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Acting Systems: Matrices, Analogies and Layers of Methods by Dr. Stephen Atkins, PhD

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This perspective paper discusses the compatibility of the Viewpoints and the Stanislavsky System in relation to the terms 'method' and system. The practice-led observations query how methods emerge from systems and what this might mean to the training actor. The paper also refers to the Crosspoints Acting System, a project developed by the author as a way of blending System-based acting with the goals of contemporary theatre and film production.

I am a performer, director and acting teacher from Canada, who has been based for significant periods of time in Australia and the UK. For many years the Viewpoints have had a great impact on my work and on my approach to teaching actors. In this paper, I would like to share how my views of actor training were challenged by the Viewpoints and what new questions have emerged. Particularly, how the Viewpoints foregrounded the question, 'Can acting even be systematised, and if so, how?'

I'd like to start by explaining briefly that the Viewpoints are a system of lenses that help directors, choreographers, actors and other performers isolate a facet of performance. The gift they give the artist is to temporarily remove latent hierarchies and unconscious biases about the most 'important' aspect of performance. Observation of, and improvising with, each facet gives the artist a sense of what they personally prioritise in their work, either through their individual habituation or because of their aesthetic paradigm. Through observation, improvisation and creating compositions, the artist develops their relationship with each of these facets and finds freedom of choice with an increased vocabulary of practice. The work also has the power to subvert assumptions or animate the tropes of performance with new energy.

Mary Overlie developed the original iteration of the Viewpoints in the late 1970s. She proposed that deconstruction is essential to the creative process and that the hierarchies and taxonomies embedded in an art form can be dismantled and placed in a 'horizontal relationship' to each other. Overlie formulated six essential elements of performance and suggested their irreducible nature by resisting the addition of any more. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau saw the potential of Overlie's work to create riveting, visceral movement for the stage and formulated nine viewpoints for movement as well as vocal viewpoints.

What both types of Viewpoints training share is that their authors have made a list of components; the prime elements of performance which can be isolated and worked with separately. Similar to the way a sound technology allows one to isolate and adjust bass, treble, volume, etc; the Viewpoints are filters and lenses for the 'materials' of performance. The result is a vocabulary and set of practices that promote deep understanding, freedom and control over a performer's choices in improvisation as well as in scripted or scored work.

I have made Viewpoints training my preferred lens for developing a critical pedagogy of acting. The result has been a body of work combining my studio training in Meisner Technique, Michael Chekhov Technique and derivations of Stanislavksian and Grotowskian methods. The Vewpoints, as an epistemic principle, propose that the matrix of relationships between performance materials may be disentangled from each other, allowing us to see how they work outside paradigms and tropes. They allow us to

question and retrieve how elements like tempo, repetition, scale and stillness impact a moment separately from the spoken text.

The Viewpoints direct the performer's attention to the ephemeral components of performance which cannot be clearly communicated in words. Having been theorised in the context of postmodern interdisciplinary practice, they're suited to contemporary writing which emphasises imagery and 'montage' over rationalistic, cause and effect, linear narrative.

The main thing that attracted me to the Viewpoints is the way they prioritise the performers' interactions. Viewpoints contrast the analysis-forward process of table work by offering a 'textless' means to explore and externalise inner life and collaborate with an expanding spectrum of expressive elements. In film, for example, this might translate to the actor understanding how the motion of the camera creates narrative, or how an imaginary, physicalised image might convey story more effectively than inner psychological objects.

Acting as a System (or is it a Method?)

In the Viewpoints Book (2004), Anne Bogart and Tina Landau write a short list of 'problems' they have prioritised in their work. One of these is the Americanisation of the Stanislavsky System. They propose that, 'Our misunderstanding, misappropriation and miniaturization of the Stanislavsky System remains the bible for most practitioners. Like the air we breathe, we are rarely aware of its dominance and omnipresence (Bogart and Landau, 2002, 16).' Bogart and Landau suggest that a rehearsal process centred on manufacturing, then hanging onto an emotion sacrifices genuine human interaction. In my own experience, this intellectualised approach focuses the actor's attention on conjuring a prescribed ideal rather than being fully 'in' the action of a scene and liberated to respond intuitively to the circumstances.

In spite of what some might see as a contradiction, the Stanislavsky System preserves this philosophy. As scholarship about his later work comes to light, the system's compatibility with 'physical theatre' methods is, to my mind, made more apparent. In Stanislavsky's well-known diagram, the System resembles a biological process with nodes for Mind, Feeling and Body. Branching threads, resembling arteries or nerves, represent practical exercises for each. The purpose of this diagram appears to show the organic relationship between exercises and the systemic principles they express.

Bogart and Landau suggest that there was American miniaturisation of Stanislavsky's work, prompted by a galvanizing response to the psychological realism seen in the final product. However, a psychological approach was only one of Stanislavsky's many experiments. Experience led him to leave affective memory behind and look for

a 'psycho-physical chain-of-action,' where action, rather than psychology, induced emotion and feeling.

One way of seeing this transition is that the System itself didn't change. It was still centred on aligning the actor's Mind, Body and Will; directing them toward the actor's 'theatrical sense of self' or their sense of self-and-character simultaneously. The exercises are contingent analogies and metaphors. They are psychophysical matrices of action contributing to the actor's inner life; something Eugenio Barba calls 'an amulet made of memory.' Barba further explains that the inner life is created in the 'subscore' which is not necessarily limited to repressed thoughts and unexpressed motivations of a character. It could also be 'a rhythm, a song, a way of breathing or an action that is not carried out in its original dimension, but is absorbed and miniaturized by the actor who, without showing it, is guided by its dynamism even in immobility. (Barba, 1997).

These analogies and metaphors help compose a character. If taken beyond the actor's work, into the field of cognitive science, they help compose an identity. As Douglas Hofstadter proposes, analogy is the cornerstone of cognition. Exercises and analogies, however, can become totemised and dominate the actor's work. Instead of engaging with the questions a System proposes, one can be seduced by the Methods that illustrate and solve them. It's a bit like the old saying, 'when you have a hammer, every problem can look like a nail.'

It's in this way that we often conflate Methods with Systems. The words are often used to define each other. If there's one thing that working with Viewpoints showed me, it's that a System is merely a list of abstract labels, propositions and concepts. The exercises are ways of *doing things* with those concepts. They are what comprise a Method by mobilising a System through the concreteness of practice. In short, I see Methods as the procedures that give shape to or express a System.

For example, a System can be seen as 'beneath practice'; acting as a substrate having an indirect association with cultural paradigms and stylistic flourish. Systems are made up of analogies that point to the essence of practice, not the specific executions of it. This is apparent to me whenever I see different types of performers working with the same Viewpoints exercises. We might all be exploring Spatial Relationship, using a Grid Exercise to do it. However, a troupe of dancers will do it differently than actors or circus performers. Different internalised cultures of expression concretise, or practise, a System in different ways.

As I grew to love working with the Viewpoints, I wanted to understand why they catalysed performers and performance problems in the way they did. I began to see the framework and lenses of the Viewpoints as one might see Platonic Forms or even as

archetypes. We were not dealing with any particular individual's 'time or movement,' but with Archetypal Time and Movement. By externalising them in this way, we could almost personify them asking, 'What does Time or Movement want from us in this session?' This process of objectification stimulates discussion, externalisation, interaction and, eventually, the development of new solutions and shared codes.

I settled on the idea that at the System level of thought, the archetypal objects are vast and unknowable except through analogy. A Method is only an instrument or a tool to reify a little bit of knowledge from the constellate System. With this concept, I came to see acting methods as analogies as well. They were not acting in and of itself, but a vehicle for the journey.

Analogy and Archetype

While adopting the Viewpoints as my primary method for training in my classes, I revisited an acting method I learned from past teachers who were greatly influenced by Grotowski's work in America. Though they did not directly adopt it, they incorporated Grotowski's notion that everything that can be felt or experienced is done through the body. The exercises they developed were built on the idea of 'emblems;' physicalised, archetypal behaviour patterns that are conjured through an experience of the body rather than conceptualized through language.

Carl G. Jung described archetypes as models of people, behaviors, and personalities; a complex set of behaviours that could be dormant like a dry riverbed or a natural ravine. They come to life once water finds them. In the work I was exploring in my studio, the 'water' was simply attention and physical engagement with the imaginary in brief, immersive improvisations called Image Studies.

Like Open Viewpoints exercises, these studies were designed to activate the system and intersect it with the performer's sense of concentrated play. Through these studies, the actor develops their individual instinct for the 'muscle and bone' of the abstract concepts.

Stanislavsky, as with Overlie, Bogart and Landau, had systems that outlined a conceptual matrix, oor alphabet, of performance. The exercises relate to performance in the same way the typed word 'apple' relates to the fruit that grows on a tree.

Being a teacher of performance methods that seem to be 'opposed' to realism, I have come to expect some young actors to be suspicious of how rolling around on a studio floor will help them play a naturalistic scene. I always try to ask for their patience. As actors, we all must undertake a bit of a critical journey into self-knowledge. To achieve a kind of objectivity on oneself, one must step out, or to the side, into analogy. This is where the work with emblems and archetypes came in.

Crosspoints, Emblems and Building Complexity

To my mind, the dual nature of the actor, being both themselves and the character, is a problem created by rationalism. From a constructivist perspective, one is only ever a single, constructed being at a time. You are one sort of person while teaching a class, another while applying for a job and a multitude of others for every role you must play or task you must accomplish.

The 'problem' I encountered with actor training was rolled together in the contradiction that the actor is simultaneously the object of art and the scaffold to create the object. When building a role, an actor must be able to apply a critical language of phenomenology; one that has personal meanings and associations.

As I revisited my training with emblems, I called this new amalgam 'Crosspoints' to indicate that the center of the work is a site of exchange and interaction, not one of origin. My goal was to integrate this work more concretely with other methods. In the Crosspoints, there are 4 essential 'viewpoints' to creating an interaction between characters. These are:

- Eye Focus – is the point of attention internal or external, if so how distanced is the attention from what is really happening?
- Emotional Rasa – is the essential atmosphere or the 'air' between the actors charged with an emotional quality? This is different from 'having' an emotion. While we have sympathetic emotional responses to our environment, it's also quite possible to giggle in frightening situations or be terrified during a joyful celebration.
- Emblem – this is a physical, behavioural aphorism that outlines a world view. For example, is a person living in their Favourite Snapshot or behind a Lock on the Door?
- Partner – this is an archetypal figure who one person sees in the other. In a scene, a person might be talking to a lover, but see them as a Tyrant or a Child, or even a Martyr. The perception might shift once or many times through their interaction.

One of the premises of Viewpoints, and many other systems that we see as elegant, is the complexity achieved by the layered application of a few simple concepts. With the four 'parent' components of Eye Focus, Rasa, Emblem and Partner, the action of a performance can be 'snapped together' quickly, like Lego blocks, with deeply engaging results if the actor has previously improvised some Image Studies.

The 'pieces of the basic set' include 4 Eye Foci, 8 Emotional Rasas, 16 Emblems and 12 Partners. The combinatorial possibilities provide over 6,000 potential 'entry points' for a role. Additionally, anyone can create a new Emblem, Partner, etc. based on their own work, individualising the method to meet their own creative goals.

As with the Viewpoints the system/method can be used as a form of improvisational actor training, as a commonly shared vocabulary for creating a role, or as a means of generating/devising new works. Additionally, the Crosspoints are not at odds with other acting methods; they simply provide an additional route to the 'source' for an actor. I've found this work to help our with content that an actor might not want to use personal memories as sources for, working with neurodiverse actors, creating stylised or non-naturalistic characters, working with film shots where a full-blown Stanislavsky-style analysis introduces more complexity than is necessary.

They also work together as a regular practice for developing emotional range and exploring character beyond the actor's type. A brief weekly or daily workout can, over time, act as a 'sketchbook' of studies and 'proto-characters' that could contribute to a larger opus. Because the image studies require no text-memorisation, they are easily incorporated into regular studio practice.

Finally, one of the most rewarding things I have found in working with the Crosspoints has been the flexibility and mobility it gives to a rehearsal situation. With commercial theatre and film demanding short rehearsal periods, a process for devising material, or numerous self-submissions for roles, this system helps in a number of ways by:

- Giving actors a means to get into each other's 'space' quickly and develop the essence of a scene.
- Broadening the scope of exploration independent from deductive text analysis, making room for inductive thinking and discovering contradictions between words, intentions and actions.
- Allowing for the efficient 'assemblage' of a proto-character and a language for adjusting choices without discarding the components that work.
- Providing a framework for scoring the broad 'bandwidth' of non-verbal communication; becoming a more significant vehicle for story in film and contemporary theatre.

I am currently exploring Crosspoints combined with elements of Meisner Technique and using this as a means to create scripted work through improvisation. I'm looking forward to seeing how this will pan out and how it might interface with more traditional writing and/or rehearsal processes.

To conclude this perspective paper, I would like to return to my opening idea. Can acting even be systematised? If so, how? In the course of this reflection, I've turned the topic over by discussing the Viewpoints system as one that has decentralisation and

deconstruction at its core. I would hazard to intuit that the goals of the Stanislavsky System may have been similar to Viewpoints inasmuch as they both create epistemic categories that operate as categories of knowledge. Methods are another story, they consist of procedures which, over time, may become tropes.

My curiosity has led me to deconstruct my own background and encounters with methodical, sometimes ideological, training mindsets. In the Stanislavsky System, it meant going back to the primary 'materials' of Mind, Feeling and Will. These informed my use of Emblems and fuelled the assemblage of the Crosspoints as another way of constructing analogies for the actor.

In closing I would like to issue an invitation to any readers interested in practice-led research that might integrate Crosspoints with other acting methods, devising and story-building processes. Questions arising from these explorations might centre on the agency of actors in having a practice that enables them to explore their own psychophysicality as much as a character's. Being from an historically marginalised community myself, I am also interested to see if 'textless' actor training helps marginalised actors expand their work and self-knowledge without being hedged in by narratives that are not their own. Additionally, are there any measurable advantages to including Crosspoints in an acting curriculum?

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Stephen Atkins, PhD (2020, University of Kent, UK) is a director, performer and devised theatre practitioner with a diverse portfolio of work. He has performed, directed and taught in Canada, Australia, the USA, UK, Japan and China. Stephen's research interests include acting and acting pedagogy in the expanded field of performance. Atkins has taught in many different universities, conservatories and private studios and currently teaches at Capilano University in North Vancouver, Canada.

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