

Anne Bogart + Tina Landau

A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition

# The Viewpoints Book



# THE VIEWPOINTS BOOK

A Practical Guide  
to Viewpoints  
and Composition

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ANNE BOGART

AND

TINA LANDAU

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# PREFACE

“What can I read on Viewpoints?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Anne Bogart and Tina Landau  
October 2005*

We would like to acknowledge the following people for their contributions to this book and to our lives:

Mary Overlie, who forged the original Six Viewpoints from her imagination. Aileen Passloff, who extended the notion of Composition from the dance world into the arena of theater. Wendell Beavers, who carries Viewpoints with him everywhere. The individual members of SITI Company, who have developed and expanded the Viewpoints over years of practice, rehearsal and teaching, in particular Barney O'Hanlon, who is a constant innovator, experimenter and inspiration. Charles L. Mee, Jr., Brian Jucha, Ron Argelander, Susan Milani, Kevin Kuhlke, Jessica Litwak, John Bernd, Mark Russell, Jocelyn Clarke, Sabine Andreas,

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—T. L.

And, of course, from both of us: Terry Nemeth and Kathy Sova, for their clarity in helping us find a shape for this book.

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THE  
VIEWPOINTS  
BOOK



## CHAPTER I

# A HISTORY OF VIEWPOINTS AND COMPOSITION

A seismic cultural shift occurred in America during the middle of the last century. It was a shift marked by such events as the protests against the Vietnam War, the marches for civil rights, and the birth of abstract expressionism, postmodernism and minimalism. During the 1960s, this cultural explosion and artistic revolution gained momentum in New York City, San Francisco and other urban centers and then spread across the nation. The movement was political, aesthetic and personal, and it altered the way artists thought about their processes, their audiences and their role in the world. This sudden eruption of activity was like a breath of fresh air for many young people, including a group of artists—the Judson Church Theater—who united together at the Judson Church on Washington Square in New York City. The group included the young painters Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, composers John Cage and Philip Corner, filmmaker Gene Friedman, and dancers Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, Laura

Dean, Simone Forti and others. Inspired by their dance composition teacher, Robert Dunn, these dancers wanted to question the assumptions of their own training and how they approached their work. They wanted to create alternatives to the pervasive influence of George Balanchine, Martha Graham and even closer contemporaries, like Merce Cunningham. They wanted to liberate choreography from psychology and conventional drama. "What is dance?" they asked. "If an elephant swings its trunk, is it dance? If a person walks across the stage, is that dance?"

A number of experiments ensued: performances on rooftops, audiences witnessing events through keyholes, dancers suspended in midair, dancers on rolling platforms. Working with the notion that anything is possible, these artists started to change the rules. Rauschenberg and Johns, for example, not only created designs for the performances but often conceived the events and performed in them. Improvisation became the common language and everyone helped each other out.

One of the fundamental agreements that united this group was their belief in nonhierarchical art and the use of "real time" activities which were arrived at through game-like structures or task-oriented activities. The group wanted to function democratically with all members having equal access to performance opportunities. In improvisations, each participant had the same power in the creation of an event. The aesthetic thinking was also nonhierarchical. Music, for example, would not dictate choices. An object could have the same importance as a human body. The spoken word could be on equal footing with gesture. One idea could hold the same importance as another on the same stage at the same time.

These postmodern pioneers forged the territory upon which we now stand. They rejected the insistence by the modern dance world upon social messages and virtuosic technique, and replaced it with internal decisions, structures, rules or problems. What made the final dance was the context of the dance. Whatever movement occurred while working on these problems *became* the art. This philosophy lies at the heart of both Viewpoints and Composition.

In the early 1970s, Aileen Passloff, a dancer and choreographer and an influential touchstone in the Judson Church Movement, became Anne's professor at Bard College. Aileen's composition class had an enormous effect on the way Anne began to think about creating work. The students were asked to create their own work based on dreams, objects, advertisements, whatever might seem fodder for creation. For Anne, this was the genesis of a lifetime's interest in applying theories of painting, architecture, music and film to theater. Aileen also inspired Anne to investigate the creative role of each performer.

Later, in 1979, Anne met choreographer Mary Overlie, the inventor of the "Six Viewpoints," at New York University, where they were both on the faculty of the Experimental Theater Wing. Although a latecomer to the Judson scene, Mary, who had trained as a dancer and choreographer, attributes her own innovations to those Judson Church experiments. Her thinking was also ignited by colleagues in San Francisco, including Anna Halprin in Berkeley, Deborah Hay and, particularly, Barbara Dille, who, with Mary, brought together an all-women's group called the Natural History of the American Dancer.

Mary immersed herself in these innovations and came up with her own way to structure dance improvisation in time and space—the Six Viewpoints: Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement and Story. She began to apply these principles, not only to her own work as choreographer, but also to her teaching. Subsequently, her work has influenced several generations of theater artists.

Mary's approach to the Six Viewpoints was and continues to be absolute. She is adamant about their purity. To her chagrin and delight, her students and colleagues, recognizing the genius of her innovations and their immediate relevance to the theater, have extrapolated and expanded her Viewpoints for their own uses.

To Anne (and later Tina), it was instantly clear that Mary's approach to generating movement for the stage was applicable to creating viscerally dynamic moments of theater with actors and other collaborators. In 1987, Tina and Anne met while working at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA. Over the next

ten years, they collaborated extensively, experimented theatrically, and gradually expanded Overlie's Six Viewpoints to both nine Physical Viewpoints (Spatial Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture, Tempo, Duration and Topography) and Vocal Viewpoints (Pitch, Dynamic, Acceleration/Deceleration, Silence and Timbre).

Over the past twenty years, Viewpoints training has ignited the imaginations of choreographers, actors, directors, designers, dramaturgs and writers. While the Viewpoints are now taught all over the world and used by many theater artists in the rehearsal process, the theory and its application are still relatively new. The questions arise frequently: What exactly *is* Viewpoints? What exactly *is* Composition?

## CHAPTER 2

# VIEWPOINTS AND COMPOSITION: WHAT ARE THEY?

**V**iewpoints, Composition: What do these terms mean? The following definitions reflect *our* understanding and use of them. Even in the context of the work of such pioneers as Mary Overlie and Aileen Passloff, it is impossible to say where these ideas actually originated, because they are timeless and belong to the natural principles of movement, time and space. Over the years, we have simply articulated a set of names for things that already exist, things that we do naturally and have always done, with greater or lesser degrees of consciousness and emphasis.

## VIEWPOINTS

- Viewpoints is a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage.



- Viewpoints is a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens onstage.
- Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working.

We work with nine Physical Viewpoints, within Viewpoints of Time and Viewpoints of Space. The bulk of this book focuses on the Physical Viewpoints, though Vocal Viewpoints, which we developed later, are addressed in Chapter 9. The Vocal Viewpoints are specifically related to sound as opposed to movement. Physical and Vocal Viewpoints overlap each other and constantly change in relative value, depending on the artist or teacher and/or the style of the production. The Physical Viewpoints are:

## Viewpoints of Time

### TEMPO

The rate of speed at which a movement occurs; how fast or slow something happens onstage.

### DURATION

How long a movement or sequence of movements continues. Duration, in terms of Viewpoints work, specifically relates to how long a group of people working together stay inside a certain section of movement before it changes.

### KINESTHETIC RESPONSE

A spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you; the timing in which you respond to the external events of movement or sound; the impulsive movement that occurs from a stimulation of the senses. An example: someone claps in front of your eyes and you blink in response; or someone slams a door and you impulsively stand up from your chair.