

Studio Teaching

My teaching philosophy integrates my workaday experience of group dynamics with Theatre Artists, Boards of Directors and Planning Committees with a hands on approach to art, accompanied by a theoretical interest in joining theory to practice.

Rather than emphasizing a singular process, I work to create an environment where theatrical form and theory can be explored using a synaesthetic vocabulary of tools which students should eventually claim. I encourage interaction with artists of the "real world" in order for them to gauge the real usefulness of the skills they are learning.

My first objective is for students to obtain a grasp of the approaches and tools available to them. I assume that people vary: that some can become good "all-rounders" while others work best in a particular style. I encourage students to try everything while seeking a personally appropriate "palette for expression" .

I find it useful to excite students about the social functions of performance. Then, I present an anatomy of the possibilities open to the director, actor or playwright by studying theatre practitioners and theories of art and culture. Because it is valuable to understand historical antecedents as well as contemporary assumptions, I come at theatre from a variety of approaches, but I always cover the theatrical elements of Story Function, Emotional Cartology, Rhythm, Composition and Symbolism. Depending on the play script curriculum, I choose a combination of practitioners to illustrate these concepts. My list is always expanding, however, I usually draw from **historical & contemporary perspectives** on acting from Joseph Roach and John Harrop to Helene Cixous' feminist analysis of performance; from the **cognitive sources** of Richard Courtney's oeuvre and organization management theory; the **acting masters'** guidebooks by Stanislavsky/Sonia Moore, Michael Chekhov, Robert Benedetti, Simon Callow; from approaches to **creative improvisation** by Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, Joan Littlewood, Ann Bogart, Eugenio Barba; also from **Popular Theatre** theory: Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre Anthropology theory, Bread and Puppet/Welfare State/ Odin Teatret, Brecht, Irondale Theatre Ensemble; from **Physical Theatre** approaches including Commedia, Bhuto dance, Meyerhold; **Structuralist accounts** from Theatre of Mistakes, Gertrude Stein, Paul Klee and the semioticians; and from **developmental drama** theory from Heathcote, Alida Gersie, Gavin Bolton.

Whatever the angle, my second objective is for students to get a practical grip on it by working. I follow information sessions with exercises to demonstrate the main principles of a theory, which I then debrief by facilitating a lot of feedback. I provide background readings for group discussion, so as to create an intellectual context for the practical work. I also provide "synaesthetic" support materials where students can see how artists in various disciplines have tackled problems similar to those posed in the exercises. I encourage students not to be ego-attached to their work, but to work together, to exchange insights and to give each other critical commentaries.

My third objective is for students to fly independently with the vocabulary, conscious of which skills they are using and how, but essentially doing what they want to do. This derives from Tai Chi, which argues the principle that the form must be experienced three ways to be learned: first intellectually, then physically, and then in relation to one's everyday life. Another strong influence has been my research into Co-operative Learning techniques. Whatever I am teaching, I aim to cover the whole learning pyramid.

Directing, Acting and Voice can all be taught through the study of five mutually inter-connected areas of study: Emotional Cartology, Rhythm, Story Function, Composition, and Symbology. Although the only course I have ever structured solely on these concepts was in mask work, I find the relations between the terms useful for understanding all performance representations, of whatever medium. Different artists prefer to stress each of the areas in varying degrees, and different projects demand flexibility.

1: Emotional Cartology (mapping)

"Emotional Cartology" is a term I have borrowed from the performance artist David Schein, to replace the more commonly used "Blocking". I like it because it says exactly what it is, and because I do a lot of improvisation, where "blocking" is a pejorative term. Once you get used to it, it doesn't sound pretentious. I come at the concept from both ends: from improvisation exercises designed to discover space and relationship, and from text based exploration of how to vivify dialogue into physical relationship.

Directing

I teach basic architectural theory about spatial relations (mainly from Francis Ching) and material on body language, acculturated territory and gesture from numerous sources (the history of gestural communication by author such as Harrop, contemporary studies by Morris and Goffman, Blacking and Schechner's environment-as-event architecture). For pedagogical examples I cover "Actors' Directors" in the mould of Stanislavsky, and stress the developmental drama aspects of directing skills: the importance of shaping the rehearsal process, the necessity to understand, facilitate and work with group dynamic and group energy, the dignity and integrity of the actor as a vital primary source in the theatrical process. Techniques for leading group creation and the ability to create a "safe environment" become important in releasing actors to discover Emotional Cartology through non-verbal communication in space.

Acting and Voice

I approach Stanislavsky's "magic if" techniques of inhabiting character, stage reality and moment through explorations of spontaneity and the psycho-physical link. Text-work focuses on translating the "what if" realities of place, action, character, and of character objectives and superobjectives into movement and spatial relationship. Acting is doing. Through imitation and by -physicalizing the various layers of relationship in a text, actors learn triggers which allow them to physically inhabit a moment, so breathing a text into life. (I don't teach the "Emotional Recall" approach to "Spontaneity" as I feel this is part of Drama Therapy. It is important for actors to maintain their identity within a role: to allow the free play of instinct without abandoning responsibility and control. I encourage actors to bring the whole personality, every experience, memory, action and belief, to provide a wide choice of material in each "off balance" moment of creation. Foregrounding analogous memories or situations can often lead to predictable choices, which inhibits the range of spontaneous, instinctual possibilities). Study of the emotional, psychological origins of breath and voice not only improves speech habits but heightens sensory, imaginative and intellectual sensitivity to language, which improves actors' rhythmic ability. Actors must "open up" creatively on a continual basis, and imaginative use of the voice is an excellent path to this, due to its strong connection to pre-conscious being. The student looks for the intuitive, creative, uninhibited, playful side of the self.

2: Rhythm

The skill of revealing meaning through manipulation of rhythm .

Directing

First, I cover structuralist dramaturgy where the rhythm of a play can be mapped through an Action Unit (or French Scene) chart. I encourage students to view theatre as music through Brecht's montage concept that change of Dramatic Reality dynamically alters the rhythm of a piece by, for example, moving from Direct Address into Song, into Monologue, into Dramatic Interaction. I encourage students to explore Game Theory (in Huizinga and Callois) and to examine the rhythm of Commedia dell'Arte lazzi. My angle on theatre games is a bit unusual: that the games and activities expose power through rhythm. Improvisation teaches recognition of structural moments of contiguous story development, metaphorical paradigm shifts, useful and zany blocks or oppositions and interesting parallels, foils and coincidences. The great gift of leading and editing improvisation is that recognition of these structures becomes ingrained, pre-conscious, to provide a kind of dramatic grammar in understanding text.

Manipulation of time is one of the great skills involved in creating theatrical meaning, and I value the role a composer plays in creating a *mise en scene*. The shaping of a story by alternating "upbeat" and "down beat" action units creates an intensifying rhythm whether or not it is part of the well-made play. In fact, a counting study of the jokes per page in Neil Simon's plays can be instructive as far as understanding Rhythm is concerned.

Acting and Voice

Chekhov's "Circle of Concentration" size of role projection is very important to an actor's understanding of Rhythm. Richard Potchenko's "body rhythm" clown exercises, which begin Rhythm exploration with the individual's heartbeat and rate of respiration, are also very useful. Odin Theatre improvisation exercises enable actors to expand their range and choice of Rhythms, particularly vocal. I have also found the movement notation theory of Rudolph Laban to be useful in communicating notions of Rhythm. The vocabulary is extremely flexible, and can be applied to gesture, to the shape of whole scenes or entire plays. Much of Laban's theory about shape harmony, power through stillness and kinesthetic spheres is echoed in the Tai Chi form. (I believe some such "wholistic", centreing, physical system to be essential to the teaching of acting). Awareness of Rhythm can only come from body awareness. I favour Tai Chi because I have studied it for 7 years and have my Introductory Teaching Permission from my society.

3: Story Function

The whole contextual meaning of a stage moment is Story Function. This meaning exists on two levels: through the telling of the story syntagmatically as it unravels with each new piece of information, and with the paradigmatic levels of story meaning in the spaces between the linear story beats.

Directing

Much of the text work described in "Emotional Cartology" and "Rhythm" illuminates Story Function. At its simplest, Story Function provides a logic framework connecting all the pieces of the drama so that no unintended contradictions yawn, no loose ends fly and each story beat leads somewhere. (Linda Seger's series of "how to" books on writing and directing for film epitomizes the rigor of this dramaturgy). Story Function goes further, though, because it pertains to the creation of meaning. All characters, dialogue and events are functions of the total work and operate symbiotically to communicate a particular collective meaning. This "rhetorical motive" of a drama might be found between the lines in a central metaphor within the text of the play, it might lie in the actors' inflection in performance, or possibly reside outside the play script, being imposed conceptually by the will of the director. Story function demands that staging picturise the "meaning of each moment" so as to communicate the precise social reality of hierarchies, cultural beliefs, and character power (Brecht's historicity which outlines the social-political ramifications of every story beat). However, forceful Story Function can still exist without a linear storyline: dissonant or montage story function works precisely because of the decontextualising of a clear familiar narrative, and often excites very startling theatrical effects. (For example, Theatre de Complicite's Street of Crocodiles or Ann Bogart's staging of Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe to quantum physics text).

Acting and Voice

I emphasize dramaturgical study and the quest for philosophical meaning in play text. It is vital to identify the building blocks the playwright has used in order to ensure that the story is clearly told, visually, in space.

In teaching co-operative creation and improvisation, Story Function becomes a vital tool for actors. Tableau work, of the kind Boal uses to empower his actors, is helpful to communicate pivotal events that wrench routine and catalyze questions. One of my favourite exercises has been to assign actors a painting to develop into a story. What questions is the image asking? Image-into-story-communication clarifies the reverse procedure which is generally the actor's job: to turn story into image-communication. I like to show actors how changing the stage space in order to "flag" new story moments in a script complements emotional cartology so that a more dimensional reality can be created from the two different kinds of "beats". Vocal quality helps to communicate story. An exploration and understanding of ways to achieve tonality and vocal placement so as to communicate character and situation is vital to the actor. Inevitably, actor-director communication improves from a shared understanding of story function.

4: Composition

The visual world of a production is the controlling medium for the words. Once the groundplan and costumes for a production are designed, the kinetic possibilities have been demarked and the piece is one-third created.

Directing

Composition is my favourite aspect of teaching directing because every time I touch it I am amazed all over again. Essentially, I start with an examination of "ways of seeing" (like John Berger's old book of this title). I encourage students to plunder works of great visual artists, from Goya and Rembrandt to Cezanne and Georg Grosz and Rauschenberg. I like to get students started on the concept of synaesthetics and to start examining all media content for the aetiology of form.

Composition provides a vocabulary by which to communicate effectively with designers. Consideration of spatial energy in creating acting areas, images, moods, effects, and materials all help. ("On Composition", by Paul Klee is a useful source). Carbon 14 and Robert Lepage are my favourite indigenous examples of "Imagist" directing which is inspired by composition. I have had first hand experience of working with both these companies, and use some of their exercises. I have devised numerous others to develop three-dimensional Composition in different kinds of stage spaces. I think that my greatest personal asset as a director is that I have lived with a designer-architect for fifteen years, and have learned a lot about approaches to design and the symbolic nature of space.

Acting and Voice

Many people would say that actors don't need to know about Composition as it is a director's job, but I disagree. The power of stillness, which is a function of rhythm but is also crucial to focusing story function, inevitably contributes to powerful composition. Actors who are excited about playing with physical and kinaesthetic composition have provided me with most fun in rehearsal. I place mask work and gesture study in the Composition study area. I have been building masks and body-puppets for ten years. I work a great deal with breath, isolations and joint-shapes to find the individual body-shape of a mask, using mirrors and music. The formal, expressive and decorative language of dance is also an important area of study: global ways of communicating content through movement so that the habitual is seen anew.

As soon as vocal work is considered, as Artaud considered it, as a composition, it leaves the realm of the natural and becomes a formal extension or tool for affect. One begins with the paradox that more effort usually produces less result, because physiologically, the voice is limited by tension-- and the attempt to serve a "symbol" by using vocal tone is one of the deadliest ways to generate tension. To be dynamically centred in the moment is a physical goal which will allow the voice to go beyond tension and relaxation, into a stage energy which can be shaped and filled so as to complement what is seen. Some contemporary plays (such as Churchill's "Blue Kettle" and "The Skriker") demand this approach to voice.

5: Symbology

The study of how to manifest a metaphor, a metonym, leitmotif or archetype in the visual-vocal presentation without becoming stereotyped or emblematically heavy handed.

Directing

Dramaturgically, this calls for a literary analysis of what precedent and metonyms the text evokes (this drawn from Aston/Savona Theatre as a Sign System). Then the director's job is to stage it so that it works in a numinous way. But often, artists create powerful symbols, totemistic and mesmerizing moments without conscious knowing of what they signify. I can teach a "literary" awareness of metaphor, metonym, foil, parallel, and echo that are present in a text, and can even relate the symbolic evocation of phonemes and punctuation to inform character portrait, but I don't think inventive symbology can be taught as a craft. It develops with the sensibility, experience and personality of an artist.

Acting and Voice

Through my work with Richard Fowler, I've been exposed to Odin Theatre improvisation techniques which pursue a powerful archetypal theatre, but haven't used them in years. In my opinion, the best aspect of the Odin work is the way it gives actors a technique to create their own work. It's vital to encourage a vision of an actor as a creator, as well as an interpreter. A lot of imagist work is created from specially learned movement vocabularies (such as tango), or specially built props (in the case of Cirque de Soleil) as performers seek meaning primarily by flowing through composed images.

The personal exploration and group dynamic practice of Alida Gersie ("Earth-Tales, Dramatic Stories for Times of Change") provides another avenue to image in meaning. The material generated via her process expresses primal relationships between people, and between people and things; it is playful, and does not impose a process on participants, but asks them to develop their own within an imagist environment.

Conclusion

The above appears to be an aesthetic vocabulary, but it becomes political as soon as it is used by a person. Each area of the vocabulary is limitless and I find it invaluable as a way of understanding the multidisciplinary art of theatre, and for deciding how to focus my productions.

I think I have two main strengths as a teacher. One is that I consider myself a learner too, and so I seldom teach something the same way twice. This means I occasionally walk precarious ground, unsure of what a studio exercise may divulge, but with good debriefing the result is always that everyone learns. The other is that I consider the people I teach to be thinking individuals rather than students who want to clone my knowledge. That is why I am able to teach people who will develop an aesthetic which I won't particularly like, but as long as their craft is sound, I will respect them for it.

The latter point is the reason that I value the vocabulary I have set out above. It values all approaches to theatre art, and teaches that each requires craft, skill, and vision.