

*Rencountering Oneself.
Reshaping the Body-Mind Unity in the Acting Classroom*

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Abstract: The following article treats the subject of first year pedagogy in the acting classroom: body-mind concept, the use of space-time in a theatrical approach, the understanding of the performer-student's own body. In the borders of the classroom a profound research on the body and its performative actions is required alongside a personal tackle in the physical patterns of the performer-student and the constructive use of the creative process. The article is a short graphical inside of how an acting technique like Viewpoints can provide a large range of possibilities from which a student can begin to understand the relationship between one own's body and space-time quantum, body-mind-presence.

Keywords: body-mind, space, time, distance, image-schema, Viewpoints, theatrical space-time concept, readiness, presence, attention.

In an disfunctional understanding of the body-mind concept, one of the most problematic discourses begins in the artist's own admission of this imperfect unity that he operates with. As a performative artist, this unity can be a source of endless creative energy or a source of great discomfort in the case of a misapprehension.

In a professional career, the artist's first creative adrees is his own bodily expericence in relation to space-time. In the aesthetic of the body-mind concept we try to overcome our most intimate, personal and professional questions regarding the artistic process and how art is made in a high quality manner. For me as a performer artist, the most intractable puzzle was, and

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remains still a recurrent question up until this day, is: how do you define the presence of the body in space? "What was presence?" I have been asking myself for the past ten years. Another question that has been haunting my last four years as a teacher is: How can I teach my students in a practical experience the concept of presence? What can I say to them about this concept and how can I clarify it even to myself?

After a further research into this concept of body-mind, a material that is a unique bodily experience through space and time, I came to realize that as an artist, space was the first technique that I was taught by my professors and that, while moving in a certain located area my body constructs a plastique metaphor using the temporal flow. Mark Johnson is stating in *The Meaning of the Body-Aesthetics of Human Understanding* that: "we adults conceptualize time via deep systematic spatial movement metaphors in which the passage of time is understood as relative motion in space"²

The temporal flow and the body as a metaphor in space has been one of my long and most delicate creative pursuits in my acting path, as a performer and also as a teacher. Temporal flow can only provide a restricted amount of data for a complete bodily experience if it is not regarded in a deep connection with space and imagination as a stimulating energy. Time, as Johnson explains, is also an experience in itself because us, as humans we can adjudge the passing of time through the "motion of objects and through the movement of our bodies"³. In this regard, time can become in one own's mind a metaphorical conceptualization that can be operated and mapped by this simple division in relation to the body of the performer:

- a) moving objects: the performer is static/stationary
 - objects moving toward the performer
 - objects found in the front of the performer
 - objects passing the performer
 - moving further and further away behind the performer

The first and most essential conceptual temporal change or temporal flow that the performer can survey and bodily experience can be seen in

2. Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body-Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28.

3. Johnson, 29.

Johnson's explanation of the "moving time metaphor" in its addition with the spatial motions:

Static location of the performer – The Present

Space *in front* of the performer – The Future

Space *behind* the performer – The Past

Moving objects surrounding the performer – "Time"

Motion of objects passing the performer – The "passing" of time⁴

As a starting point, I believe that this schema of the body in relation with time and space that Mark Johnson is talking about can be viewed as concrete and practical mechanism of the performer which questions the concept of presence on stage. Johnson also utters that the moving body, in the case of a human being (observer), not being in a static position, is able to move from one location to another and therupon "determine the character of temporal change"⁵. In this case of the "moving body" in space, the temporal metaphor will suddenly shift the performers (observer's) point of view, as seen here:

Location of the performer – The Present

Space *in front* of the performer- The Future

Space *behind* of the performer- The past

Locations on the performer's *path of motion*- "Times"

Distance moved by the performer- Amount of time "Passed".

Just as in the case of the human being, the performer divides time into units and defines it with the proper expression: long versus short, extended versus stretched. The performer can also see time as a way of *getting closer* to something (objects, other stage parteners), *approaching* objects and other bodies, *passing, leaving* or *reaching* other bodies on stage and so on.

The time metaphor presented by Johnson in his inquiry of the human body is a valuable asset in an artist's investigation of movement linked to time, space and imaginative energy. This analysis has assisted me in clarifying the stages of the 'qualitative dimension of movement' that I can or will engage on stage. In the classroom, while I try to teach the *Viewpoints technique* the basic training is related to the spatial movements that incorporate time and

4. Johnson, 29–30.

5. Johnson, 30.

imaginative energy. This type of practice takes a long time in the classroom, because every concept discussed earlier has to be assimilated by the student, digested in their own time in the process of experiencing while doing.

In my own professional trials and quests implicating the concept of 'movement on stage' I can submit that, for me, the most important outlines that movement on stage implies is a very personal qualitative experience of space and forceful exertion. *Movement* on stage (and by this I mean body-mind presence in space and time conjunctively adding imaginative energy) is a tool that serves the artist and also a student in developing a different world with the support of his acting technique. We can support this allegation with the words of Johnson: "movement is the principal way by which we learn the meaning of things"⁶. Taking this contention into consideration, involving any human body, we can rely on it in our own pursuit of cleaving the concept of *moving (movement)* on stage and in real life. Segregating the body-mind from the space and time unit is in my opinion a evident denial of the human being's micro and macrocosm.

The body of the performer will experience space and time by moving and in this manner will be leaving peculiar pattern of its motions in the area that it moves in. This distinctive motion experience and process can be observed from the outside as:

- a) linear versus non linear path or patterns of motion
- b) degrees of exertion and force

The "linear versus the non-linear pattern" heads to the development of creating awareness in spatial trajectories and directions and "the degrees of exertion and force" used by the body can reveal the level of exertion that is needed by the body to move from point A to B and moving objects of different weights. So my first trial, while in the classroom is to make in the beginning a simple practical study with my students: they have to normal walk one by one, following each other, from one corner of the room to the other point keeping the diagonal line of the space. The simple diagonally walk from point A to B will provides the following information about the body of the performer-student: the degree of use of his own center of gravity, personal internal pace, rhythm and cadence, position of

6. Johnson, 22.

the spine, proprioception level and type of connection with his own body. My personal and professional view on this matter regarding the movement on stage has to start with the deep understanding of one's body and how the body in relation with the binomial space-time can provide enough datum about our own motion patterns that we have acquired in our early stages of growing up. In the practical discourse in the classroom the attention focuses on making the performer-student become aware of his own mental and physical forms, patterns and features. I encourage the performer-student to examine the way he walks, stands and the locomotion patterns in close partnership with these two concepts: space and time. We then decompose the notion of body movement and after that the logical step is to underline the importance and relevance of seeing the body as a moving image in the accompaniment of space-time. This type of allocution creates awareness on the four qualities⁷ of movement that Johnson classifies in his attempt of understanding the 'flesh' and the movement of flesh in a deep physical and metaphysical way: tension, linearity, amplitude and projection. In this work conditions we are trying to find out what amount of effort is required for a movement and what is the level of tension in the musculature is needed to perform any stage movement. After discovering the complete effort and energy used by the body, the next step is to let the body make its own unconscious adjustments and recalibrate the exertion prerequisites in the performance of an organic movement.

After trying in the classroom levels of tension, we proceed to the next qualitative state of movement—*linearity* that gives the performer-student the following information: every move made on stage creates a path or a pattern of motion and this path or pattern can be actual or projected in space, linear or curved, jogged or smooth and up or down. The *amplitude* of movement can be performed with various swing impulses depending on whether our body fills and uses a compacted space. Involving the body in time and space the performer-student can come to the same conclusions as Johnson's definitions⁸ of the quality of movement:

1. *Tension* can be viewed as giving 'grounded meaning in the bodily exertion and its felt in the muscular tension'.

7. Johnson, 22–25.

8. Johnson, 21–26.

2. *Linearity* is in close connection with the peri-personal space and 'spatial directional qualities of bodily motion'.

3. *Amplitude* can be regarded as a 'bodily phenomenon of expansion and contraction in the range of motion'.

4. *Projection* inured as a 'vectoral quality of certain bodily'.

In the theater pedagogy structure that I promote and embolden in the first year when I meet my performer-students consists in making a group effort in creating awareness about the one's relation with his own body. After being linked-up with their own 'flesh' and mind, the involvement of imaginative energy is indispensable and vital, in the trials that students make in the classroom. Creating and recognizing one own's body (and mind) as a projected image in space and time in a stage manner becomes an almost absolute need that takes a lot of time for the performer-student to acknowledge and to assume as a part of the acting technique.

In the second part of teaching movement techniques we try step a little bit forward and grow more and more aware of the differences between us as entities and the entities surrounding us, because we are residents of physical environment that is always recasting our physical and mental movements and actions. We are born in this physical world and we interact in multiple environments and this "involves both the structure of the organism and the structure of its environments inextricably woven together". In the basic outlines of actions and movements made on stage the next logical step is to test the ensuing: "movements manifest a broad range of recurring structures and patterns called *image-schemas*"⁹. In the practical cases that we operate in classroom along side the performer-student I attempt to take into consideration the definition given by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff to the concept of image-schemas. Both of this two philosophical figures with an extensive background in cognitive linguistics and embodied sciences exhibit a very specific definition of the notion mentioned before: "*image-schema* is a dynamic, recurring pattern of the organism and a basic sensorimotor experience (body-mind) by which a person encounters an environment or what we call the world around us"¹⁰.

9. Johnson, 21.

10. Johnson, 136.

In addition to this mental clue that they leave us, both continue with a wider range of the notion, and in this situation we can look at the *image-schema* as:

- a recurrent, stable patterns of sensorimotor experience
- “image”-like, in that they preserve the topological structure of the perceptual whole
 - operating dynamically *in* and *across* time
 - at once “bodily” and “mental”
 - predicated on interaction with a wider environment
 - realized as activation patterns in topologic neural maps
 - structures that link sensorimotor experiences to conceptualization and language and having internal structures that give rise to constrained inferences.

In this encounter of bringing into consciousness our own *image-schema*, in the first year performer-students are advised to enquire in their own bodies for the verticality of the bones and muscle structure, balance of the body and movement behaviour and patterns. The proper way to start this type of bodily investigation comes from a personal need of a better understanding of our own mechanism and also from a professional belief that the actor’s apparatus is the main tool in which the fictional word can manifest. The exhibition of the fictional world of a character is linked to the actor’s training and his bodily experiences combined with the imaginative stimulus. In the labour of what I believe to be a safe way of incorporating a fictional character or a role, the student has to be aware of his body and mental patterns. The journey of getting to know our bodies in a deeper sense is a lifetime perambulation.

The main lesson’s that the students have to learn in the work done in an acting classroom is, in my opinion, the encounter with the body and finding our *motor schemas*. As we try to “carve” into our own body, we must take into account the six main transition paths of a *sensorimotor schema*: readiness, starting phase transition, main process (central phase transition), postcentral state, ending phase transition and final phase. With the help of the research of M. Johnson we are now able to define and explain more broadly this six transition of a *motor schema*.

The six phase identified by Johnson can be regarded and interpreted as:

a) readiness: in any particular body action or movement there can be found a prior kinetic and sensimotor that has to be satisfied by the body in a state of preparatory conditions;

b) starting phase transition: the beginning of a certain bodily movement is regarded as a separate and distinctive process done in a proper and organic manner;

c) main process or central phase transition can be viewed as the specific performance of the action you undertake and the typical motor sequences that constitute that particular movement;

d) postcentral state: in the case of interrupting the movement sequence a breach is created that can be continued and then the interrupted sequence can be resumed and monitored up until the final stage of the completed process that involves that particular movement;

e) final phase: includes the stop of the movement and the final adjustments that can be performed in our attempt in finishing and completing the action or movement sequence.

Time and space in the dramatic or performative actions is clearly linked with the motor schemas and, another emphasis is given to the importance that one gives to these two basic concepts used in most of the theatre techniques that have been revealed to us up until this day. Space and time consciousness in the dramatic area is very dissimilar from natural or organic time and space. In the performative space of action these concepts can be seen as visual entities and there is a very significant lesson that the performer-student has to learn: "the fully developed relationship with space is not a 'skill' that can be simply copied stylistically. Hours of standing in *Space* is required to truly occupy the stillness, to hold the ACTION OF SPACE"¹¹.

Understanding space in Marie Overlie's visions and practical discoveries, begins with regarding the notion of space as a theatrical or performative technique. Marie Overlie, in her book (*Standing in Space-The Six Viewpoints*

11. Marie Overlie, *Standing in Space-The Six Viewpoints Theory and Practice* (Billings, MT: Fallon Press, 2016), 11.

Theory and Practice) dedicated to uncover the subtle depths of this notion says that everyone of us posses this inmate ability to a certain degree, but “when you add observation of distances between yourself and fellow performers, and pay attention to the spatial patters (...) you will develop an awareness of space as a unifying effect”¹². This complete awareness of personal and professional spatial patterns can lead to a better “listening of the space” that Overlie sees as a high sense of cooperation of the performer. The author of the book that regards space as a tool in the acting class, states that this intentional spatial pattern can not be separated from the concept of *Time*. In our professional teaching opinion we agree with her next written allegation: “in front of an audience, facing *Time* you are performing a deeply emotional and courageous act of surrender and integration with a natural force that is both inside and outside of your own existence”¹³.

Making these concepts a conscious material in our body-mind construct can become a life time research and can become a interrogative principale that can emerge in every single moment our professional choices. The decision of working on understanding and listening to space and time can be seen as a mile stone in the development of any artist or acting student. Taking into consideration the relation of the body and the movements it make in time and space has not only a personal foundation, but a concrete physical one. We create our physical identity in time and spce and every action seen as movement can be percieved by others as a kinetic sensation that the body-mind releases in a specific situation.

In her search for a system that sustains and employs the body-mind unity in relation with Space-Shape-Time-Emotion-Movement-Story (SSTEMS), Marie Overlie with the help of a deconstructing process tries to improve the act of creation and make the performe turn off the impulse to control his working materials. In her approach and in her professional interrogations regarding the core of a performance and the job of a performer, Overlie, allows this Six Viewpoints to develop along side the performer’s needs. She boards into a journey of a profound reasearch of the functions of the body-mind without making the performer follow a strict formula or directions. Marie

12. Ibidem.

13. Overlie, *Standing in Space-The Six Viewpoints Theory and Practice*, 25.

Overlie's statement regarding the act of creation starts from her professional inquiries and sets a liberating view over the process created by a performer: the Six Viewpoints employs this double process of acting/reacting and the realisation that description is prose and expression is poetry revealed by the relation of the body with time and space.

Taking into consideration the primal points from this technique, in the classroom or in the creative extent, Marie Overlie believes that the concept of *Space* encompasses the following: the action of blocking, placement of furniture, placement of walls, doors, windows, angle of gaze, distance of projection, spatial alignment of the actors to the proscenium, to each other, to the audience, etc. In these context we can also look at *Space* as a sensory based material "unique to each person, and time dependent. (...) There is no distinction first between space and time since what vectoralizes (shapes) the space is already temporalized, specific to the moment. When you percieve a vector, perception accelerates (it builds on itself). Space is not empty. It is a space of action."¹⁴

The next concept that we abide upon is *Shape* it is link to geometry and it can be found in the costumes of the performer, his gestures, in the posture of the other actors bodies and it you will discover it in all objects seated on the stage. The third point of view, *Time* can be displayed as duration, rhythm, punctuation, pattern, impulse, repetition, legato, pizzicato, lyrical and a myriad of unnamed qualities of movement and it is in close relationship with space. Moving forward in our own investigation of the Viewpoints, the next that we encounter is *Emotion* and has a great deal to do with stage presence. We can also name a few like: anger, dissapointment, fury, pity, alienation, fear, wonder, happiness, sadness in order to make the concept clearer. The fifth material that should have a big role in the classroom is Movement and its particular links: falling, suspension, contraction, impact, running, blood pumping, breath, body weight, center of gravity, etc. The last sphere that has to be dissected is *Story* that has contain an organic logic, order and progression of information, memory, conclusions, allusions, reification and un-reification, construction and deconstruction.

14. Caryn McHose, "Phenomenological Space: 'I'm in the Space and the Space Is in Me.' Interview with Hubert Godard," *Contact Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 33.

The materials presented by Overlie in the SSTEMS will have a visual impact on the observer and also on the performer and its meant to shape our creative options and choises. It also can improve our perceptive ability of space in and outside our own bodies and this non-formal approach can teach us that we as humans and as performers are space-time commorants that contain a particular potential of action.

In my daily lessons in the acting clasroom or in a rehearsal group or area I try to always come back to this Viewpoints exercise that I have learned in a workshop guided by Brownyn Tweddle that has been teaching her own personal approach of this techique: 'Walk. Stop. Run. Jump. Lay down'. The set of rules that this exercise infers can be regarded in this manner: a group of people situated in a the stage area are restricted to perform the following actions: walk, stop, run, jump and lay on the floor. The second rule states that this performed actions can only be executed as a group unity. If a member of the group initiates any actions from the five mentioned before, the entire group members have to pursue and accomplish in the shortest time possible that action. Having determined this set of rules, the performer-students will aknowledged in their own mind-body unity the concepts of space-time, image and motor-schemas of their own and of the others, the six main transitions of a sensimotor schema, the four qualities of movement (provided by M. Johnson): tension, liniarity, amplitude, projection. Also, this exercise can provide a wide information about the response time of our kinesthetic reactions, the use of peri-personal space, distance, proximity, energy and effort dosage. As well, as an outside observer we can notice the listening abilities of our bodies and the attitude toward an event. This attitude that the performer-student has while performing and engaging his body-mind unity in the exercise can contribute to what that performed action becomes. One of the main purposes of this exercise that I repeat in the classroom is to emprove the process of listening to our own bodies and to the bodies we come into a relationship with and also, to enhance the quality of our attention. Envamping the quality of attention will allow the performer-student's body-mind unity to change and to create a change in the other partener, whether we regard it as another human being, or we as a simple time-space material.

There is also a very idealistic pedagogue that hides behind this technique (Viewpoints) in which I have been specialized in the last four years, and this utopian entity wants to go into the classroom and find sensitivity, a wakefulness of the body-mind unity, fervour, a violently conscious and reactive professionals, attentive and responsive people that are driven by the belief that “attention is an *action* and it can be learned and practiced. It is a way of touching the world”¹⁵.

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15. Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act-Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 62.