forward as if you're being pulled on a string: that is the kind of powerful, directed energy the Slow Ten requires. While the exercise doesn't include the quality of constantly being thrown off balance by a series of fast movements that end in total stillness, it requires a different kind of challenge to the sense of balance that results in a kind of stillness-in-motion.

When observing a Slow Ten, it is particularly easy to see the power of the exercise when the two lines of actors cross in the middle of the stage, as each group is moving forward. Since each line is moving forward at the same rate of speed, each group passes the other at a single point. The Slow Ten is in no way focused on emotion or psychology, but the moment of passing is dramatic and palpable when all the energy generated and focused by the actors is present in one single line running down the middle of the stage.

The Basic Number Two

There are four “foundation” exercises in Suzuki; they serve as an introduction to the Basics of the training and are often used as “warmups” for other, more complicated work. As with the other exercises, the class is divided in half so that the people who are working are always reminded of the spectator.

The Two, like the Slow Ten, is about moving forward in unison without actively “working together.” Actors begin in a line at the back of the room or stage, or are standing in evenly spaced intervals so there is enough room to work. The beginning

position is with knees slightly bent, back straight, upper body relaxed; the arms are slightly bent at the elbow, with the hands in the “pole-holding” position; the feet and knees are together.

At the command of the teacher, the right foot sweeps forward as the knee is quickly pulled up and back so that it is tight to the chest; part of that motion is showing the sole of the foot to the spectator as the knee draws back. Once the right knee is up and in place, the bottom of the foot should then be parallel to the floor. All of this happens as a single, quick, continuous movement; the head and torso must remain still and centered, and the distance from the hips to the floor shouldn't change. The energy of “flashing” the foot as the leg pulls up is designed to throw the actor off balance, and requires intense focus on placement and stillness once the movement is complete (Climenhaga 294).

The next move brings the raised foot down as a stomp. In the subsequent move the same (right) foot slides forward until the back leg is straight and extended, and the (left) foot is still flat on the floor. At this point, the hips are balanced over the right foot (the form is tested by lifting the back leg: if you fall over, you've done it wrong).

The next command takes you up on tiptoe, keeping the body entirely steady and the weight shifting; the following command takes you back to feet flat on the floor with the weight shifting back to the right foot. Then left foot slides forward and sweeps up, and the left knee is drawn up to the body in the same motion as before. The exercise continues, moving the body forward.

The shifting of the center of gravity from foot to foot during the sweep/stomp/slide/tiptoe/flat/sweep/stomp sequence should not be visible.⁹¹ Sometimes,

⁹¹This is the exercise that Inglesrud described as “defying physics,” as it requires shifting your center of balance in a way that isn't actually attainable.

this exercise incorporates the five foot-long poles – their angle and the way the poles are held changes with each part of the sequence, increasing the difficulty of finding the balance and stillness that should separate each motion, no matter how quickly (or slowly) the command for each move comes.

The effects of Suzuki training

When describing the Suzuki method of actor training, theorist Allain wrote that “the training also attempts to integrate physical and mental systems, to create a ‘body-mind’ ... the gestalt is what makes the training so beneficial” (*Practice* 96). When I first heard, in the mid-90s, that SITI Company was offering training, I had already heard enough about Suzuki that I was afraid to go (to be fair, Suzuki was known for throwing chairs and poles at his actors). However, as I continued to watch their work over the following years, I realized that what I was seeing on stage – especially the powerful stage presence of the actors – was tied to the Suzuki training.

Once I made the decision to train with the company, I was still very concerned about the Suzuki work; that didn’t stop once I was there.⁹² I am not ultimately athletic enough to be “good” at Suzuki, but the training changed the way I think about bodies on stage, and the way that I use my body on stage. Even if I couldn’t always focus the energy or find the stillness in the exercises, I could still feel precisely where it should have been; the times I *was* able to find that focus, it reinforced what I already understood about the work. There was also a way in which not being able to do the exercises well

⁹²On the morning after our first three-hour Suzuki training session, I had to walk backwards up the stairs to the dining hall because I couldn’t trust that my thighs would hold me up if I climbed them like a normal person.

gave me the opportunity to interrogate my self-consciousness about not being able to do them.

I was particularly surprised at being able to find a sense of flow even in the middle of experiences that were well beyond my physical level of skill. As I examined my process, I found that it was my skill at evaluating my body in that moment and trusting that the information it gave me was accurate, and – what’s more – didn’t have moral or aesthetic value tied to it. The impossibility of the exercises (both in terms of my physical abilities and in terms of physics) made it easier to let go of my sense of self-consciousness – much as tennis pro Tim Gallwey told his student to (impossibly) try to watch the seam of the ball as it came toward her so that she could let Self 2, the *doer*, take over. Betty Edwards’ idea of presenting “one’s own brain with a task that the dominant [L-mode] system *will turn down*,” is a particularly apt way of describing the dynamic (Edwards, web, emphasis mine).

In a blog post titled, “Ouch! The Role of Pain in Transformation,” SITI actor Leon Inglesrud discussed the benefits of engaging with Suzuki training at all levels, painful or not:

I vividly remember my first summer in Toga. As I said, I hate pain, and this training was the most physically rigorous thing I had ever engaged with. I hated it. I saw the value of it but hated doing it. And I was in a lot of pain. I remember waking up every morning and not being able to get out of bed until I could muster the conviction to keep going. I had to get to a place that I wanted to do this enough that it would overcome what I thought it was costing me. This crucible was one of the most valuable things I ever went through. I have not seriously doubted that this is what I want to do since....

I’m skeptical as hell about this work, and I think that’s healthy. I don’t have any question about how much I

owe this training. But if I didn't think that it was still helping me be a better artist I would stop doing it. On the contrary, the training has put me in productive, long term dialogue with many of my biggest weaknesses, physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically... (blog).

I expected Suzuki training to be astoundingly physically rigorous, and it is. Members of the company make it clear that the training is beyond demanding; actor Akiko Aizawa introduced a Suzuki training session by saying, “Suzuki will fuck you up.”⁹³ Coming into it, I would have assumed that being immersed in an environment that Inglesrud described as a “productive, long term dialogue with many of my biggest weaknesses” would be demoralizing. However, I was surprised by how much internal sense the training made to me as an actor, even though it was so far outside most other training I've experienced. My Suzuki training was and has remained one of the most valuable experiences of my life as an artist, and profoundly changed my understanding of the *watcher* and the *watched*. I found that my experience paralleled that of Zen and archery student Eugen Herrigal when he described his experience in this way: “I passed through the hardest schooling of my life and ... I gradually came to see how much I was indebted to it. It destroyed the last traces of any preoccupation with myself and the fluctuations of my mood” (61).

When describing the Suzuki training, performance theorist Paul Allain wrote that the training “attempts to integrate physical and mental systems, to create a ‘body-mind’ ... the gestalt is what makes the training so beneficial” (*Stillness*, 96). When

⁹³Because SITI actors are dedicated to daily training – and training together whenever possible – all Suzuki and Viewpoints sessions include members of the company. It is instructive to see them work – their embodiment of the methods make the workings clearer – but it is also instructive to see that they also fall short or struggle, and they are always very open about the way that Suzuki in particular challenges them every time they are on the floor working.

observing a Suzuki session, it is the dramatic physicality that is obvious. What is not as clear is the rigor it offers the mind. Learning to *not think* about something so demanding and so complicated while in the middle of doing it is as important a skill as pulling the weight of the room behind you in the Slow Ten. While the scope is very different, in some ways the dynamic is similar to that of Diana Nyad's Cuba swim: a task so impossible that the only way to do it is focus the mind on the moment at hand, regardless of what the body is required to do.

While the Viewpoints are clearly focused on creative collaboration, that is more difficult to see in the Suzuki training. In the same blog post about the ways in which the training is physically demanding, and sometimes painful, Inglesrud mentioned a lecture by the theatre director Lear deBessonet, in which she said that "the way to create a transformational space is to have a group enterprise that has high stakes and yet is safe." She went on to note that that was one of SITI's goals with the training; Suzuki training certainly has high stakes. This is the same dynamic that designer Helen Storey described regarding her experience with creative collaboration: that "collaboration makes you braver," when it happens in an environment built on respect and trust, regardless of the difficulty of the project.

Members of SITI Company focus their work on the actor and on the ensemble, and each of the three methods of training approach those ideas from a different angle. Suzuki and Viewpoints provide the foundation for the third area of training: Composition.

Composition

Composition is a training method for creating theatre: it is how SITI Company builds their work. Like Viewpoints, Composition is based in Bogart's early involvement with modern dance companies, and her interest in the techniques the choreographers of those companies developed as methods of creating physical narrative on stage. Through her entire career as a director, Bogart has created work that features the body of the actor as the primary means of communication between the stage and the audience; and the company's other forms of training, Viewpoints and Suzuki, contribute significantly to the kind of work that can happen during a Composition exercise.

Director and playwright Tina Landau, who has extensively worked with and written about SITI Company, described the technique in this way:

Composition is the practice of selecting and arranging the separate components of theatrical language into a cohesive work of art for the stage ... because we usually make Compositions in rehearsal in an unbelievably short amount of time (anywhere from three minutes to half an hour), we have no time to think.

Composition provides a structure for working from our impulses and intuition ... a method of generating, defining and developing the theatre vocabulary that will be used for any given piece. In composition we make pieces so 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 productions ...

Composition is a method for creating new work. It is an alternate method of writing ... it is writing with a group of people on their feet (Landau 20).

Describing Composition as "writing with a group of people on their feet" not only defines Composition – it also describes what the process feels like.

Bogart has said that theatre is “creating fiction together,” and Composition is how that collaborative creative work happens. It begins with research, brainstorming, and some improvisation, and ends as something with an internal structure and a sense of narrative. A Composition can then be repeated, pulled apart, re-arranged, thrown away, or set aside for use in a different production. The energy, focus, and attention to detail of the Viewpoints and Suzuki training informs and expands the practice of Composition; they also give Composition some of its vocabulary.

Compositions themselves are short pieces (between five to ten minutes) that are created in a very short period of time (usually counted in hours, or even minutes, rather than days), with a small number of collaborators. Bogart likes using these tight time constraints on Compositions to create what she calls “exquisite pressure,” where the artists *have* to make a decision because the clock is ticking (blog, date). There’s no time to plan: building a Composition is a “leap before you look” process, where each actor’s trust is placed in the collaborative ensemble.

The process of Composition begins with the initial concept of a production and is part of the development of the work up to the point of performance (and even afterward, if a show needs reworking). In some ways it is like Viewpoints, in that it focuses on small groups of people engaged in in-the-moment collaboration; unlike Viewpoints, it is structured to “force” some kind of narrative.

Once SITI decides on a concept or a script that they want to develop, they begin what is known as “source-work”: this includes the kind of literary, historical, and dramaturgical research that would be associated with any well-produced play, but it extends into other areas as well. This can include visual art, scraps of conversation, music

or sound; however, it can also go well beyond that point (as with their research on neuroscience for their production *Who Do You Think You Are?*). This source-work produces a series of “lists” – specific or evocative ideas associated with the production in development. This list is then given to small groups of actors who are asked to devise a short Composition.

In her essay, “Source-Work, the Viewpoints, and Composition: What Are They?” director Tina Landau gave an example of what she called an “imaginary, but typical” Composition assignment that might be given to actors at the beginning of a rehearsal for a Chekhov play (or a piece about Chekhov).⁹⁴ In this particular Composition exercise, the actors were divided into groups of five; each group was to create a 6-minute piece that expresses something about a “Chekhovian” world. Landau explained:

The piece should be in three parts, each with a clear beginning and end, and each separated by a device (a blackout, a voice-over, a bell, etc.). The three parts are titled:

- The way things look in this world
- The way things sound in this world
- The way people are in this world.

These elements must appear in the Composition:

- All the Viewpoints.
- A setting (somewhere in this building) which is the perfect architectural environment for your piece.
- A clear role for the audience (Are we voyeurs? Judges? Historical archeologists? Etc.).

⁹⁴While this list is described as “imaginary,” Landau wrote the essay while SITI Company was developing their work based on Chekhov, *Small Lives, Big Dreams*, that premiered at Actors Theatre of Louisville (and was the first SITI production I saw – though I’d seen some of Bogart’s and soon-to-be-SITI actors work in the years leading up to the founding of the company). *Small Lives, Big Dreams* is a five-person play; each actor’s lines come from one of five different Chekhov plays: one character was built entirely on the text of *Three Sisters*, another character was built entirely from *The Cherry Orchard*, etc. This is particularly interesting to keep in mind when reading the sample Composition list above that Landau provides – it definitely gives a glimpse at how Composition serves as the “group writing while on their feet” process works.

- A Revelation of Space (for example, the curtain rises and we see the stage, or a door opens and we see endless corridors behind it).
- A Revelation of Object (for example, someone opens a box and there is a gun inside it).
- A Surprise Entrance.
- Music from an Unexpected Source (for example, the doctor opens his medical bag and the aria of an operatic soprano emanates from inside it).
- 15 Seconds of Simultaneous Unison Acting.
- Broken Expectations.
- A Staged Accident.
- Two Uses of Extreme Contrast (loud/quiet, fast/slow, dark/bright, violent/gentle, still/chaotic, etc.).
- The Objects:
 - A gun
 - A cigarette
 - Playing cards
 - A tea cup
 - Fire in any form
- The Sounds:
 - A clock chiming
 - Birds chirping
 - Someone singing offstage
 - Silverware clinking
- The Actions:
 - Tripping over something
 - An embrace
 - A slap
 - Whispering
 - “Laughing through tears”
- The only text you can use is:
 - I was so happy
 - Do you remember?
 - Whatever do you think has come over her/him today?
 - Two hundred years from now, I wonder if humankind will still be suffering?
 - My boot.
 - Do you hear the wind?
 - We must go on living.
 - We must work.

You have 20 minutes (Landau 28-30, italics hers, bolded emphasis mine).⁹⁵

Obviously, that is impossible, and yet it needs to happen – and has happened many times, each time interpreting and using that list in a different ways. This practice is how SITI Company builds its work through the dynamic that Bogart calls, “exquisite pressure” – another way to describe Pope’s concept of embracing the constraint of rules as a necessary element of creativity. Entering this state of “exquisite pressure” also evokes collaborator Helen Storey’s idea of “holding your nerve” in the face of this kind of open, collaborative, creative investigation.

As a point of comparison, the following is another sample list that comes from the period of time when SITI was developing a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Less detailed, this list was put together to use in SITI training sessions, where actors studying with SITI were learning and practicing the technique of Composition, along with participating in Viewpoints and Suzuki training. These elements were to be combined for a Composition of less than ten minutes (students are given two days to develop a piece – a leisurely pace, compared with the 20 minutes that the SITI actors get):

- One minute of music
- 20 seconds of silence
- A dance
- Off-stage action
- 15 seconds of top-speed talking
- 15 seconds of simultaneous, unison action
- Something very loud
- 15 seconds of crying/laughing
- A physical fight
- The disorientation of love

⁹⁵If you know anything at all about Chekhov, it is easy to see how the lists come together, even if it’s not clear how all those things happen on stage in six minutes in a way that makes any sense at all.

- 5 interruptions
- A meeting that causes physical change
- A midstream change of alliance
- Text from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- Text from something else
- Sex
- A chase scene
- A surprise
- The moon (2013 lecture)

Compositions are a way to play with various elements of theatre to create something entirely new, using the crunch of time to put the ensemble into a space of *not-thinking*, only *doing* – Self 1 doesn't have time to share any opinions on how the work needs to be done. The impossible number of elements and the short time allowed force actors to work together on an immediate and intuitive level, trusting the collaborative moment.

These lists change over time depending on which production, which part of a production, or what idea or theme is being explored, as well as who is involved in creating the composition. Repeating this process with different groups of people, different subsets of the ensemble, and different combinations of ideas and images from the source-work generates a constant series of theatrical images and phrases that can be explored further. Bogart also encourages what she calls “stealing,” where the actors pull one “successful” element from a Composition exercise (either one they've created or from another that they've seen another group perform) and bring it into the next round of exploration/research/improvisation.⁹⁶

The process of “harvesting” pieces of Compositions and bringing them together as a production is built over time is based on the question: “Vice, or not-Vice?” When the

⁹⁶During my time training with SITI Company, we went through two rounds of Composition. the two lists were similar, but not identical. One of the items on the list for the second set of Compositions included “something stolen” from one of the Compositions you'd just watched.

television show “Miami Vice” was in production, the job of one member of the design team was to walk through each shoot, assessing the details of the setting, the props, the costumes, the hair, even lines of dialogue— and say “Vice” if it belonged in the world of “Miami Vice,” and “not-Vice” if it had no business being there, no matter how interesting it might be. Whatever was not-Vice could be shelved if it was interesting enough on its own, but it could not transform itself into Vice.⁹⁷

The Compositions themselves are a series of questions, a means of collaborative investigation, driven by the dynamic that is described by Bogart as “What is it? What is it really?” When used as part of the rehearsal and devising process, Composition creates a structure for “improvisation as research,” with each artist bringing something vital to the table – an approach to creative work that I have always loved, and have tried to find or foster. It also results in the kind of performance or production that I most enjoy, where my responsibility as an actor is about doing, not feeling, and what I’m doing is focused outward – toward my fellow-actors on stage, and to the audience – rather than inward.

Even though this technique clearly applies well to Anti-Realism, my experience with Composition has also changed how I would approach acting in Realistic productions. Looking at the list associated with Chekhov (see above) has changed the way I think about Chekhov’s plays. It is much like the difference between Viewpoints and Suzuki – my awareness of the heart of the play is open to all kinds of ideas and snippets of ideas to which I can respond, rather than relying on focusing inwardly as a means of analyzing my character.

⁹⁷Vice or not-Vice is a helpful tool in any number of situations.

Summary

The importance of creating a lifelong method of creative practice for the actor is so significant to SITI Company that it is part of their mission statement, and they have developed and refined the three training methods to support that mission – Viewpoints, Suzuki, and Composition. The members of the company teach those methods as part of a larger whole, where each informs the other. The practice of Viewpoints can develop the skills of open awareness and immediate, organic response to the details of the moment, and it raises the questions of responsibility to the creative collaboration: “Does this moment need me?” In many ways, Suzuki training builds on those skills, complements them and redirects them: the awareness seems as if it is focused entirely inward, and yet the goal of that detailed inner interrogation of power and presence is the way it connects the actor to the spectator: “How can I show myself?” Composition then uses the creative energy and attention to detail of both the ensemble and the individual to investigate and create the world of the play: “What is it? What is it really?”

The ways in which each of these training methods appear and are used in the development, rehearsal, and performance of *Steel Hammer* are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VIII

STEEL HAMMER

Some say he was....

— Julia Wolfe

Introduction

I've been following SITI's work since the company was founded. During that time I've seen plays like *bobrauschenbergamerica*, which included a scene played on a plastic drop cloth, where actor Leon Ingelsrud made martinis by pouring gin and tonic on the stage, and then dragging bikini-clad Akiko Aizawa around the stage by her feet, as if she was the swizzle stick. Noel Coward's *Private Lives* featured a giant Eiffel Tower on wheels that actors climbed up and down on during exchanges of witty repartee. *Who Do You Think You Are* is a retelling of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the language of neuroscience, and *Small Lives, Big Dreams* created the world of post-earthquake Kobe, Japan, through the language of Chekhov, where each of the five actors in the production chose a particular Chekhov play and each was then limited to creating dialogue from the words of that play, weaving them together.

My favorite SITI production, *the theatre is a blank page*, relied entirely on the text of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, and included a sequence in which the audience passed long muslin ribbons, printed with bits of text from the novel, by running

them through our fingers and on to the person on the left: tactile reminders of the passing of time. I find their work evocative and thrilling, and even when a show is uneven, the presence of the actors and the clarity of what they're doing comes through and serves as the backbone of the production.

As a result, I know a lot about their methods and the results of those methods on stage. However, my interest in *Steel Hammer* in particular here is related to more than just the way the timing coincided with my graduate studies.

Over the past five years, SITI Company has been particularly interested in reaching outside of theatre to find collaborators and collaborative projects that take them in new directions and invite more diverse points of view, both in terms of topics and the nature of those collaborations themselves.

While Bogart has directed opera before, and SITI actor Barney O'Hanlon has choreographed some operas, SITI Company had never collaborated on a project that included opera. When I heard about the *Steel Hammer* project, I was already involved in research on collaborative creativity – considering the relationship between that research, the way SITI Company is organized, and their methods of training and producing work. I am familiar enough with SITI to understand how vital music is to their work, and I found the idea of adding live music to a SITI production intriguing.⁹⁸ I was also interested in observing the collaborative structure of a production that stretched across disciplines. Finally, my own background as an artist includes a period of time where I performed as a professional musician, and I was curious about what the collaborative relationship

⁹⁸I found it particularly interesting because when I trained with SITI there were two Viewpoints sessions with live music – by keyboardist Rachel Grimes, from the Louisville ensemble, The Rachels. The addition of yet another layer of kinesthetic possibilities was exciting and inspiring.

between actors and musicians might look like in this production. That *Steel Hammer* would premiere in Louisville made the project even more manageable.⁹⁹

Steel Hammer

Steel Hammer, an exploration of the truths and legends of John Henry – the man who beat the steam engine – began as a contemporary opera score (also called *Steel Hammer*), with music and lyrics written by Julia Wolfe, performed by Trio Mediæval and Bang on a Can All-Stars. Wolfe explained the genesis of the opera:

Steel Hammer [was] inspired by my love for the legends and music of Appalachia. The text is culled from the over 200 versions of the John Henry ballad. The various versions, based on hearsay, recollection, and tall tales, explore the subject of human versus machine in this quintessential American legend. Many of the facts are unclear ... [b]ut regardless of the details, John Henry, wielding a steel hammer, faces the onslaught of the industrial age as his super human strength is challenged in a contest to out-dig an engine. I drew upon the extreme variations of the story, fragmenting and weaving the contradictory versions of the ballad that have circulated since the late 1800s in to a new whole – at times meditating on single words or phrases – in order to tell the story of the story – to embody the simultaneous diverse paths it traveled.

The sounds of Appalachia have long been a part of my musical consciousness ... [i]n *Steel Hammer*, I'm calling on the Bang on a Can All-Stars to expand out from their usual instrumentation to include the likes of dulcimers and bones, and accessing Trio Mediæval's extensive work in their native vocal traditions (Wolfe, production program, web).

Wolfe's opera, *Steel Hammer*, premiered in 2011; Bogart saw a performance and she and Wolfe discussed the idea of turning it into "a play with music" (Bogart, rehearsal).

⁹⁹While distance would have prevented my regular attendance at rehearsals, I have traveled long distances in the past to see SITI productions.

SITI Company moved forward with developing the work, and made the decision to develop the themes of the theatrical production independently of the score of the opera; the opera already had its own musical integrity and production history, and Bogart wanted to focus on creating a piece of theatre with its own life. This is how SITI framed their approach to the production:

The subject matter of *Steel Hammer* revolves around the legend of John Henry and the ever-widening circles of resonance that might ripple out from this American story of the 1870s.

Specific points of thematic interest include:

Work and the cost of hard labor on the human body and soul.

The human impulse to tell a story.

The necessity for stories in our lives.

The function of stories in society.

How stories travel through time.

Who owns a story?

The thrill of a story (*Steel Hammer* web).

Work on the production began in 2013, with SITI members accumulating source-work, rehearsing ideas, and working on composition exercises with the sixty participants in the yearly SITI Summer Training Intensive; there was additional workshop time with SITI company members to develop some of those ideas further. Bogart also reached out to four playwrights – Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux, and Regina Taylor – and asked them each to submit a treatment of the John Henry legend that “felt most true to them” (Inside).

Jon Jory, of Actors Theatre of Louisville, invited SITI to premiere the work at the Humana Festival of New American Plays. Together SITI and Jory chose the smallest venue at Actors, the Victor Jory, for the work – while the plan for the play was to eventually perform it with live music – both Bang on a Can All-Stars and Trio Mediæval

– the Louisville premiere would rely on recorded music instead, giving the work more room to develop as a play. This maintained the course that Bogart had charted previously, in which the theatrical portion of the play would be fully developed before pairing it with live musicians.

In this way, the full staging of the play would incorporate all the disparate elements and determine the order and the connections between them: the music, the texts from the four playwrights, and the material that SITI had developed over the previous year.

The deeply collaborative nature of the production – composer, musicians and playwrights, along with members of SITI Company – is reflected in the program and the promotional material for the production. The credits for each part of the collaboration are listed alphabetically:

Steel Hammer

directed by Anne Bogart

music and lyrics by Julia Wolfe

original text by Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux, and Regina Taylor

recorded music performed by Bang on a Can All-Stars and Trio Mediaeval
performed and created by SITI Company (Actors Theatre, production program).

In *Steel Hammer*, it is important to note that the actors and other creative and administrative members of SITI are listed as co-creators of the play, in the non-hierarchical model used by SITI Company. Because of the choice made to alphabetize the names in the program, the promotional material presents the varied collaborators as equals.

Development

After SITI's year-long development of material – a process that included many of the SITI actors and designers – six actors were involved in staging and performing the play at Actors Theatre of Louisville.¹⁰⁰ Four of those actors are members of SITI Company: one of them, Barney O'Hanlon, was one of the founding members of SITI (and even worked with Bogart on projects preceding that time). Two other SITI actors – Akiko Aizawa and Stephen Webber – are long-term members of the company (both over fifteen years); the fourth SITI actor, Gian-Murray Gianino, has been with SITI for almost ten years. Actor Eric Berryman – who was often the “designated” John Henry, has performed before (and since) with SITI, and is a regular guest artist (he had previously trained with both SITI and Suzuki at Toga). The sixth actor in the production, Patrice Johnson Chavonnes, had not studied with SITI before joining the cast of *Steel Hammer*, and so had no direct experience of their training and rehearsal processes.

The staging of Wolfe's opera itself was static; unlike traditional opera, the singers and musicians were stationary – no action or characterization had been written into the songs, and the order of the songs didn't create any kind of “plot” (as is true of the structure of several SITI productions).

Rehearsals – New York

In 2014, two months before the Bogart/Wolfe production would open, SITI actor Barney O'Hanlon – who regularly serves as SITI's choreographer – began developing the dance sequences that would be part of the show; these dances were sometimes connected with the movement sequences developed previously by the company. At the same time,

¹⁰⁰These same actors performed in subsequent re-stagings of the production, including the production I saw at BAM (the Brooklyn Academy of Music).

rehearsals with the full cast started in New York. Each rehearsal began with both Viewpoints and Suzuki sessions.¹⁰¹ O’Hanlon – working with music director Christian Frederickson – began teaching the choreography to the cast (along with the form and dynamics of clog dancing).¹⁰² Frederickson also taught the cast “body percussion” – also known as “patsch”; this was incorporated into the choreography of one of the songs. Actor Eric Berryman gave a demonstration of “step dancing,” which was also incorporated into the production.¹⁰³

The cast spent the last three full days of New York rehearsal on “table work” – reading each of the short plays together out loud, over and over – where they “discussed and hypothesized and posited” (Sheedy, blog).¹⁰⁴ They were also joined by the dramaturg from Actors Theatre, Steve Moulds, who contributed further source materials and served as the connection between SITI, the playwrights, and Actors Theatre.

Three of the four playwrights were able to join the cast on the last three days of rehearsal in New York: Regina Taylor, Kia Corthron, and Will Power.¹⁰⁵ Taylor’s play (*John*) is poetic and musical, with a “call-and-response” structure; she and the cast worked on changes in rhythm and focus, and shifts from speaking to singing (she also

¹⁰¹This is an illustration of the dedication to ongoing training that is integral to SITI’s mission; these sessions also provided the opportunity to practice vocabulary of Viewpoints together—that shared physical language is a significant tool in the way SITI stages productions.

¹⁰²This is an interesting dynamic: since the music was pre-recorded, there were no musicians involved in rehearsal – no musicians for a music director to direct. In this case, Frederickson worked directly with SITI as a kind of bridge between SITI and the opera, teaching the actors the basics of complicated musical dynamics in the work: changes in tempo and time signatures, and the qualities of the musical intervals, harmonies, and instrumentation. He also worked with the cast on the snippets of songs that appear in the text - songs that are part of the John Henry legend.

¹⁰³Both patsch and step dancing will be described in more detail later in this chapter.

¹⁰⁴Even during this table-work period, the actors began each rehearsal with Viewpoints and Suzuki training sessions; the Viewpoints sessions focused on specific elements of the vocabulary, working within parameters associated with different parts of the staging (as with my previous example in Composition, involving the park bench).

¹⁰⁵The contributions of all four playwrights will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

gave them a revised script at this time). Corthron's play (*Tunnel Tale*) has a "tent show" quality, and – while Brechtian in structure (actors speaking directly to the audience, etc.) – it includes characters with names and relationships that Corthron clarified and expanded on in conversation with the actors. *John Henry, Polly Ann*, Power's play – a conversation between John Henry and his wife Polly Ann while John is in prison – spans generations, and rehearsal with Power focused on the roots of that conversation: post-Reconstruction prison labor and the New Jim Crow. Carl Rux, author of the fourth 10-minute play in *Steel Hammer – Migrant Mamie Remembers John Henry* – was unable to attend New York rehearsals, but the play (a monologue that recounts the meeting of the character's twelve-year-old self and John Henry) was discussed and rehearsed (and specific questions about the play were sent to the playwright).

On the final day of New York rehearsals, cast member Eric Berryman gave an in-depth demonstration of step dancing, which he had participated in as an undergraduate involved with a step fraternity. Step dancing is a style of dance that relies entirely on body percussion – movements that include hands and feet – and chanting and/or choral sounds. Step's foundations are in the stomping of some types of African dance, and military call-and-response drills. Over time, nine black fraternity and sorority houses – the Divine Nine - added other types of dance moves that were influenced by early funk and soul music, tap, and break dancing. Developed to "uplift" audiences, step also became an expression of pride and unity (Sheedy, Hilbring).

Rehearsals – Louisville

SITI Company has regularly developed and performed work in Actors Theatre’s Victor Jory performance space¹⁰⁶. The Victor Jory (also known as “the VJ”) has a thrust stage, and it seats 159 people.¹⁰⁷ The audience sits on graduated risers on three sides, with the first row of the audience at stage level; there are six rows of seats. The set was simple – a circular raised platform in the center of the stage floor; sometimes actors brought a variety of wooden chairs on stage (from stylistic periods preceding mid-century America). Strings of small white lights were strung above the stage in a pattern that mirrored the wagon-wheel pattern of the wood on the stage floor. There were no doors, only space for exits at all four corners of the stage floor: upstage and downstage, left and right.

While the whole Actors Theatre complex is extremely busy during the weeks leading up to the Humana Festival – where anywhere from five to eight different productions are performed on the three stages (the Pamela Brown, the Bingham, and the VJ) – the Victor Jory is slightly isolated from the others, up on the third floor. *Steel*

¹⁰⁶ Over the past 19 years, SITI has premiered or developed the following original productions at Actors Theatre of Louisville, in one of the three performance spaces: the Victor Jory, a three-quarter thrust stage with 159 seats; the Bingham, an arena stage with 318 seats; and the Pamela Brown, a proscenium stage with 633 seats.

1995 (Modern Masters Festival) *Small Lives/Big Dreams* (Bingham), and *The Medium* (Victory Jory);

1996 (Humana Festival) *Going, Going, Gone* (Victory Jory);

1999 (Humana Festival) *Cabin Pressure* (Victory Jory);

2000 (Humana Festival) *War of the Worlds* (Victory Jory);

2001 (Humana Festival) *bobrauschenbergamerica* (Victory Jory);

2002 (Humana Festival) *Score* (Pamela Brown);

2006 (Humana Festival) *Hotel Cassiopeia* (Victory Jory);

2009 (Humana Festival) *Under Construction* (Victory Jory);

2014 (Humana Festival) *Steel Hammer* (Victory Jory).

¹⁰⁷ A thrust stage is a performance space in which the stage breaks through and extends well past the proscenium arch. It reaches out into the auditorium, so that it is surrounded on three sides by the audience. (Theatre Development Fund)

Hammer was the only production in the VJ that year, and that gave the company the luxury to rehearse and work in the space without having to accommodate other productions or move to a rehearsal hall.

Rehearsals began in Louisville on March 3, 2014. SITI Company member stage manager Ellen Mezzera joined Bogart and the cast, along with music director Christian Frederickson and Actors Theatre designers and technicians.

The structure of rehearsals in Louisville followed that of the New York rehearsals: Suzuki and Viewpoints training in the morning, followed by work with the texts and music. Now that the company was in the space, on the set, the process of physically connecting the different parts of the project – the music, the ten plays, and SITI-generated materials – through choreography, patsch, step, and ongoing Viewpoint exercises could begin in earnest.

Daily work with Christian Frederickson continued as well – “listen-throughs” of each song, along with increasingly detailed analysis by Frederickson helped acclimate the actors to the complicated internal dynamics of the music.

The choreography was challenging – with the exceptions of O’Hanlon and Berryman, the cast had little experience with dance, and in some ways the complexity of the choreography had to meet that of the music. Even though choreography rehearsals with the cast began before bringing the production to Louisville, intensive rehearsals continued to the day of (and, in some ways, beyond) opening night. Actors Webber and Aizawa put in significant amounts of “extra” practice – on breaks and before and after rehearsals – and it showed; in performance, Aizawa in particular looked as though she had a long history of dance training. Assistant Director Laura Sheedy described the

complexity of O’Hanlon’s choreography – and the necessity of the constant counting of beats on the part of the cast – in this way:

The choreography that Barney is making is a complex combination of simple patterns repeated with slight variation in timing, at each repetition. The actors are learning sequences of 8 counts, up to 20 of them at a time, to be repeated and called back. Not only is each 8 different to the one before, each series changes its timing in the counts. And then there are the canons in which the six actors are split into three pairs and each pair starts the same sequence, at a different time to the one previous ... and they all have to keep in time! It’s an incredible process to watch and one in which as a voyeur, I feel like the actors are in something that I have no understanding of. It’s as if they have created their own language and when dance rehearsal time starts, they enter a world where that’s all they speak. Because, in effect they have, and they do. While continually counting out loud. Problems are identified and solved by trying to match numbers and moves, and repeating. And repeating. And counting. And counting (Sheedy, blog).

The idea of choreography that is “repeated and called back” echoes the elements of the text that rely on a call-and-response dynamic: in physical rhythm in the step sequence, and in rhythmic language in Taylor’s text. This is another example of the Viewpoint of Repetition.

The texts

In order to discuss the rehearsal process further, each of the texts requires a more detailed description: linguistic form dictated physical form, as much as the musical forms of Woolf’s opera shaped the physical incarnation of the songs.

Tunnel Tale

Tunnel Tale sets up the major theme of the production: storytelling and the making of folklore. Staged as a medicine show, the audience are automatically included in the performance. While the characters have names, those aren't made clear to the audience, though it means that the actors had to define them in some way for themselves. The relationships shift, but are based on a tension between those who want to present John Henry as a historical figure and excavate the clues available about his life, and those who want to consider him only as a figure of folklore, and consider how those stories reflect American life, both then and now. Bits and pieces of the hundreds of songs about John Henry punctuate the text.

This is an (edited) sample of the text from the beginning of the play:

Carnival music. JOHN HENRY, large man of inordinate strength, driving HIS large steel hammer. As it is very heavy, every swing will require excessive effort, the clangs well-spaced between each other, and loud...

SANDERS. (*Grinning at JOHN HENRY, admiring:*) Steel driver!

GRAHAM. "John Henry," 19th Century folksong... countless versions.

COX. Almost all reference death off the bat: first stanza.

GRAHAM. In American folklore we have our fictional Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and the tall tales surrounding real figures: Johnny Appleseed, Calamity Jane. All white. John Henry stands along as a black legend. For us *all*...

GRAHAM. (*sings:*) *This old hammer*

Killed John Henry

Killed my brother

Can't kill me.

SANDERS. Another version of the song:

GRAHAM. (*sings:*) *John Henry was a little bitty baby*

Sittin on his mama's knee

He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel

Said,

(JOHN HENRY joins in here without looking at

GRAHAM or interrupting HIS work. SHE turns to HIM,

surprised by HIS participation, delighted.)

GRAHAM and JOHN HENRY. *Hammer's gonna be the death of me*

LawdLawd

Hammer's gonna be the death of me.

COX. Or (*Chants:*) This ole hammer, mos too heavy

COX and JOHN HENRY. *Huh, (Should coincide with JOHN HENRY's hammer coming down.)*

COX. Killed John Henry, killed him dead.

COX and JOHN HENRY. *Huh.*

SANDERS. The way to start is to start at the start....

(Suddenly music out, lights out except for the light on

JOHN HENRY, who has stopped working, has turned to the audience.)

JOHN HENRY. Elizabeth City, New Jersey born. But come down Virginia, I'm a prisoner. Convict ... (Corthron, 304).

The text continues to weave different facts with different fictions, with different versions of songs about John Henry interspersed throughout, laying the groundwork for exploring the themes SITI Company wanted to feature in the production: work and the cost of hard labor on the human body and soul, the human impulse to tell a story, the necessity for stories in our lives, the function of stories in society, how stories travel through time, questions about ownership of a story, and the thrill of telling and hearing stories. This section of the production recounts different versions of the story of John Henry beating the steam engine with the speed of his hammer: "Man versus machine!" – but, as with the beginning of the folksongs about him, the stories all end with his death.

Migrant Mamie Remembers John Henry

Below is an edited selection from the second of the four plays in the production of *Steel Hammer*. This is a ten-minute monologue, in which a woman recounts meeting John Henry when she was a little girl.¹⁰⁸

... I wasn't but nuthin' then ... A shadow on the doorsill ... just a girl
slaughterin' hogs for folks ... they pay you with the scraps ... pig guts ...

¹⁰⁸While I have used ellipses to indicate editing, the text itself includes many of the ellipses that appear in the quote above.

pig feet ... pig head ... Overcrowded shacks and shanties, no running water. Sanitation is an unuttered idea. Contagion a fact. Congestion a matter of existence. Insects everywhere, feeding upon the host. He come round ... laid near beside me ... and get to talkin' ... I remember everything he say then ... whisper it soft ... say his name John Henry ... big old man ... say to me Death is grace. Say Death is reality and nature of life. Say man – every man – is an end to himself, exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose. Say neither life nor happiness the pursuit of a free man. Just as man is free man got to be free to survive in a random manner, less he perish, less he mindless. Say some things I do not know all what he talkin' about except I like how it sound. Say ... the problem is time, time as a horizon. Time for the understanding of being. Life. Death. Struggle. Food. Peace. Shelter. Place to rest ... I remember everything ... the insects ... many rivers. I walked a whole lotta roads feet covered in rags ... but well, this long before them steel driving steam days ... this long before his incarceration ... that man what lay next to me ... son of the Ocean, that John Henry. Must been. Maker of songs. A place for permanent dreaming ... (Rux 311).

This play is unlike anything else in the production: not only is it a monologue, it is delivered with the actor seated – while the actor isn't entirely still while delivering it, the only real movement is within the text. It is also the only scene in the production where some iteration of John Henry doesn't appear.

John Henry, Polly Ann

This play is a conversation between John Henry and his wife Polly Ann that takes place when she visits him in the penitentiary. It returns to the Brechtian style of the first medicine-show sequence, and at times, both Polly Ann and John Henry speak of themselves in the third person. It is also only loosely grounded in time. When John Henry calls for Polly Ann at the beginning of this play, “Polly... Polly Ann, I needs to see ya/This 20 pound hammer feel like 40 pounds today/My head is light and my thoughts are heavy/Won't you come by here, Polly Ann? Polly Ann! Polly Ann!” She first responds with, “John Henry, you gonna get out of there soon and we gonna resume our

life, as hard as it was ...” but then continues, “John needed to hear her voice, but tonight he was in no mood to hear all that poetic stuff, cause he’d been hearin’ it for the last hundred and thirty-somethin’ years.” As they speak, they move in and out of third person, and move in and out of time. Finally, John Henry tells her that they need to part ways – he’ll never get out of prison. He asks if she will tell their children about him, and she says yes, but

POLLY ANN. “I won’t say nothing about prison. I won’t say nothing about that. And I’ll make you 6 foot five instead of 5 foot two. And I’ll make up something about you beatin’ a steam engine.

JOHN HENRY. A steam engine?

POLLY ANN. Yeah. And you died a hero. How does that sound?

JOHN HENRY. It sounds ... it sounds just fine. (Power 314).

This play closes with them singing one of the folksongs about John Henry together.

John

Playwright Regina Taylor created something much more fragmented and deconstructed with her text – bits and pieces of text and song, overlapping. The characters are listed as:

- 1 – John
- 2 – Lucy
- 3 – Other woman
- 4 – Steel driving man/Another John
- 5 – Overseer/carny barker
- 6 – Steel driving man/Another John

The play begins:

We are seeing JOHN on the day he dies.

We hear in the darkness –

JOHN’S VOICE/1. HUH!*

(As we hear hammer ringing –

A WOMAN’ VOICE – #2 – Ghosts in the same pitch as ringing--)

2. John!*

(The strike brings light up on JOHN/#1)

JOHN/1. (*Trying to hold onto self.*) I am.
2. One
ALL. of many*
3. Not the only
ALL. To die
 Like...
2 AND 3. A man*
1. Doing what I do
 As best I can.*
ALL. (*Striking of hammer*) huh*
5. Name
ALL: John*
 (*Striking of hammer.*)
 huh
3. Not the only John
4. Number 3 –*
6. And uh-4 and uh –*
2. What’s true –
5. (*Like CARNY BARKER.*) Flesh versus tech-no-lo-gy—*
 (*We hear: DING!*
 Of a boxing bell.)
6. –The rest of the story*
1. Belongs to others
4 AND 6. 1 and uh 2 and uh –
ALL. Brothers
 In blood
 huh*¹⁰⁹ (Taylor 319-320)

Moving from text to sound to song, the play is layered and complex, and particularly well-suited to SITI’s style of staging.

Steel Hammer (the opera)¹¹⁰

There are eight songs in the opera *Steel Hammer*: “Some Say,” “The States,” “Destiny,” “Mountain,” “Characteristics,” “Polly Ann and the Race,” “Winner,” and “Lord Lord.” Together, they take the listener through the variations on the folk tales

¹⁰⁹The asterisks that appear in the text indicate movement that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

¹¹⁰All the songs in *Steel Hammer* can be heard on Julia Wolfe’s website:
<https://juliawolfemusic.com/music/steel-hammer>

about John Henry. “Some Say,” “States,” and “Characteristics” all feature repetition of ideas about John Henry and his life and origins. The only lyrics in the song “Some Say” are the two words of the title, eventually stretched to “Some say he...” and finally, “Some say he’s from...”, reminding the audience that they will leave with more questions than answers. The final song, “Lord Lord” leaves the listener with the words “chime” and “ring” repeated endlessly, almost breathlessly, suggesting a mystical ending to the life of John Henry.

Rehearsal and staging

The assistant director of *Steel Hammer*, Laura Sheedy, shared this comment from her rehearsal notes:

As Barney O’Hanlon said in rehearsal a few days ago – time is a character in *Steel Hammer*. In the rehearsal room, we are all constantly engaged by a study in time. The time signature of the piece of the day. Our human ability to keep up with the measures on the page as we are hearing them in our ears. The thought of how long each piece is, and so then, how much work we have in front of us in building the physical context for this music. The tempo of each action, movement and sequence within the tempo of Julia Wolfe’s score and the texts of our four writers (Sheedy, blog),

The relationship between time and the actors during this part of rehearsal period relied entirely on cognitive, L-mode processing. The challenge for the actors at that point was how to move through that to a place where they could *do* instead of *think*.

My experience while watching rehearsals for *Steel Hammer* reinforced those ideas. The way that the dynamic of “exquisite pressure” Bogart assigns to Composition exercises – related to how much material has to fit into such a short piece and how

quickly that piece has to be constructed – was very much a part of *Steel Hammer* rehearsals, in a different manner from their other works. The piecing together of so many different elements – four plays, eight songs,¹¹¹ and material generated by SITI Company that served as bridges between each – was more complicated than anyone anticipated.

Sheedy’s phrase, “building the physical context for this music,” is an apt description of the ways in which each piece was constructed. While each song had some kind of choreography, and some of that was more “traditional” (the dances that O’Hanlon based on Appalachian folk dance, for instance), several songs required something different.

The two songs that stand out in terms of their physical demands are “Mountain,” and “Polly Ann and the Race.” Anyone who has ever seen *Steel Hammer* will remember “Mountain.” The concept regarding the quality and type of movement that would create the world of John Henry in relationship to Wolfe’s song “Mountain” was (like much of the physical work on the play) decided on before the company arrived in Louisville; I saw it in rehearsal in the second week in the Victory Jory.

The song “Machine” follows a scene that was a sequence of enactments of the final moments of John Henry’s “Man versus Machine!” race against the steam engine, where – time after time – John Henry collapses and dies, heart bursting in exhaustion and effort. In the staging, actor Berryman repeatedly swings his hammer one last time, and collapses; each time the rest of the company catches him, lowers him gently to the ground, and responds to his death.

¹¹¹On average, the songs run about ten minutes each, with two notable exceptions: “Winner” is less than two minutes long, and “Polly Ann and the Race” is fifteen minutes.

The song begins after John Henry is pulled back from death and put on his feet again one final time. The rest of the cast exits, and Berryman is left alone on stage. Suddenly, the somber tone shifts, and Berryman begins to walk around the edge of the circular platform on the stage, and after one complete circle quickly breaks into a run, continuing on his path around the platform, as if pursued.

The song begins quietly, with a lone and plaintive cello (echoing an earlier musical phrase that was paired with the lyric “This hammer’s gonna be the death of me.” Other instruments join in (with a clarinet that sets up the repetition of “shine, shine, shine, shine, shine” and “ring, ring, ring, ring, ring,” of the final song, “Lord Lord”), and the tempo picks up quickly and becomes more percussive.

Berryman runs for the entire nine minutes of the song. The other members of the cast run in and join Berryman in circling the stage, but then exit (while running) at different times. It is the closest thing to a Viewpoints *exercise* that I’ve seen in a SITI production – while they always rely on Viewpoints as a staging tool in development (and in making small adjustments during performance), they are rarely used “as is” in performance. The use of Viewpoints in this way addressed several issues: first and foremost, Berryman was the only person who was supposed to run for the duration of the song – the chase needed to feature John Henry throughout. There were also different stamina levels among actors in the play – the exits gave them a chance to take a breather so they would be better able to support Berryman in the last moments of the song, especially his collapse. Additionally, one of the actors, Gian-Murray Gianino, had injured himself early in the Louisville rehearsal period (though not while working on this sequence), and needed to hold back and limit his contribution to a certain extent. The

other actors also all ran at different speeds, and never right beside Berryman (or anyone else) except to pass them. Viewpointing was the best solution to all those issues, and because of the skill of the cast and their long experience training together, their entrances and exits – while spontaneous – seemed planned and deliberate. Over the course of the nine minute song, Berryman ran over a mile during each performance.

In the Suzuki training, when SITI actor Will Bond had encouraged actors to pay attention to those around them during the stomping portion of Stomping Shakuhachi – to stomp near them as a way of sharing energy. That was true of the “Mountain” sequence as well: when the other actors joined Berryman in the run, the ways that they passed him with their entrances and exits, along with the times they ran near him, were ways to share their energy with him as he ran.

Like Stomping Shakuhachi, the piece was choreographed so that energy was built up over time during the “Mountain” run; the entrances and exits of the other members of the cast picked up in both speed and regularity as it went on – actors would go flying off in one direction and disappear through an exit, and almost immediately reappear to run one or two laps before dashing off again. The final minutes of the song required extreme precision on the part of the cast – the only piece of Viewpoint vocabulary that was available to them was tempo, and there was only one tempo they could use. What’s more, by the end of the song, all six cast members needed to be on stage, running full tilt. Their skill at utilizing the heightened, open awareness of Viewpoints is the only thing that kept them all safe from running into one another at full speed.

At the end of “Mountain,” John Henry collapses once more, taking all that built up energy with him down to the floor, just as in the Suzuki exercise Stomping

Shakuhachi, but with one difference: in Stomping Shakuhachi, the powerful energy that is generated through the repeated stomping is contained, even in the fall to the floor – it is not “released” until the actor has gotten to his feet and slowly moved to the edge of the stage. Feeling the power created by the running pour into the stage after Berryman’s collapse was cathartic.

Critic David Dudley, in his review of *Steel Hammer* for *American Theatre* magazine, wrote about this moment after speaking with Berryman:

Berryman as Henry has just completed an eight-and-a-half-minute run, a kind of physical crescendo. Right before his fall at the performance I saw, I heard an audience member whisper to her neighbor, “How is he still going?” Just at the point in the story where Henry is exhausted and ready to give in, so too is Berryman. In this moment, the lines between character and performer blur.

“I’ve been beaten up, worked myself to death, I fall,” Berryman later told me. But then the ensemble gathers around him, he said, and helps him up. “They check in with me—the actor, not the character—to see if I can go on. I nod. They help me up. We lock arms. We dance. They help me beat the machine” (web).

The nature of SITI’s work gives the actors the flexibility to be themselves in the moment without sacrificing “character.” As with *Chess Match #5*, much of the work onstage is a genuine reflection of who the actors are – both as themselves and who they are to each other. The distinction between actor and character disappears and becomes irrelevant. Not having to somehow “generate” emotions that are “supposed” to be part of a scene gives the actors the opportunity to invest in the creative connections of the moment.

The song that immediately follows “Mountain” in *Steel Hammer* – “Characteristics” – could not be more different in tone. The staging of the song begins with a sequence of patsch (also known as “hambone”) – a type of music that creates

rhythm by using the body as a drum kit. In the play, the actors face one another, and their hands, thighs, chest, and feet are all part of the song. During this sequence, they meet one another's gaze – they are enjoying the music, the patterns of the hambone, and the fun of simply *doing* it – along with enjoying one another's company: all of which is communicated to the audience. The lyrics of “Characteristics” are more complex, harder to hear or make sense of, and the quiet, relaxed energy onstage gives the audience the space to listen.

Watching both “Mountain” and “Characteristics” in rehearsal were very much like watching them in performance: the dynamics of both are simple (even though “Mountain” is so grueling in performance), in that they marry the movement/choreography with the actors' genuine effort and/or experience of the moment.¹¹²

The dynamics of the dances for some of the other songs were similar in performance (though the rehearsal processes associated with them were less relaxed than that of “Characteristics”) – with the actors working to embody the music rather than presenting it (as would be the case in a musical); in a way, they became another layer of instrumentation.

Challenges in rehearsal

There were two particularly challenging sections of the work: a choreographed movement section that is part of the song, “Polly Ann and the Race,” and the movement sequences in the final ten-minute play, *John*.

¹¹²For obvious reasons “Mountain” wasn't rehearsed often – another reason for the heavy reliance on the Viewpoints (and trust in the actors' skill in using them).

The choreography of the “Race” section of “Polly Ann and the Race” is based in step dancing, and it contains the intensity of some step performances. The angular quality of step and the loud stomping and clapping that is part of it were sharpened, as the actors embodied both the organicity of human beings and the sharp, metallic danger of the machines they were pitted against. The movements are harsh in quality, even violent, and require the kind of focused energy and precision of Suzuki practice. This was the place where – in both rehearsal and performance – actor Patrice Johnson Chevannes’s relatively short experience with Suzuki training showed; while she knew the choreography, and kept time with the other actors, her movements seemed loose when compared to the quick, sharp work of the SITI actors. The power of the sequence – in ways similar to that of “Mountain,” in that each movement builds in intensity, until the whole sequence almost vibrates with it – depends on the energy of the individual’s precise contribution to the energy of the whole. Her imprecision “deflated” some of the power of the moment by adding a softness to the ensemble’s energy that didn’t belong.

Rehearsal for this sequence was grueling. The tempo of the music is fast, and there are no movement sequences that repeat; it moves quickly from explosive movement to stillness and back. Since the music was pre-recorded, there was no room for even a little compromise on tempo between the musicians and the actors. This section of the song is full of clanks and rattles: it obviously reflects the introduction of the steam engine and its crushing power – a metaphor that was not lost on the actors. The cast was finally able to resolve their issues with the piece through sheer determination, fueled by their training experiences with Suzuki – training designed to force the actor through physical challenges. In performance, the sequence was tight, powerful, and dramatic.

The other movement sequence that proved challenging in rehearsals was the blocking for the final play, *John*. The full ten minutes of this play is staged with the actors in a diagonal line across the platform – they never leave their place in the line. Rather than moving around the stage floor, the actors developed a series of tableaux - poses associated with the process of manually tunneling into a mountain and then passing the broken rocks along the line to get them out of the tunnel and out of the way so that the tunneling can continue.

Tableaux are sometimes developed as a starting point for a Composition exercise – they are a way of distilling ideas down into something more complex and interactive than gesture.¹¹³ They can sometimes originate in discoveries made through the Suzuki Statue exercises, either sitting or standing. The speed of the Statues exercises can reveal physical shapes that bypass cognition (and so are more than “ideas”).

The actors created nine different tableaux that, if performed in sequence, would show the steps of tunneling, with hammers and the empty buckets and buckets full of stone passing up and down the line. As the text of the play was spoken, the tableaux were moved in and out of order, speeding up and slowing down; furthermore, when the tableaux were out of order, the movements connecting them necessarily changed as well. In order to keep the movements from overwhelming the text, the actors needed to find

¹¹³This is an example of the way that SITI uses tableaux in staging: when I was training with the company, we were working with themes and concepts from *Antigone*. During an afternoon session directed by Bogart, she asked us to divide into groups of three. Each person in the group was to come up with a response to the words “loss,” “betrayal,” and “sacrifice” that would take the shape of a tableaux. Once we had each decided on an idea, we were to take turns putting the other members of our group into a position that expressed that response. After seeing each of the three tableaux, we were to choose the one we thought most fully expressed what we were trying to say about loss, betrayal, and sacrifice, and then combine the three to create a play, where the action happened in the movement that connected each tableaux. Of course we had only ten minutes to complete the exercise.

stillness – without looking “frozen” – once a tableau was reached, and then move seamlessly into the next on cue, while avoiding any kind of a “stop/start” dynamic.

The tableaux were numbered and, in rehearsal, O’Hanlon, Bogart, and/or the stage manager would call out each change while actors were speaking the text of the play to reinforce each movement: “1! 4! 1! 2! 1! 9! 3! 4! 1! 4! 6! 9!”¹¹⁴ To make matters more complicated, the playwright made some changes to the text a few days before opening night – changes that requires re-organizing some of the sequences.

There were times when several of the cast said that they were glad I was there as a spectator. I always trained with them on the mornings I attended rehearsal – rather than training being a “closed” experience, they welcomed guests who brought new energy to the session.¹¹⁵ That was true in rehearsal as well: I was not a director, I was not the stage manager or dramaturg from Actors Theatre – I was a spectator, and their work requires that, even in rehearsal, because they train and rehearse toward being *watched* (which is different from the role of the director at that moment, which is to *assess*). The need for a spectator was more obvious in the Brechtian sequences: talking to a person is much easier than talking to a row of empty seats. It was also vital in the movement sequences: the machine-made-of-people during the clanking section of the song “Polly Ann and the Race,” and the tableaux of *John*. The actors needed to know if they were being *seen* – if the movement expressed what was vital and human in those moments.

I had assumed that I’d be very much an “outsider,” sitting in on their rehearsals, scribbling notes in a corner. However, their collaboration includes everyone in the room

¹¹⁴For an indication of how quickly the poses sometimes changed, please refer to the section of the text, John, included above: each asterisk shows a shift from tableau to tableau.

¹¹⁵This wasn’t a completely “open” session – it was a training session for people who had experience with Suzuki and Viewpoints.

– it’s a very generous approach to the work, and an acknowledgement of the constant of theatre: the relationship between the actor and the spectator. My contribution to the collaboration was that of a careful watcher, and that is something they value as the *watched*.

Performance

I saw the production in performance five times at Actors Theatre. Over time, the more complicated Appalachian-style dance sequences gained the lightness that was the goal of O’Hanlon’s choreography; the changes gave the show more of the balance that is part of Wolfe’s musical score. As would be expected, the performance of each of the plays improved: the cast was finally able to navigate the complicated shifts in tone and style that each demanded (and also, the playwrights had to stop making changes to the scripts).

The Victor Jory was an excellent venue for the play. It is a warm and intimate space where it is easy to make direct contact with the audience, and so it supported both the Brechtian sequences that broke the fourth wall and the quiet, more “realistic” moments that were a part of the conversation between the two actors in *Polly Ann and John Henry*. A small theatre also helps to reveal the moments of connections between the actors in a way the audience can feel: the moment of John Henry’s collapse after the run is a good example. The size of the venue also put the audience in much more direct contact with the buildup of energy in that sequence before his collapse: because it’s a thrust stage, the exits are right next to audience seats. Being next to the actors (as opposed to observing them at a distance) as they raced in and out to join John Henry in his run created a sense of anticipation, even danger. As a result, none of the actors had to

“act” being in danger, or being “exhausted” – it was right there to see (and with none of the psychological underpinnings that would be a part of a Method production).

The production was visually exciting; the composition and Viewpoints work came together with the choreography to create an environment that was physically intriguing and inviting; the variety in style and energy of movement added depth to a production that was uneven in terms of its texts. The final sequence of the production – the Regina Taylor text, *John*, immediately followed by the final song of the opera, “Lawd Lawd” – was lovely. Once the actors had internalized the sequences of the tableaux, they developed a fluid quality that could be fine-tuned for the moment – points when the text pointed to struggle, or love, or pain. Again, because these moments were so carefully planned, it was the spontaneous quality of the movement that communicated those things to the audience, rather than the emotional state of the actors. After the complicated “tunnel work” created by the tableaux, the movement for the song “Lawd Lawd” was simple and contained. As the song began, the actors slowly turned upstage – with the exception of Berryman. One by one, the actors took the tools they’d been using in *John*, and began an exceptionally slow walk upstage – with all the weight of the Suzuki Slow Ten exercise, where the actor brings the weight of the room behind her as she walks. Because of their physical training, the movement was smooth and measured – made “dramatic” by the simplicity and focused energy of motion. The music is poignant, and the voices echo one another: the combination of repetition and duration in both the movement and the sound was moving.

This was, to me, to the most successful sequence of the production: where the script and the music and the movement all came together and made something bigger

than the three of them individually. I think part of what worked with this section is that the script of *John* is closer to the style of what SITI actually does, what they excel at – and it made best use of their extensive training with Viewpoints and Composition. The same was true for “Lawd Lawd” – the choices they made required movement that incorporated a sense of stillness. The actors didn’t *exit* – bring the action of the play to a stop – as much as they moved steadily toward whatever would happen *next* – even though that *next* was something the audience would never see. This evoked the fundamental quality of the folktale – always changing, as in *John*, and carried forward into the future in “Lawd Lawd.”

New York restaging with live music

I also saw a performance of *Steel Hammer* when it was restaged at BAM the following December. The production was performed in the Harvey Theatre, which is in proscenium orientation and seats 837 people: there are lower and upper orchestra seats, as well as a balcony.

This production also featured live music: the Trio Medieval and the Bang on a Can All-Stars (the same musicians Wolfe originally chose to perform and record the opera). Along with the three members of the Trio Mediæval, there were eight Bang on a Can musicians playing instruments that ranged in size from a flute to a piano, and a space for everything associated with percussion.¹¹⁶

Each musician had at least one microphone (some, like the percussionist, had more than one). While the actors were also “mic’d,” they wore wireless microphones –

¹¹⁶Given that the name of the ensemble is Bang on a Can All-Stars, it should be obvious that there is a wide variety of percussion instruments.

the musicians, on the other hand, were all wired, resulting in a lot of distracting shiny microphone stands and cable snaking across the floor to the sound board.

While the rest of the musicians were on the stage floor with the actors, the singers of Trio Mediæval stood on an elevated platform that was about five or six feet above the stage; the platform was upstage center.¹¹⁷

When the play was performed in the Victor Jory, there were moments when the lights on the stage were low and the exits were in darkness. The lighting design reinforced the moment – and the intimate space helped “feature” the actors and strengthen the connection between the actors and the audience. However, the musicians who were performing with the actors in the Harvey Theatre at B.A.M. required at least some light – they needed to be able to read the music, and so the periphery of the stage was never as dimly lit as it was in the Victor Jory: the light on the actors could never be as focused because there was no true shadow as a point of contrast. In some ways, theatrical lighting serves as a cinematographer – it tells the spectator when and where to look, in tandem with the actors and the blocking, and in the Harvey, with live musicians, that tool almost completely disappeared. While the SITI actors have a great deal of stage presence – I’ve seen them “compete” with busy staging before and win the contest – losing the support of lighting design was a real problem.¹¹⁸

There were other ways in which the line between musicians and actors were blurred – when one of the Bang-on-a-Can musicians joined the actors for the patsch sequence, for instance (even though he was not costumed for the show). Since that was

¹¹⁷If you are unfamiliar with stage terminology: “upstage” is the part of the stage that is farthest away from the audience, at the back wall of the stage. “Downstage” is the area closest to the audience.

¹¹⁸For instance, I have seen them grab focus on stage through their physical presence when competing with a fifteen foot tall model of the Eiffel Tower on wheels.

the only instance of “breaking the wall” between musicians and actors, it was confusing and odd.

The addition that had the greatest impact on the production was the Trio Mediæval raised platform and lighting. The cultural reference, “being upstaged,” or “upstaging” someone was a reality in this version of *Steel Hammer*. Their elevation above the stage floor and everything on it – actors, musicians, instruments, microphones – completely overshadowed the production and overwhelmed the actors and the theatrical action on the stage: the performance seemed to be “A Night with the Trio Mediæval, with additional music by Bang on a Can All-Stars, and dancing by SITI Company.” The most powerful theatrical elements of *Steel Hammer* were swallowed up by the “busy-ness” all around them on stage (musicians, microphones, cables, etc.), and the way that the staging and lighting featured the three singers: the actors all but disappeared.

Reviews

The professional reviews of *Steel Hammer* were mixed.¹¹⁹ Louisville Public Radio Partnership’s Erin Keene called the work “a movement-heavy musical ode to and interrogation of American folklore hero John Henry.” She had previously seen some of SITI’s productions, and described the dynamics of their work for the reader:

(F)or those unfamiliar with SITI Company’s style, expect to see an emphasis on choreographed movement and dramatic gesture. In other words, what the body is doing and where it is in relation to other bodies on stage is just as important as what’s being said (web).

Keene had this to say about the way that process translated to the stage in *Steel Hammer*:

“There are moments in *Steel Hammer* where this elevates a scene to pure magic – the

¹¹⁹ The selected reviews presented here include critics who have experience with SITI Company’s work over time along with one who has not; these reviews are also a mix of local and national.

closing of the show is a moving tableau to both the beauty and the horror of hard human labor,” but she noted that the production could have benefitted from live, rather than recorded music, and that caused some of the long choreographed sequences to look and feel “artificial.”

Louisville Magazine’s Michelle Rymbrandt (web) was unfamiliar with SITI’s work, and noted that the production “is not really a play; not really a musical. It is a compilation of dance, storytelling, physicality, symbolism and music, with a large dose of repetition mixed in,” and that the “majority of the play is a non-verbal representation of oppression, hard work, suffering, [and] the many levels of truth.” She was impressed by the technical elements of the play, and said that “it is easy to imagine how demanding both the rehearsal process and performance are for the actors” – suggesting that the creative process of SITI Company is in some way present on the stage during performance. However, her conclusions about the production suggested that it fell short of what all that work on the part of the actors might have produced: “For those involved in the production, *Steel Hammer* is a powerful, intense and exhausting journey; but for uninitiated members of the audience, *Steel Hammer* is a little too abstract—a little too disjointed—and a little too long.” Intriguingly, she makes no specific mentions of Wolfe’s music or the musicians anywhere in the review.

Longtime critic Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* saw the production both in Louisville and New York, and called *Steel Hammer* “an odd and not always satisfying hybrid,” and said that “[w]hen the music predominate, all is well.” He has great respect for Wolfe’s compositions and the musicians, but was less impressed by the contributions of the playwrights.

[M]uch of the text is a combination of a loose fantasia on his life and a lecture on its significance. Sometimes it's witty and warm, sometimes pedantic and repetitive. It matches the fragmentary nature of Ms. Wolfe's lyrics, but sung fragments of text are more easily digested than spoken ones.

Too often, the playwrights' contributions feel like unwelcome interruptions that drag on and keep feeding us the same bits of lore in different packages (web).

Isherwood preferred the production at B.A.M., because of the “driving intensity and joyous spontaneity” of the live music: “I found it thrilling to hear Ms. Wolfe's score with a real band onstage.” He is very familiar with the work of SITI Company – he mentioned several of the actors, and framed their performances as “intensely physical,” and “in keeping with the [production's] theme of hard labor.” The review closes with another reference to the “sturdy musical spine” of Wolfe's score, noting the way in which the legend of John Henry is primarily carried forward through the songs that memorialize his epic battle with the steam engine – Isherwood concluded that Henry “receives his noble due in Ms. Wolfe's powerful score” (web).

Todd Zeigler of *Broadway World* saw the production only in Louisville in the small Victory Jory theatre. He described Bogart as a “master of theatrical innovation,” who applied “SITI Company's multidisciplinary approach” to the play – an approach that he said sets SITI apart because of “the diversity of artistic languages it uses.” Noting the “storytelling contest” structure of *Steel Hammer*, his review seemed to suggest that the way the production expanded to include other (potentially disconnected) artistic languages created an environment both so complex and so constraining that the production couldn't quite escape from it to become more than the simple sum of the parts.

From one point of view, this is a showcase of impeccably crafted and executed artistry from a multitude of fields delivered by a finely-tuned ensemble

with absolute confidence in the material and the work. From another perspective, it's the sort of performance art where the cast runs in a circle for five to 10 minutes and you are expected to abide (web).

While I found the 10-minute scene (in "Mountain") of running very powerful, I was, at the same time, sometimes bored; it lasted about one or two minutes too long – something that could have been addressed with a more even collaborative relationship between Wolfe's compositions and SITI's staging. It's important to keep in mind that when Wolfe's opera was first performed, it was with a "static" staging that had much more in common with ensemble performances of chamber or symphony music, rather than a "traditional" opera with recognizable characters and plot that is "acted out." Wolfe's invitation to SITI to turn the opera into a play had built-in limitations that aren't present in SITI's collaborations with other playwrights such as Mee, where they are co-creators from the beginning: the music remained as the music was – a dynamic amplified by the four different plays that were, for the most part, equally rigid.

Summary

Over the past twenty-six years, I have seen eighteen productions by SITI Company (and several productions that featured SITI actors or that Bogart directed outside of SITI). *Steel Hammer* is one of my least favorites – to me, it was not a very successful piece of work. That is not to say that I didn't think it was "creative" – it absolutely was, and I saw the creative work in every rehearsal and performance I attended.

A collaboration between SITI and Julia Wolfe could have worked – the way the actors filled the space with the different energies of each musical sequence was engaging

and evocative: there was a strong connection between the two. The bridges between songs that were built by SITI Company (rather than those contributed by the playwrights) were equally engaging.¹²⁰ However, there were simply too many “non-SITI” collaborators. Additionally, those “collaborators” – particularly the playwrights, but not exclusively – were not on a level playing field with SITI. In *Steel Hammer*, the playwrights’ contributions were prioritized. SITI’s collaborative work is most successful when it is least hierarchical, and where everyone’s contribution to the collaboration is of equal importance: the structure and process of *Steel Hammer* didn’t fit that model.

SITI regularly works collaboratively with playwrights: playwright Charles Mee joined SITI Company early on, and the plays born of those collaborations are some of the strongest of SITI’s productions. However, those plays are built together, with SITI and the playwright contributing to the process, and the workshopping/Composition practice contributes to the structure and text of the play, not just of the staged production.

The four playwrights of *Steel Hammer* were not a part of that year-long developmental process – their texts were only added to the production a few weeks before rehearsal in Louisville began. Additionally, the structure of Actors Theatre’s Festival of New American Plays prioritizes the playwrights; that has worked well for SITI in the past, when they worked with playwrights like Mee who welcome – even depend on – the back-and-forth quality of those collaborations. The relationships between

¹²⁰I have not shared examples of those SITI-generated scenes here because the text was not published along with the four short plays that are part of *Steel Hammer*. What I can describe is the scene immediately following the run and John Henry’s collapse: it was a collage of poetry and prose that relied on different texts meant to “inspire” (including some text with the flavor of Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*). After all the energy and intensity of the run, it was a funny, quiet little moment, and when Berryman rejoined them on stage, there was a sense of warm welcome (again, a sense of the actors recognizing one another and acknowledging what they’d just been through). As Berryman entered, the actors were in the process of arranging chairs in a circle, facing inward. As the text came to a close, they all sat and then began the pautsch sequence, sharing the fun of making percussion together with their own bodies.

SITI and Corthron, Power, Rux, and Taylor were different, and much more hierarchical – what’s more, the playwrights worked entirely independently from one another, making each play a small world unto itself.

While SITI worked to connect some of the themes of the plays, those connections were sometimes overwhelmed by the music – another collaboration that went in only one direction. I expected that once the musicians were in the same room as the actors that that connection would be more fluid and cohesive. Instead, the BAM staging featured the musicians so completely that the work of the actors was eclipsed.

In the tableaux exercise described previously (where three people are given three concepts, and each person contributes a tableau for each of the concepts) the dynamic that is the most important is that they must make decisions immediately. This immediacy allows for no time for weighing and discussing which of the three best expresses “loss.” Instead, they have to go with their instincts and trust that no one person in the ensemble is going to push their work because they want things to go their way. The result of the equal collaboration is – as Helen Storey maintained – much more interesting and complex than anything that could have come from a single individual. SITI members express the same ideas.

And yet this collaboration was not an equal one, and so there was little opportunity to “knit” all the pieces together into a whole. The music existed prior to the play, and while that could have been a point of creative negotiation, the recorded music was unchanging, and the performance with live musicians was staged in a way that featured them, even if the musical dynamic was more evenly shared between actors and musicians.

The playwrights also “resisted” some levels of creative negotiations: their plays existed outside of SITI and were presented as “complete” works in and of themselves – they came into being *alongside* of SITI rather than *with* them.

When Bogart decided to develop SITI’s contribution to *Steel Hammer*, she made the point that the play needed time away from the music: the musical score already had its own structural and creative integrity – a life of its own – and the play needed to find its footing in the same way. However, in some ways, the playwrights and their plays prevented that process from being truly collaborative in the way that SITI usually works.

The decisions to bring all these different approaches to the legend of John Henry together was meant to echo our cultural relationship to John Henry and all the different forms that legend takes: historical, fictional, and fiction-elevated-to-folklore. However, the “versions” of the legend that make up *Steel Hammer* are entirely independent of one another, and they resist the process of balanced adaptation and creative collaboration. The resulting production may have been significantly hampered by the mutually contradictory “rules” imposed by the work of the other collaborators that then limited SITI’s creative opportunities.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSIONS

Tie a string to something.
— Charles Mee

The SITI Company production *bobrauschenbergamerica* – developed with playwright Charles Mee – begins in this way:

An empty stage covered by a blank canvas.
A ladder.
The actors come out to remove the ladder and canvas.

Big Music.

1 Title

A chicken slowly descends from the flies on a string.
It has a sign around its neck that says:
bobrauschenbergamerica

2 What I Like

A roller skater bursts in with a big red umbrella, and the rest of the characters come out immediately, some with objects – the trucker has a bathtub on wheels with a light set in the mass of crunched steel where the showerhead should be, and maybe a One Way sign on the side of the tub. Susan has a stuffed deer on wheels, or maybe a goat with a tire around its stomach. Becker the filthy, rag-dressed, disheveled, offhand derelict has a cardboard box, Phil's Girl pushes a baby carriage with a stuffed chicken inside, Wilson has a house window on wheels. Allen crosses the stage carrying a ladder

while a voiceover is heard:

VOICEOVER

What I like to do is...
I start with anything,
a picture,
these colors,

I like these colors,

or I might have an idea about something I'd like to try with a shoe,
or maybe I just feel:
happy.

Look,
everything overlaps doesn't it?

Is connected some kind of way.
Once you put it all together, it's just obvious.
I mean, tie a string to something, and
see where it takes you.
The biggest thing is
don't worry about it.
You're always gonna be moving somewhere so
don't worry about it.
See?
Start working when it's almost too late at night,
when your sense of efficiency is exhausted
and then just,
let it come on.... (Mee, *bobrauschenbergamerica*, web)

bobrauschenbergamerica is one of SITI's best-known and well-received works. The opening of the play could serve an example of what the Chekhov Composition exercise and its long list of ingredients¹²¹ can become: it suggests that everything you *really* need to know about this play is right there in that small slice. It also illustrates one of Bogart's directives for any play: "You need to tell the audience everything they need to know about the world of the play in the first five minutes – if you lose them then, you'll never get them back. They need to understand what is going to happen on the stage, and they also need to understand their responsibility as spectators for this production – what will

¹²¹Presented in Chapter 7.

they need to *do* during the course of the play, and how are they supposed to do it?” (2013 lecture).

The rubber chicken opening of *bobrauschenbergamerica* tells us that we – the spectators – should consider not taking any of the “artist-y” things that will follow entirely seriously: it’s a play, after all; all of us are pretending. Moreover, we are free – even encouraged – to “follow the string” to wherever it leads. The starting point of that particular production is a blank canvas, a *tabula rasa*, for both actors and audience; the next step may be (or not) about a color, or a shoe. What’s more, the work is best done in a place where the rigid, analytical, linear-mode cognition of Self 1 is perhaps too tired to voice an opinion on whatever happens next, “when your sense of efficiency is exhausted.” Whatever it is that happens, the audience is part of how it happens: they are co-creators with the actors, and the actors must tell them how that’s going to work – this is true for any production: Realism, Anti-Realism, classical, or big Broadway musical.

In the type of Anti-Realism practiced by SITI, the creative responsibilities of the actor are different from those of an actor in a traditional production of *Death of a Salesman*, and as a result, the creative process and experiences of the actor are also different. One of the creative responsibilities of the actor in *bobrauschenbergamerica* is not to make sure the spectator *understands* why the actor is wheeling in a taxidermied deer on wheels but to make sure that the spectator *sees* the taxidermied deer on wheels as a vital ingredient of what’s to come.

In some ways, every performance has an element of the blank slate for any actor and for any spectator: the ephemeral nature of the theatre means that the actor starts from scratch with each new audience, even if the creative focus and goals change from genre

to genre. In Realism, the actor's creative focus may be on "fooling the dog" – making sure that the difference between real life and the life on stage is indiscernible – night after night. The actor in a musical may focus on what it takes to entertain the audience while being part of the spectacle (it does take a certain skill to create jazz hands that actually work with the show) and the actor in a production of Brecht's *The Measure's Taken* may work to confront the audience directly in new ways in every performance (because the people he or she is confronting are different every night).

Both Bogart and Suzuki have said that their methods are based on "creating fiction" – and as Bogart clarifies, "making fiction together." Those methods help the actor create a sense of presence and immediacy on stage that is not just about a particular kind of fiction or style of drama: those are part of any performance. Their practices are not for everyone, but they have created an approach to actor training and performance that predictably and regularly provides increased opportunities for flow for a very large number of actors, demonstrated by the widespread popularity of their training.

I know this to be true in part because it is true of myself. When I first saw one of their productions in 1992, I was astounded by what I saw on stage: I had never seen anyone do what they were doing, and I wanted to know how they were doing it. The more of their work I saw, the more aware I was of the holes in my own extensive, Stanislavski and Method-based conservatory training. I was repeatedly struck the powerful stage presence of the actors, and because I saw several of the productions more than once, I was aware of the consistent spontaneity of their performances. I understand the appeal. Now, having internalized the training, I understand the ways SITI Company training makes concrete many excellent but abstract insights from the

theorist/practitioners I discussed earlier. They gave me ways to access and develop what I value most as an actor: the quality of stage presence, connection to the audience, repeatability, and flow.

It is up to the actors – not the theatrical genre, nor the narrative of the script – to invite the spectator to co-create, and that invitation can come through the *presence* of the actor. Jane Goodall¹²² stated that a powerful, physical stage presence can create that invitation: the actor seems both “familiar” and “strange,” and the audience feels both “consternation” and “fascination” (9). It’s easy to see how that might connect to Suzuki training, where the process involves the fascinating but concerning dynamic of hurling yourself off-balance while simultaneously trying to hang onto it.

Rob Pope described the kinds of play that can lead to flow, and broke those games down into four primary areas (though they can overlap): *agon*, where competition is dominant, *alea*, where chance is dominant, *mimicry*, where simulation is dominant, and *ilinx*, where vertigo is dominant. As rigid as Suzuki seems, it is the most *ilinx*-ish of the three training methods, and I was surprised by how easy it was during those training sessions to fall into flow. It’s also something I observed the actors doing during *Steel Hammer* rehearsals, where the “machine” section of “Polly Ann and the Race” and the “mining” tableaux of *John* shifted from linear L-mode, highly cognitive work to Self 2’s *doing-without-thinking*-ness, as the complicated sequences felt more familiar. What occurred to me while watching is that, especially with the “machine” sequence, the process of shifting from L-mode to R-mode was not unlike building the frame for a roller coaster: shifting the feelings of *ilinx* from the actors to the audience.

¹²² Not *that* Jane Goodall.

It's important to remember that in many ways, the nature of Suzuki training isn't "creative" – at least not in the way that Composition or Viewpoints can be. However, flow is still possible in Suzuki¹²³ because there are infinite ways to fine-tune the balance between skill and challenge

What SITI training offers the actor is a set of tools that can help access flow in different ways, and can invite the audience in in different ways. As a part of that, it's important to remember that Michael Jordan was in flow without the goal of "being creative." He was creating an incredibly exciting game, but that was not because he set out to do it (an interesting dynamic for an actor to explore); it was due to how the crowd responded to what he was doing. They were co-creators.

In one of the conversations with the actors of SITI Company quoted above, actor Barney O'Hanlon talked about the necessity of seeing the other actors on stage with "new eyes," even though he's known and worked with them for years. That new-eyed focus is built into the structure of Viewpoints, but it's also an achievable, real skill that can be learned and developed for an actor in any play: the skill of employing an open focus while still paying attention to detail – something much less complex and much more open-handed than drilling down inside to attempt to dredge up an emotion. However, that emotional dredging is what we often expect actors to do – or automatically assume that's what we're they're doing.

I understand the pull of the Method – I trained as a Method actor for years, and it feels *real* when you manage to match your emotional recall up with the text of the play. However, it feels very *not* real when, in subsequent performances, you can't get back to that place – like the example of Laurence Olivier's *Othello*, when he had no idea how he

¹²³I know this because I experienced it.

had accomplished such an astounding performance. It sounds as though Olivier was in flow, where the performance almost seemed to happen without him (like Michael Jordan's shrug to the fans during his run of 3-pointers: "I have no idea how this is happening, but it's fantastic!"). He was crushed that couldn't repeat it because he couldn't identify the skills he'd used to get there.

There is an example of the use of the tools SITI training offers the actor as a way to get to the same "place" with consistency, in an adaptation of *Trojan Women* by Tadashi Suzuki. One of the characters in the play was a god, Jizō – a protector deity. The play begins with all the characters entering together, in a kind of procession, each group moving in specific and highly theatrical modes. The actor playing the god then stands "motionless" in the same spot throughout the production, as horrors unfold on the stage in front of him: rape, murder, torture, insanity. Many actors would choose to simply stand in one place and try to find ways to express their shock and grief. However, the Suzuki company actor who played that role – Kanze Hisao – made a physical decision that created depth of character without having to ask "What's my motivation as a god?" Instead, he spent the entire play holding his staff ¼ inch off the ground. As the physical challenge increased over the course of the play, so did the tension in the body of the actor in the struggle for stillness – a powerful physical choice *which the audience saw and interpreted* as the helpless distress of the character. The actor's goal was not to express despair so the audience would feel it: it was to create a physical condition that the audience could see – which takes us back to the responsibilities of the *watcher* and the *watched*. It was up to the actor to *do* things – do things that were repeatable, even if extremely challenging – and it was up to the audience to *feel* things. They are co-creators.

Viewpoints training can develop the skills of awareness, kinesthetic response, and doing-without-thinking (something that is also part of flow in sports – knowing where everyone is on the court and making a pass to a person who you may not even be able to see). It is easy to find moments of flow in Viewpoints – the structure and vocabulary invite curiosity and play. The Suzuki focus on stillness and deliberate precision in movement can also influence a Viewpoints exercise – it allows the actor to make much more specific choices much more quickly. The Viewpoints also give the actor a way to practice recognizing and respecting narrative that may come from within the ensemble – learning the dynamic that SITI calls “Who’s Hamlet?” – and the willingness to let the moment pass: a complicated skill, but one that is always a part of any live performance.

Similarly, Composition exercises demand spontaneous, collaborative action: there’s no time to think and no time to negotiate; and while “collaboration” is a skill, there are ways the Composition exercises work like the Suzuki training – they are designed to shove you off balance, and it is the responsibility of the ensemble to find the center of gravity for the work. They create absolute mayhem and, like Viewpoints, there’s no time to plan a narrative, or find Hamlet, and yet – if the exercise is set up well – those things occur. Working with the same Composition list several times in a row, whether working with the same or with different people, can be a kind of communal archeological dig into the heart of the themes and ideas of the production.

SITI Company is dedicated to the power of the ensemble in practice – and the opportunity to be in flow with other people engaged in the same work of the moment. These ideas are featured in every part of SITI training: their mission statement declares their commitment to the ensemble and life-long actor training, in equal degrees. Suzuki,

Viewpoints, and Composition give the actor the opportunity to constantly identify and practice the foundational skills of stage acting, regardless of genre. Rather than the actor being reduced to waiting for the muse to strike in a reliable fashion every night at eight and twice on Sundays, the structures of each method can be used to set up the conditions most likely to result in flow on a regular basis.

That is not to say that the practice of these methods gets easier: if anything, they are designed to get harder and more complicated to practice, which again makes them such strong platforms for creating the conditions for flow. What's more, these practices exist entirely outside the idea of "script" and "character analysis," making them tools that can support the actor no matter what the production – or even without a production (which is where actors often find themselves). Bogart has explained her ideas about actor training in this way: "Find something hard to do and then do it every day," and part of what excites so many actors about their methods is that it gives them something hard to do every day.

The methods of SITI Company – in training and performance – came into the spotlight at a time when many American actors – including me – were finding themselves stuck with training methods developed almost entirely for different flavors of Realism; Stanislavski's System and Strasberg's Method fell far short when used in other theatrical genres and to meet the demands of new performance styles. SITI's unintentional timing was very much like the appearance of the Moscow Art Theatre on the New York stage in 1920: actors saw that work and were so hungry to learn it that they traveled to Moscow themselves, or coerced those Russian actors to stay in America (Brockett 192-193). Fortunately, SITI Company made the decision to respond to that kind of hunger on the

part of contemporary actors by teaching their training and rehearsal methods as a natural extension of their own work. That the training methods have spread so extensively speaks to their power and flexibility. SITI is one of Csikszentmihalyi's Big C creatives – a game-changer that pushes the domain into something new: the most significant influence on American theatre in the past twenty-five years.

Along with flow, stage presence, repeatability, and ensemble – all the elements of SITI training that are important to me – it is the redefining of the relationship between actor and audience that I find powerful: a dynamic of partnership that all parts of their training support. I return to Bogart's summary of the responsibility of the actor in each performance: that you are performing for someone in the audience who is seeing the first play they will ever see, and for someone who is seeing the last play they will ever see – acting is never about *me*. Instead, I'm just part of how the thing works – a creative experience that I find much more exciting and fulfilling.

Since acting is so significantly underrepresented in the field of creativity studies, it is vital that the voice of the actor appear more regularly and comprehensively in the literature as a regular part of research. Challenges to the ways creativity and the creative process are sometimes defined using concepts of “newness” and innovation should be a significant part of that effort. How can acting expand our understanding of what it means to make something new, time after time? There should be studies on as many actors as there are on poets (culturally speaking, we take in the work of actors every day; it's rare for most people to run into a poet). Shouldn't we want to know more about what it's like to do what they do, instead of just guessing?

Flow is autotelic, and we tend to continue to seek it out once we have experienced it: pleasure in an activity is integral to finding flow, and flow is so pleasurable that we begin to deliberately find ways to seek it out. In his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experiences*, Mihali Csikszentmihalyi noted that every activity that resulted in flow – research, creative work, sports, chance, competition – shared certain elements and certain results:

[Flow] provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness. In short, it transformed the self by making it more complex. In this growth of the self lies the key to flow activities (*Flow* 113).

Finding ways for flow to be a consistent part of the actor's experience is crucial, and it is important to build the means of finding flow into the training methods of the actor. It is significant that SITI training shifts the emphasis from the psychological to the physical. This means that actors are no longer limited to their own personal experiences as inspiration for creative work, and they don't have to wait for inspiration. Instead, they can use the transformative nature of flow to find more flexibility and complexity in the creative process, and expand their experience of self beyond that of day-to-day life. As this dissertation has demonstrated, SITI training provides a tangible and specific means of access to the creative state that is increasingly identified by contemporary theory and research. Just as Stanislavski provided an effective way for actors to approach a new style of drama (Realism), so too does SITI Company provide an effective approach to post-modern performance, regardless of genre.

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APPENDIX I

SITI COMPANY MEMBERS¹²⁴

Akiko Aizawa (Actor)

Akiko Aizawa has been a member of SITI Company since 1997, after seven years as a member of the Suzuki Company of Toga. With SITI: Persians, Steel Hammer, A Rite(w/Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company), Cafe Variations, Radio Macbeth, Trojan Women (After Euripides), American Document(w/Martha Graham Dance Company), Antigone, Under Construction, Who Do You Think You Are, bobrauschenbergamerica, Freshwater, Hotel Cassiopeia, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Intimations for Saxophone, La Dispute, War of the Worlds, Culture of Desire and systems/layers. Roles with SCOT include: Trojan Women, Three Sisters and Dionysus. Theaters/festivals include BAM, the Public Theater, Wexner Center, American Repertory Theater, Arena Stage, Joyce Theater, ArtsEmerson, Krannert Center, Los Angeles Opera, New York Theatre Workshop, New York Live Arts, Carolina Performing Arts and Getty Villa. International festivals/venues include: Edinburgh, Dublin, Bonn, Bobigny, Helsinki, Tbilisi, Melbourne, Bogota, São Paulo, Tokyo, Toga and Moscow.

J.Ed Araiza (Actor)

J.Ed Araiza is originally from San Antonio, Texas, and has a degree in Bilingual Theatre from Texas A&I University in Kingsville. His SITI Company credits include Trojan Women, Under Construction, Hotel Cassiopeia, Midsummer Night's Dream, systems/layers, bobrauschenbergamerica, Culture of Desire, The Medium, Small Lives/Big Dreams, War of the Worlds: The Radio Play, Who Do You Think You Are and Radio Macbeth (Dramaturgy). J.Ed has long and varied experiences working on multicultural, cross-disciplinary projects as a writer, director and performer. As a playwright with seven original full-length plays produced, J.Ed is also a member of The Dramatist Guild, Austin Script Works and NoPE, and a former member of El Teatro de la Esperanza and the Los Angeles Theatre Center. In 2013 he was appointed Professor and Head of Graduate Acting at UCLA

¹²⁴ These biographies are drawn from the SITI Company website. They are listed in alphabetical order, as is the case on the website, <http://siti.org/content/siti-company-members>

Anne Bogart (Co-Artistic Director)

New York City. Bard College (BA) and New York University (MA). Works with SITI: Café Variations, Trojan Women, American Document, Antigone, Under Construction, Freshwater, Who Do You Think You Are, Radio Macbeth, Hotel Cassiopeia, Death and the Ploughman, La Dispute, Score, bobrauschenbergamerica, Room, War of the Worlds, Cabin Pressure, War of the Worlds: The Radio Play, Alice's Adventures, Culture of Desire, Bob, Going, Going, Gone, Small Lives/Big Dreams, The Medium, Noel Coward's Hay Fever and Private Lives, August Strindberg's Miss Julie, and Charles Mee's Orestes. Professor at Columbia University. Author of four books: A Director Prepares, The Viewpoints Book, And Then, You Act and Conversations with Anne.

Will Bond (Actor)

Will Bond grew up in Delaware. He received a BA in English Literature from Albright College and an MFA in acting from University of Pittsburgh. SITI credits include The Medium, Small Lives/Big Dreams, Culture of Desire, Cabin Pressure, War of the Worlds (by Naomi Iizuka for SITI), Lilith & Seven Deadly Sins (New York City Opera), War of the Worlds: The Radio Play, Bob, (Drama Desk Nomination), La Dispute, bobrauschenbergamerica, Radio MacBeth, Who Do You Think You Are, Death and the Ploughman, Antigone, A Rite with Bill T Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Persians.

Gian-Murray Gianino (Actor)

As a member of SITI, G.M. has helped create and performed in Persians, Steel Hammer, Café Variations, Trojan Women, Radio Macbeth, bobrauschenbergamerica, Systems/Layers, and Freshwater. New York credits include work at BAM, Second Stage, Signature Theatre, The Public, Women's Project, SoHo Rep, and HERE Arts. He has performed regionally and internationally including at Yale Rep, Arena Stage, Actors Theatre Louisville (Humana Festival), Berkshire Theatre Festival, GettyVilla (LA), The Court (Chicago), Krannert, Walker, Wexner, MC93 Bobigny (France), Bonn Biennale and Dublin Theatre Festival. With SITI, he has taught all over the globe. B.A. Wesleyan University. Acting apprentice, ATL. G.M. is the third generation of a New York theatre family.

Leon Ingulsrud (Co-Artistic Director)

Mr. Ingulsrud is one of the three Co-Artistic Directors and helped found SITI Company. He has appeared in Orestes, Seven Deadly Sins (New York City Opera), Nicholas & Alexandra (Los Angeles Opera), bobrauschenbergamerica, Hotel Cassiopeia, Under Construction, Who Do You Think You Are, Radio Macbeth, Antigone, American Document (with Martha Graham Dance Co.), War of the Worlds; Radio Play, Trojan Women, Cafe Variations, A Rite (with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Co.), Persians, the theater is a blank page, and directed Hanjo. Mr. Ingulsrud has taught in workshops and universities around the world, and holds an MFA in directing from Columbia University.

Ellen Lauren (Co-Artistic Director)

Co-Artistic Director, founding member. SITI credits include Persians, Trojan Women(After Euripides), A Rite(with Bill T Jones/Arnie Zane Dance) Café Variations, Under Construction, Radio Macbeth, Who Do You Think You Are, Hotel Cassiopeia, Death and the Ploughman, Midsummer Night's Dream, Room, bobrauschenbergamerica, Hotel Cassiopeia, systems/layers, War of the Worlds, Cabin Pressure, The Medium, Culture of Desire, Going, Going, Gone, Orestes, Seven Deadly Sins at Lincoln Center, American Document (with Martha Graham Dance Co.). Festivals include Bonn, Iberoamericano Bogota, BAM Next Wave, Humana, Bobigny, Melbourne, Edinburgh, Singapore; Wexner, Krannert and Walker Center for the Arts. In NY: Live Arts NY, NYTW, CSC, Women's Project, Miller, Public, Joyce Theaters. Regional credits with SITI include San Jose Rep, ART Cambridge, Court Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Fox Fellowship Distinguished Achievement 2008-2010.

Kelly Maurer (Actor)

Kelly has been a member of SITI since its inception. SITI credits include Orestes, American Document, Radio Macbeth, La Dispute, Hayfever, bobrauschenbergamerica, The Medium, Small Lives/Big Dreams, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Culture of Desire and Cabin Pressure, and theatres including The Joyce, NYTW, P.S. 122, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Walker Arts Center, Wexner Arts Center, The Irish Life Theater Festival, Under the Radar (NYC's Public Theater), Bobigny (Paris) and the Edinburgh Festival. Regional credits include Rainbow in And What of the Night at The Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Hamlet at StageWest and Christine in Miss Julie at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Internationally, she has toured with Tadashi Suzuki in the Suzuki Company of Toga's Dionysus and director Robert Wilson in Persephone. She performed the roles of Jolly (as standby for Patti LuPone) in The Old Neighborhood on Broadway and Hermia in Dead Man Cell Phone at Playwrights Horizons. She also performed in An Adult Evening of Shel Silverstein and The Water Engine at the Atlantic. Kelly teaches with SITI and the Atlantic Theater Acting School, at NYU and workshops and universities throughout the U.S.

Charles L. Mee (Playwright)

Chuck Mee grew up in Illinois, headed east and graduated from Harvard College. He wrote Orestes 2.0, the first play done by the SITI Company when it was first formed, and has also written bobrauschenbergamerica, Hotel Cassiopeia, Under Construction and American Document for SITI. Among other awards, he is the recipient of a lifetime achievement award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His complete works are available online at charlesmee.org. His work is made possible by the support of Jeanne Donovan Fisher and Richard B. Fisher.

Ellen M. Lavaia (Production Stage Manager)

Originally from San Francisco, Ms. Mezzera now resides in New York City. SITI Company productions include Steel Hammer, Persians, Café Variations, Radio Macbeth, the theater is a blank page, Bob, and Chess Match No. 5. Broadway credits include The Lion King, Annie, Matilda, and Les Misérables. Additional New York Credits include Gentlemen Prefer Blondes with New York City Center Encores!; Macbeth and A Man's a Man with Classic Stage Company; Shen Wei Dance Arts at the Park Avenue Armory. Mezzera has toured internationally through China, Georgia, Hong Kong, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates. She had the opportunity to work on The Sound of Music Live! and the 2013 Tony Awards. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree from Columbia University and her Bachelor of Arts degree from Gonzaga University. She is a proud member of Actors' Equity Association, Local 764, and SITI Company.

Barney O'Hanlon (Actor)

From Cape Cod, MA. Barney graduated from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts with a BFA (with honors) in drama. SITI Company credits include Small Lives/Big Dreams, Culture of Desire, War of the Worlds: Radio Play, War of the Worlds, Cabin Pressure, Short Stories, Hayfever, A Midsummer Night's Dream, bobrauschenbergamerica, Radio Macbeth, Room (movement), Seven Deadly Sins and Lilith (New York City Opera), Nicholas and Alexandra (Los Angeles Opera), Hotel Cassiopeia, Under Construction, systems/layers (director/choreographer), Antigone, Trojan Women, Freshwater, Who Do You Think You Are?, American Document (with the Martha Graham Dance Co.) A Rite (with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Co.) and Café Variations. Barney most recently choreographed the world premiere of Sarah Ruhl's The Oldest Boy for Lincoln Center Theater

Neil Patel (Scenic Designer)

SITI member since 1997. Productions with SITI include Café Variations, Under Construction, Hotel Cassiopeia, A Midsummer Night's Dream, La Dispute, Score, Room, Bob, Hayfever, War of the Worlds, Cabin Pressure, Alice's Adventures, Culture of Desire, Adding Machine and Private Lives. He is a graduate of Yale College and the University of California at San Diego.

Brian H Scott (Designer)

Brian H Scott hails from New York City. Brian is a SITI Company member and has designed lighting for Cafe Variations, Trojan Women, Antigone, American Document in collaboration with the Martha Graham company, Under Construction, WhoDoYouThinkYouAre, Hotel Cassioepia, Death and the Ploughman, bobrauschenbergamerica(Henry Hewes Design Award 2004), War of the Worlds Radio Play, Macbeth, and a dance collaboration with the musical groups Rachel's and 'Systems/Layers. Additionally, he has had the pleasure of assisting Mimi Jordan Sherin

on Bob, Cabin Pressure, War of the Worlds, The Medium, Small Live/Big Dreams, Going Going Gone, Miss Julie, Private Lives, Alice's Adventures, Culture of Desire, and The Adding Machine. With Christopher Akerlind on SITI Productions Room, Score and Midsummer Nights Dream.

James Schuette (Designer)

James has designed scenery and/or costumes for over 17 SITI Company productions. His work has been seen at American Repertory Theatre, American Conservatory Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Arena Stage, BAM, Berkeley Rep, Classic Stage, Court Theatre, Goodman Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Long Wharf Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, Manhattan Theatre Club, McCarter Theatre, NY Live Arts, New York Theatre Workshop, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Papermill Playhouse, Playwrights Horizons, Public Theatre/NY Shakespeare Festival, Seattle Rep, Steppenwolf, Signature Theatre, Trinity Rep, Vineyard Theatre, Wexner Center, Yale Rep, Boston Lyric Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Chicago Opera Theatre, Glimmerglass Opera, Houston Grand Opera, LA Opera, Minnesota Opera, New York City Opera, Opera Theatre of St Louis, San Francisco Opera, Santa Fe Opera Seattle Opera, and internationally.

Megan Wanlass

Has been a member of SITI Company since 1995, and was its Executive Director from 2000-2014. In her tenure with SITI, Megan helped to create over 30 shows. She began working with Anne Bogart during production of The Adding Machine at Actors Theatre of Louisville (1995). She has an Arts Administration Certificate from New York University, attended the Executive Program for Non-Profit Leaders at Stanford University Business School, was a member of the Arts Leadership Institute Charter Class at Teachers College, Columbia University, is participating in the National Arts Strategies Executive Leadership Program and holds a B.A. in Theater from Occidental College in Los Angeles, California. Megan currently serves as the Managing Director of Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles.

Stephen Duff Webber (Actor)

With SITI nationally and internationally: Persians (Getty Villa), A Rite (with BTJAZ Dance Co.), Steel Hammer, Café Variations, American Document (with Martha Graham Dance Co.), Antigone, Radio Macbeth (Macbeth), Hotel Cassiopeia, Under Construction, Freshwater, Death and the Ploughman, War of the Worlds (Orson Welles), bobrauschenbergamerica, systems/layers (with Rachel's), La Dispute, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Cabin Pressure, Going Going Gone, Culture of Desire, The Medium, Private Lives, Hay Fever, War of the Worlds: Radio Play (Orson Welles), Short Stories. New York: The Golden Dragon (Playco), Death and the Ploughman (CSC), War of the Worlds (BAM), Culture of Desire (NYTW), Trojan Women 2.0 (En Garde Arts), Freshwater (Women's Project), Hotel Cassiopeia (BAM), American Document (Joyce), Antigone (NYLA), Radio Macbeth (Public), Radio Play (Joe's Pub).

Regional: American Repertory Theater, Actors Theater of Louisville, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, San Jose Repertory Theater, Magic Theater, Kennedy Center, Portland Stage Company, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Court Theatre, Stage West.

Darron L West (Sound Designer)

A SITI Company member since 1993 Darron first collaborated with Anne Bogart in 1990 while resident sound designer at Actors Theater of Louisville. His work has been heard in over 500 productions nationally and internationally. His accolades include the 2012 Tony Award, the Princess Grace Statue, the OBIE, the Henry Hewes Design Award and the Lucille Lortel. As director: Kid Simple (2004 Humana Festival), Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse and Eurydice (Children's Theater Company), Big Love (Rude Mechs) and co-director of SITI Company's War of The Worlds The Radio Play and Radio Macbeth.

APPENDIX II

FLOW STATE SCALE

Please answer the following questions in relation to your experience in the event you have just completed. These questions relate to the thoughts and feelings you may have experienced during the event. There are no right or wrong answers. Think about how you felt during the event and answer the questions using the rating scale below. Circle the number that best matches your experience from the options to the right of each question.
Rating Scale:

Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Agree (4),
Strongly agree (5)

1. I was challenged, but I believed my skills would allow me to meet the challenge.
2. I made the correct movements without thinking about trying to do so.
3. I knew clearly what I wanted to do.
4. It was really clear to me that I was doing well.
5. My attention was focused entirely on what I was doing.
6. I felt in total control of what I was doing.
7. I was not concerned with what others may have been thinking of me.
8. Time seemed to alter (either slowed down or speeded up).
9. I really enjoyed the experience.
10. My abilities matched the high challenge of the situation.
11. Things just seemed to be happening automatically.
12. I had a strong sense of what I wanted to do.
13. I was aware of how well I was performing.
14. It was no effort to keep my mind on what was happening.
15. I felt like I could control what I was doing.
16. I was not worried about my performance during the event.
17. The way time passed seemed to be different from normal.
18. I loved the feeling of that performance and I want to capture it again.
19. I felt I was competent enough to meet the high demands of the situation.
20. I performed automatically.
21. I knew what I wanted to achieve.
22. I had a good idea while I was performing about how well I was doing.
23. I had total concentration.
24. I had a feeling of total control.

25. I was not concerned with how I was presenting myself.
26. It felt like time stopped while I was performing.
27. The experience left me feeling great.
28. The challenge and my skills were at an equally high level.
29. I did things spontaneously and automatically without having to think.
30. My goals were clearly defined.
31. I could tell by the way I was performing how well I was doing.
32. I was completely focused on the task at hand.
33. I felt in total control of my body.
34. I was not worried about what others may have been thinking of me.
35. At times, it almost seemed like things were happening in slow motion.
36. I found the experience extremely rewarding (Jackson, Marsh, 35).

APPENDIX III

Questlove on Flow

I remember being at a friend's house and sitting outside at night. Birds and crickets were chirping. I don't know very much about birds and crickets. But I wanted in on the discussion. I imagined that they were talking to each other in the lyrics of songs that I knew. One of them was singing "Changes," the David Bowie song, because it had a little ch-ch to it. Another one was making z's, and I told myself that it was "Rump Shaker," because of the "zoom zoom zoom in the boom boom." After a while I started noticing something else, not the alphabetical aspect of the sounds, but the fact that they came in clusters. One of the animals (a bird?) was doing triads, and the other one (a cricket?) was doing pairs. That meant something more to me: 3-2-3-2. I got a little rhythm going from there. Da-da da, da-da-. It was "Louie Louie" by the Kingsmen, which meant also that it was another David Bowie song, "Blue Jean." I remembered being disappointed that it was Bowie's follow-up to "Let's Dance." Was that all there was? (Side note: toward the end of that song, as he keeps singing, "Somebody send me," Bowie got more and more intense, to the point where I started to worry that he was going to throw up.) That made me think of the Jackson 5's version of "Mama I Gotta Brand New Thing (Don't Say NO)," and how Dennis Coffey's guitar sounded like someone was saying "pick it up," and then I realized that I was thinking about that because I had

dropped a paper cup. I picked it up. (That song is also an example, by the way, of Motown's consistent abuse of the abrupt creepy synthesizer ending.) None of this is especially consequential except to suggest that there are patterns and links everywhere, and if you are trying to remind in a creative frame of mind, you should let your brain find its way to them. (28-29)

CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: Carol Jordan Stewart

ADDRESS: 1825 Fleming Road
Louisville, KY 40205

EDUCATION & TRAINING B.F.A., Acting
Goodman School of Drama
1984

M.A.T., Expressive Therapies
University of Louisville
1994

Ph.D., Interdisciplinary Humanities
University of Louisville
2008-2019

AWARDS AND HONORS

Faculty Guest Coach, University of Louisville Athletics, Academic
Services
2015

Nominee, Favorite Faculty Award, Delphi Center, University of
Louisville
2014

Alexander Scourby Award, Finalist, Excellence in Narration, Fiction
2002

Canadian National Institute for the Blind Award, Finalist, Excellence in
Narration, Fiction
2001

Golden Headset Award, Excellence in Narration, Fiction
2000

PUBLICATIONS

Plays

Rain and the Rhinoceros, adapted from the writings of Thomas Merton by Carol Stewart and Bethany Morse. *Thomas Merton Centennial*, Bellarmine University Press, forthcoming

Production Reviews

“*Betrayal*, by Harold Pinter, University of Louisville, 2016” *The Harold Pinter Review*, Penn State University Press.

Commercial Audiobook Narration

Jackson, S. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). *The Lottery and Seven Other Stories*, Audio Partners Publishing Corp: Auburn, CA. 1998; reprint BBC America, 2010.

Wright, B. W. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). *Crandall's Castle*, Live Oak Media: Pine Plains, NY. 2009.

Konigsburg, E. L. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley and Me, Elizabeth. Listening Library/Random House Audio: New York. 2008.

Wright, B. W. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). *Christina's Ghost*. Live Oak Media: Pine Plains, NY. 2002.

Hildick, E. W. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). *The Serial Sneak Thief*, A Felicity Snell Mystery, Live Oak Media: Pine Plains, NY. 2000.

Wright, B. W. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). *The Dollhouse Murders*, Live Oak Media: Pine Plains, NY. 1999.

Hildick, E. W. (Stewart, C. J., narrator). *The Purloined Corn Popper*, A Felicity Snell Mystery, Live Oak Media: Pine Plains, NY. 1999.

Lowe, J. (Stewart, C. J., narrator) *Oprah Winfrey Speaks*, Soundelux Audio Publishing: Hollywood. 1998. (cassette edition; out of print)

Weis, M. (Stewart, C. J., narrator) *The Soulforge: The Raistlin Chronicles*,

Vol. 1

Soundelux Audio Publishing: Hollywood, CA. 1997. (cassette edition; out of print)

Hart, E. (Stewart, C. J., narrator) *Hallowed Murder, A Jane Lawless Mystery*. Hall Closet Book Co: Seattle. 1995. (cassette edition; out of print)

ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

Papers Presented

“What’s My Motivation? Science Fiction Theatre and the Distractions of Method Acting,” Stage the Future II: International Conference on Science Fiction Theatre, Phoenix, Arizona, March 5-7, 2015

“Embodying the Monster: What We Can Learn About Staging the Not-Exactly-Human from Traditional and Contemporary Japanese Theatre,” Stage the Future I: International Conference on Science Fiction Theatre, London, UK, April 25-26, 2014

“If This Be Magic: Audience Expectations, *Wabi-Sabi* Performance, and the Men of Shakespeare Behind Bars,” HERA – Humanities Education and Research Association Annual Conference, Washington D.C., February 27-March 1, 2014

“Stand and Unfold Yourself: How Hamlet and Yukio Ninagawa are Renegotiating Shakespeare for the 21st Century,” PCAS/ACAS Conference on American and Popular Culture, Savannah, GA, October 7-9, 2010

“I’m as Real as Real Can Get: Super Bad Brad and the Social Tension of Live Performance,” PCAS/ACAS Conference on American and Popular Culture, Wilmington, N.C., October 1-3, 2009

“Translating the Visual Classroom: Beyond Accommodation,” Lilly Conference on College Teaching, Oxford, OH, November 15-18, 2007

INVITED TALKS AND FACILITATED WORKSHOPS

“Shakespeare’s Life Behind Bars,” for “First Folio: The Book that Gave Us Shakespeare,” The Frazier History Museum, Louisville, KY, 2016

“The Tibetan Buddhist Sand Mandala,” The Merton Center, Louisville, KY, 2013

Co-Facilitator, Viewpoints Workshop, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, 2012

Co-Facilitator, Viewpoints Workshop, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, 2011

Audiobook Narration Workshop, Miami University, Oxford, OH, 2007

“Symbolism in Tibetan Sacred Art,” Muhammad Ali Center. Louisville, KY, 2005

“Interpreting Tibetan Theatre and Dance,” Cathedral Heritage Foundation, Louisville, KY, 2004

“Spiritual Practices of Tibetan Buddhism,” Interfaith Paths to Peace, Louisville, KY, 2004

“Interpreting Tibetan Theatre and Dance,” St. Joseph’s Cathedral, Bardstown, KY , 2004

Keynote, “Talking Book Narration and the Production Studio of the American Printing House for the Blind,” Oregon Council for the Blind, Annual Convention, 2002

Keynote, “Talking Book Narration,” New York State School for the Blind, Annual Convention, 2001

Keynote, “Talking Book Narration,” Ohio Council for the Blind, Annual Convention, 2000

“Talking Book Narrators and Their Importance to the National Library Service,” American Federation for the Blind, Annual Convention, 2000

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Louisville, Humanities

Creativity and the Arts, Honors (Fall 2012-2019, Spring 2014-2018)

Creativity and the Arts (Spring 2017, 2019, Summer 2018, Fall 2018)

Theories of the Theatre (Fall 2010)

University of Louisville, Theatre Arts

Radio Drama and Podcasting (Spring 2018)

Enjoyment of Theatre, Distance Education (Fall 2015-2019, Spring 2016)

Graduate Voice IV – Radio Drama and Podcasting (Spring 2016)

Acting I for Majors (Fall 2015, Spring 2016)

Graduate Performance Theory (Fall 2015)

Graduate Voice III – Voice Acting (Fall 2015)

Script Analysis (Spring 2014)

Enjoyment of Theatre (Spring 2013)

University of Louisville, Honors Seminar

Inside Incarceration (Fall 2017)

Miami University, Theatre

The Musical in American Culture, eLearning/Distance Education
(Summer 2017)

Experiencing Theatre, eLearning/Distance Education (Summer 2017)

Bellarmino University, Interdisciplinary Studies

The Musical in American Culture (Spring 2018, Fall 2018)

Theatre and Prison (Fall 2015-2018, Spring 2015-2019)

Freshman Focus (Fall 2007-2011)

Cooperative Center for Study Abroad

Explore the Arts in London (London Summer 2019)

The London Arts Experience (London Summer 2018)

The London Arts Experience (London Summer 2017)

The London Arts Experience (London Summer 2016)

Shakespeare in Performance (London Summer 2015)

Bellarmino University, Theatre

Acting I (Fall 2006-2013, Spring 2007-2008, Summer 2012-2013)

Radio Drama (Fall 2013-2014, 2007-2009)

Experiencing Theatre/Introduction to Theatre (Fall 2006, Spring 2007-2015)

Voice for the Actor and Professional Speaker (Fall 2010-2011, Spring 2010, 2009, 2007)

Acting II (Fall 2011, 2009, 2008, 2006, Spring 2009)

Theatre History I (Fall 2011-2012)

Theatre History II (Spring 2012-2013)

Performance in Theatre: Theory and Practice (Spring 2014, 2012)

Independent Study, Radio Drama II (Fall 2009, Spring 2009)

Acting III (Spring 2008)

Independent Study, Directing (Fall 2009)

SERVICE

To University of Louisville Theatre Arts Department, academics

2015 – 2017 Graduate faculty advisor

To Bellarmine University, Theatre Program, academics

2009 – 2011 Faculty advisor, Honors Senior Thesis

To the profession

Conference Co-Organizer, “Stage the Future, The Second International Conference on Science Fiction Theatre,” Phoenix, AZ, March 6-8, 2015

– Teacher Educational Committee, Actors Theatre, Louisville, KY, 2014

Production Committee, Slant Culture Theatre Festival, Louisville, KY, 2014

Judge, International Audiobook Awards, The Audies®, 2001-2009

Narrator Representative, Audio Publishers Association Industry Development Committee, 2005-2009

To community

Board Vice-President, Savage Rose Classical Theatre Company, Louisville, KY, 2015-2017

Board President, Louisville Rowing Association, Louisville, KY, 2006-2009

Executive Director, Drepung Gomang Institute, Louisville, KY, 2002-2007

National Tour Coordinator, Friends of Drepung Gomang Monastery, Mundgod, Karnataka, India, 2006-2007

Board of Directors, Drepung Gomang Institute, Louisville, KY, 1999-2007

Founding Co-Director, Drepung Gomang Institute, Louisville, KY, 1998

Local Tour Facilitator, Friends of Drepung Gomang Monastery, Louisville, KY, 1998-2007

U.S. Program Development Committee, Drepung Gomang Monastery, Mundgod, Karnataka, India, 1998-2007