

the viewpoints mystique

I am the veteran of a thousand viewpoints wars. I first encountered Anne Bogart's six or seven or eight or nine viewpoints (they kept changing the number) of "postmodernism", as they were originally called, in the summer of 1990. I was employed as a Faculty Associate (or "FacAss", as we were known, basically teaching assistants plus) at Northwestern University's National High School Institute, aka the "Cherub" program. Two of the people I was assisting, one for a voice and movement class, and one on a production of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, were MFA students at the Trinity Rep conservatory, where Anne Bogart, the premier evangelist of the viewpoints was at the helm. My initial encounter with viewpoints was thrilling: using viewpoints, the instructors seemed to be able to effortlessly concoct a quirky, surprising theatrical landscape with moving parts that seemed connected to each other in some mysterious way. It was a little like watching a Rube Goldberg machine being simultaneously designed and tested, with human bodies and voices triggering each other in an endless series of jerks, plops, ritardandos, bounces, beelines and stop-drop-and-rolls. To use a slightly more contemporary analogy, it was like a large-scale, human-body version of the culmination of the boardgame from the 1970's, *Mousetrap*.

As the summer wore on, though, something became clear: one "viewpoints" exploration looked a lot like the next one, and the previous one as well. The person moderating the exercise could introduce various stipulations, but sooner or later, a monotony crept in. The reason for this, I would maintain, was the underlying arbitrariness of the unfoldings. A relentless series of surprises of more or less the same kind, is still a relentless series. And a relentless series of anything grows wearing at some point. A college friend of mine who entered the Columbia Graduate acting program under Bogart, but later

dropped out in disgust, dubbed the viewpoints “aerobics for dramaturgs.” And I think that about hits the nail on the head.

A year later, I was interning in New York at Mabou Mines, a downtown theater collective that dates back to the 1960's. The original members included Lee Breuer, Phillip Glass, JoAnne Akalaitis, Ruth Maleczech and David Warrilow, all of them titans in the history of downtown New York theater. It was the early nineties at this point, and many of the original members were gone, and the collective was scrambling for a new vision or a way forward. In collaboration with the Public Theater, which at that time JoAnne Akalaitis was running, Mabou Mines produced Bertolt Brecht's enigmatic, early play *In the Jungle of Cities*, and hired Anne Bogart to direct it. Anne was a very hot item right about then, her recent departure from Trinity Rep notwithstanding, and there was a good deal of excitement about the potential synergy of Anne Bogart, Mabou Mines and Brecht. The excitement, sadly, did not bear fruit.

The production was widely panned, although it did have its defenders, and it had some fine performances as well. It had Ruth Maleczech, a titanic force of nature and a phenomenal actor, but she was in a relatively small role. It had Fred Neumann, a man whom none other than Samuel Beckett had entrusted some of his prose pieces for adaptation to the stage, also a tremendous actor. And it had a wonderful, recent graduate of the NYU conservatory named Fanny Green, who acquitted herself splendidly. But on the whole, the productions failed, and there was a simple reason for that sad fact.

Frank Rich nailed the reason for this in his New York Times review of the production;

Since most of the large supporting cast is as smart-alecky in voice and gesture as Mr. Arrambide

[the lead actor], the jungle of Ms. Bogart's Chicago is less

a savage industrial wasteland out of Upton Sinclair than a benign absurdist cartoon, a rather **sexless** retread of R. Crumb.

Ms. Bogart **does not dream big**. She is so cautious that she minimizes the seedy Chinatown fantasized by Brecht, perhaps out of fear that a contemporary audience might be offended by the author's tongue-in-cheek use of old Charlie Chan ethnic stereotypes. (Even Shlink's Malayan identity is all but obliterated.) As **bold esthetic sensuousness is missing** from this "Jungle," so is most of Brecht's raw pain at discovering man's "infinite isolation." **Far more care is devoted to the busy deployment of two moving men whose endless shifting of a few sticks of furniture typifies the evening's pedantic illustration of Brechtian stagecraft.**

I was in a lot of those rehearsals, I was friends with the backstage interns who handed off and received that furniture from the actors on stage, and I can say that Frank Rich is absolutely right. Bogart did spend hours in those rehearsals painstakingly choreographing the movement of the furniture movers. But it gets worse. She had an assistant director for the production who was the development director (grantwriter) for Mabou Mines, an aspiring director himself, with whom, to my knowledge, she had not worked previously. When one of the actors would have a question about the scene involving, you know, their relationship to other characters in the scene, their needs or desires, or the outcomes they were seeking, she would motion the assistant director to run down and chat with them.

Now, getting to the essence of any scene is a challenge. Brecht's play is especially enigmatic, and it really takes someone with an overarching vision to help actors connect the dots. Someone like a director. Regardless of how helpful this assistant director's insights were, it's a terrible signal to send to the actors that their concerns, their legitimate concerns about how to act their roles well, are to be relegated to an assistant. They must NOT, under any

circumstances, be allowed to interfere with the machinations of the director as the string-puller of the uber-marionettes.

Bogart reaped what she sowed. The production flopped. But worse than that, she left the lead members of Mabou Mines with a profound sense of betrayal. "We got taken" Ruth Maleczech said in the office on Ninth St, months later. She then proceeded to perform a spontaneous, derisive parody of "kinesthetic response", one of Bogart's most hallowed viewpoints.

This anecdote perfectly illustrates both the appeal and the danger of viewpoints. People who are studying acting want desperately to be initiated, to be shown the true secrets of doing compelling, memorable work. However, finding someone who can really help them with that is never easy. They may encounter a gifted teacher at school, college, or grad school, but eventually, they leave that institution, and are faced with finding someone who can help them continue to develop. The teaching of acting can be maddeningly insubstantial, ethereal even, and so often aspiring actors despair of finding someone who can help them make sense of it all: what to do with their minds, their bodies, their feelings, the text. It can seem to be impossible to find an approach that works with all of these elements together.

Viewpoints makes a false promise: put your money on the "physical". Anything that deals with the inner life or intention or yearning or longing smacks of dated, naive aberrations from Lee Strasberg's 1950's New York. Use viewpoints and focus on the physical, the acolytes are told, and let the rest take care of itself. And so the actor is introduced to this series of relatively simple "viewpoints" that are concerned with an actor's physical relationships with others in a space: how far away or close they are to each other, the shapes of their bodies, the mimicking of what others in the space are doing, the contours of the space itself, and potential responses to the gestural exhibitions

of others. Follow these simple steps, and you, too, can be a “physical” actor.

The appeal is in the concreteness of what viewpoints is pushing, and in its relative simplicity. Through my years of training at the Yale School of Drama and at Duke before that, I watched it happen again and again: actors would be presented with a concrete skill to master, whether it was the “ask” list of words, in which the pronunciation of the short “a” sound varies across British and American dialects, or fencing, or scansion, or stage combat, or, yes, viewpoints, and they leaped at the promise that mastering this very concrete set of more or less mechanical rules, a set of rules that was divorced from things like judgment, intuition, and imagination, would somehow accredit them as actors. I can empathize with the impulse: learning to act well is not easy, even with the help of a caring and insightful teacher. But the promise, my friends, is a false one.

Any good acting teacher, like any good yoga teacher, or any good Alexander teacher, or any good Zen teacher, will tell you, in one way or another, that it is all about body-mind integration. Viewpoints promises to make accessible something that *DEPENDS* on this integration of body and mind, i.e. acting, by focusing on the merely physical, and in a totally superficial way. I had a great piano teacher growing up, Linda Calligaro, and she insisted that you do *NOT* develop independence of the right hand and the left hand by practicing one hand at a time. Learning the part of a piece of music one hand at a time could be useful as a preliminary, but no gains would be made in achieving the *INDEPENDENCE* of the two hands by practicing one hand at a time. For that, you had to try to do the much more difficult challenge of playing with both hands at once. It’s all about coordination. As so is acting. It’s about learning to simultaneously direct your attention to people or things, sometimes ones that are present, sometimes not, use your voice, use your body,

remember your lines, and an whole lot more. It's what Barack Obama has referred to as walking and chewing gum at the same time. It's rubbing your tummy and patting your head, jumping on one foot, naked, while speaking a bit of text that means everything to you in a way that honors both the punctuation and the need to preserve the integrity of the whole thought. Viewpoints, sadly, makes things just way too easy, and tries to make a virtue of that.

Viewpointa can have a value as part of an actor's training. It is definitely valuable for an actor to have a dynamic understanding of space and his or her relationships to others in that space, and the way she can use his body in relationship with the space and the others with whom she shares it. Too much of this awaremess, though, is NOT a good thing. These concerns are essentially the purvey of the director (viewpoints evolved out of dance composition principles), as they involve the "big picture". And being too aware of the "big picture" can be a major stumbling block for the actor: when he is thinking about that, he is thinking about what he, and everyone else, looks like, and is therefore the very definition of self-conscious. Viewpoints also tacitly encourages cleverness (or "smart-aleckeyness" as Frank Rich put it), and seeming clever has nothing to do with being vulnerable. So a LITTLE bit of viewpoints goes a long way. Some viewpoints proponents will no doubt say that their technique is not intended to replace "inner" work, but my experience with Anne Bogart, and Frank Rich's etimation of her work, shows that that is not the case.

The only way I can imagine viewpoints being valuable is as a kind of basic awareness of space and its possibilites. Though I have heard tell of scene study classes that attempt to incorporate viewpoints as part of the working process, I am very, very skeptical. Getting the attention of the actor on to the right things is difficult enough, and viewpoints is an invitation to focus on many of the wrong ones.

But whatever merits viewpoints may have, it is NOT a substitute for a real approach to the difficult terrain that belongs to the actor: the domain of dreams, fears, needs, outcomes, interventions, confrontations, and intuition, as well as the body and the voice. And like Mrs. Calliagaro said, the real work begins when you are practicing using all of these things at one time. Is it difficult to work with these things all together? Yes. Is there only one way of doing it? No. Is finding an approach to dealing with these things necessary for any actor who wants to sustain a creative life in acting in film or theater? Absolutely. The only way out, a wise man once said, is through. That's a viewpoint you can believe in.