

## Teaching Philosophy, Eleni Papaleonardos, MFA

I believe it is essential that acting and directing courses provide room for exploration with the body and voice both discretely and within the context of more traditional scene work. I believe in offering several forms of technique rather than one method that “must” be followed without room for questioning, self-assessment, and thoughtful critique. I approach director training and new works creation together, combining traditional directing, Viewpoints and composition work, and new works creation as series of inquiries addressing those practices pivotal in developing directors: finding the essence of the story and cultivating deep listening, focus, and an awareness of time and space.

As a creator and teacher of movement-based theatre, I believe it is crucial for student actors and directors to cultivate a personal relationship to space, time, and their own bodies. In order for students to move beyond the phase of trying to get something “right” and into thinking critically about creation and the storytelling potential of movement, I stress the importance of laboratory exploration. The goal is the journey, the investigation, the experimentation, and the increasing knowledge of self. I encourage fearlessness. And I remind my students “there is no such thing as a bad movement: we are investigating and creating, not judging.”

To begin to utilize the body for theatrical creation, the first and foremost task is the development of awareness of self and awareness of space. I use the tenets of meditation, Viewpoints work, and developmental movement as a base for guiding students to first begin to “notice.” If students cannot perceive their own impulses, then they cannot relate or respond to those same impulses in others, which is the basis of scene work. Equipped with the ability to respond to impulses both in self and other, and with the whole body as a tool for expression, the student actor can create as a moving storyteller, reminding the audience what it is to be human.

Actors in the United States, trained too often with realistic work as the sole foundation, have lost touch with the body as a whole, focusing mostly on the head and face. I employ exercises derived from my foundational study of corporeal mime and Suzuki, the work of Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki which focuses on physicality in relation to one’s center. I find the rigorous training aspects of mime, Suzuki, and the *plastique* and *corporel* exercises of Jerzy Grotowski’s physical approach to acting to be a vital part of the education of young actors and directors.

The vast majority of American theatre students who pursue acting after graduation might not do so as a member of a company of physical experimenters and devisers; they will go up for local or national TV commercials, audition for revivals of *Death of a Salesman*, and try for that sometimes elusive *Law & Order* gig. Just as I am convinced that the compositional, physical and vocal work that I do as an acting teacher is critical to the complete education of the maturing theatre artist and liberally-educated young thinker, it is also vital that I be equipped to mentor my students in their more traditional work and provide clear and constructive guidance. My introductory acting course, consequently, blends realistic and antirealistic technique. The material is based strongly in work derived from Suzuki, Konstantin Stanislavski, Grotowski (through the work of Steven Wangh), and Sanford Meisner.

Suzuki work introduces the student to the strength and energy contained in the body. The rigorous and physical Suzuki training was created from elements of martial arts, ballet and traditional Japanese theatre. Through this training the actor develops a physical, vocal, and emotional power for the stage. It is difficult, it is hard, and that is the work. The frustration, the anger, the feeling—the *obstacles*—that present themselves to the actors within this work are critical elements of personal discovery. The work, in this case, is the discipline of the form. Stanislavski's "system," the basis for a remarkable share of the realistic work in Europe and the U.S., is often misunderstood and it is vital, at the introductory phase, to have a clear grasp of this critical work; creative and research projects explore both the intellectual and the physical aspects of Stanislavski's influential writings. Psycho-physical Grotowski work connects the actor to his or her body in a very organic way, providing an avenue into the work of the latter portion of Stanislavski's career. I conduct a series of exercises connecting movement and image and allow students to experiment with the image-inspiring movement and movement creating the image. My integration of Grotowski-inspired psychophysical acting with the study of both disciplined and free play tie the student's newfound body, emotion, voice and image directly to the task of the actor. The *plastique* and *corporeal* exercises lead the actor with physical inspiration to access actor tools for character and scene work. Realistic Meisner work is really very close to Viewpoints work in that actors are reacting, rather than trying to make something happen. Working with the Meisner Technique is very important to me as students begin to listen in a whole new way, hearing with their entire bodies.

Training the body and the mind together is a critical practice. It is just as necessary to study stillness as it is to study movement (found in Viewpoints work, for instance, speeding the body up to react to impulses of the mind). I illustrate this harmony, for example, using an exercise developed by my master teacher Barbara Dilley (Grand Union, Judson Dance Theatre) inspired by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's writings on Dharma Art. This exercise, "The Red Square," begins by placing the outline of a large red square on the floor. Having identified "space" in a rudimentary and palpable way, the work begins. I lead students through a brief meditation to clear the mind and then encourage "first thought, best thought." When the students engage with the space, they must picture themselves within the red square. I guide students to create as the space instructs them; they physicalize then as they had pictured and offer this posture to the class. They let themselves be seen. As soon as the mind begins to wander, the static posture is let go and the student sits down again. This continues first with one student at a time and grows into a moving group improvisation. "The Red Square" has a clear and, indeed literal, structure; within that structure, however, there is freedom and there is play. Moments of loose structure—time simply for students to play with the work—can be the most crucial thing to deeper learning. It is terrifying for the first minute, then perhaps boring, or maybe strange, and then something kicks in and the investigation begins ... progress. This way of working informs not only the student actor in awareness of how to work in space, but also the compositional mind of the director.

I teach both acting and directing by pairing discipline and play in my courses. The SITI Company utilizes this same idea of contrasting strict form and loose play in their training. I am fortunate to have studied so closely, and to continue my relationship, with the SITI Company for over ten years. Having the opportunity to grow with the Viewpoints work and study the lineage from two of its creators (Barbara Dilley and Wendell Beavers), I teach from my own relationship

to the work. My friend and SITI member, Barney O'Hanlon, remarks that he doesn't teach "Anne Bogart's Viewpoints" or "Mary Overlie's Viewpoints," but his own investigation, his own way. And I do as well. I utilize the Viewpoints work in developing an ensemble, but it is just as important for students to discover a solo relationship to their work too. I stress working alone together, that students work in an ensemble but in a way in which the self does not disappear.

I believe directors (and ideally all who work in the theatre) must have a strong working knowledge of all the aspects of theatre. "Acting is not theatre," I tell my students, "scenic design is not theatre, directing is not theatre, it is all these elements and more that come together to create theatre." In order to communicate effectively, collaborate, and create with designers, actors, stage managers, etc., the director must be trained as a theatrical creator, with the ability to use all aspects of the stage. My approach to training directors begins with the creation of original work. The student director in this setting learns important lessons about creation, collaboration, and communication not only with others, but with the audience and with the space itself.

Particularly in coursework with liberal arts college students, I find intellectual and physical investigation must come with a constant dialogue of feedback and questioning. This questioning process also provides the opportunity for the student further to develop an awareness of self, the beginning of the journey to becoming an active artist. I have encountered many student actors for whom it is so ingrained that the director will tell them how to move that they cannot make decisions themselves. During a Viewpoints class one such student was having a difficult time. I asked her how the scene was going, and she said "I feel like I can't move!" "Why?" I asked. "Because you won't tell me where to go." As soon as the words came out of her mouth she recognized what we were working on and exclaimed "It's like I have a hand in making the art myself!"

I seek to give students the room to experiment with different levels of form and freedom, known and unknown, which will serve them as they continue to grow as artists. I offer student actors the tools and skills to transform their body from being an extra element that supports their acting to functioning as the foundation of acting. Full body awareness and physicality can and must contribute to the overall creation of theatre. The vital tools of intellectual and physical investigation, the space and license for exploring and experimentation, the development of awareness, and the combination of play and rigor are not only the constituents of a challenging program for actors and directors, but also the foundations of liberal inquiry and growth as a thinker and citizen.