

Unpublished Notes on the Viewpoint of Story
Based on the Work of Mary Overlie
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Story

The Viewpoint of Story has a particular provenance which is rooted in a moment of dance history which declared itself anti-story, anti literal and anti illusion.* Several of the most powerful storytelling experiences in the theater I ever witnessed were performances of the Grand Union, a group made up of participants of the Judson Dance Theater. Its members were perceived as both heroic and legendary performers and disgusting cheapeners of the magic that was supposed to happen in the theater. The divide was mostly generational and the result of a natural sort of overthrow of what came before. Their brand of open improvisational performance featured precipitous surprises and a kind of high drama difficult to explain because of the ordinary circumstances from which these events always managed somehow to arise. The next “thing” to happen always seemed inevitable after the fact, but completely impossible to anticipate the moment before. This was storytelling--which got labeled post-modern--but in retrospect had a peculiar link to shamanistic story telling.

It may be jarring to link post modernism with shamanism because we associate shamanism with the cultivation and communication of spiritual or other worldly things. Postmodern performers of the sixties and seventies were looking into themselves and their immediate environment. They were communicating or pointing out the nature of the material world before us. There was not supposed to be anything otherworldly about it. The ordinary magic that they practiced and bequeathed to the next generation was quite subversive to the modern dance sensibility, not to mention the high art theater world of ballet etc. That material world they pointed to was the body and its movement possibilities unadorned by rarified styles of moving (Steve Paxton); the chair and its simple presence and percussive qualities (David Gordon)); the wall and its flatness and emotional resonance when repeatedly struck with a pillow (Yvonne Rainer). If shamanism is bringing the unknown into the known, a sort of birthing of reality where the performer/shaman is the midwife, then this would be a good description of what these artists were doing. It is also a very good description of viewpoint improvisation in general and viewpoint storytelling in particular. It might also stand as a good definition of viewpoints acting.

In a sense the actor who acknowledges the viewpoints is reciting. Viewpoints acting is an act of recitation as the Victorians practiced it; a declamatory underlining kind of oratory. What is being read however—the text so to speak--in the viewpoints is enlarged to include the whole field of perception and sensation.

In the story work it is exhilarating to find oneself reciting, enacting, being moved by a

* See The Judson Dance Theater and Yvonne Rainer, “No to Illusion” manifesto.

previously ineffable story. The story here emerges via sensation, or unfolds through a succession of visual images participated in by the performer. The story viewpoint is the arena where immediate perception and sensing meet memory and imagination.

Viewpoints storytelling is the joining of our ability to generate mental associations with our ability to project them onto otherwise innocent people, objects or environments.

The Story Viewpoint, because of its origins in dance, is also quite different from Storytelling as most actors think of it. It is, in its fundamental practice, the very antithesis of Spolin style theater games that relate to story telling. As in the other viewpoints, we are using the viewpoint or focus—in this case “story”—as a source for generating movement or action in space. In the viewpoints, Story is cultivated first as source. Actors are quite attached to story as product and in fact see the telling of stories as perhaps their primary function. Because of this it is sometimes a difficult leap, but a very rewarding one, to flip the role of story and look at it primarily as a source for generating movement, visual imagery, action etc. In training, to establish story as source, it is necessary to give up one’s attachment to the story product. Practicing the story viewpoint does acknowledge story as product but its life as product is not separated from its life as process. The essence of viewpoint storytelling is to plough the product back into the source as immediately and directly as mind and body will allow.

In Viewpoint story work there is no separation of the story and the teller. The teller becomes the story as completely as mind and body will allow. There is therefore no one left over to stand outside the story and narrate. This is achieved by first absolving anyone entering this activity of the responsibility of “telling a story” or in any way communicating outwardly the inner succession of imagery which is being experienced. Secondly the first observer/witness of the story, that is the performer, must allow the story to change. Sticking to a storyline, which precedes the actions of the performer, is the beginning of the alienation of the teller from the story. Consequently, this is discouraged completely. The story is changed or affected by what is occurring moment to moment, so one’s previous work with perception of space, time, shape and sensation comes directly into play. The third instruction therefore is to include the activities of others in our own story. In solo work this means including one’s previous actions. In this case our own movements, and the visual imagery we generate, are the “other” in solo work. In fact we are asked to include everything one perceives and feels into the story to the extent that this is what is driving the story.

(Curricular exercises described in related texts)

Story and Narrative: Relating Story to the other Viewpoints

Creating a spatial narrative

Creating a shape narrative

Creating a movement narrative

Creating an image narrative

Teaching Progression for the story viewpoint

Establishing Image work of a non progressive nature

Non-progressive images Duet Form

Expanding Imagery to include Interpretation of a given story or event

Teaching Scenarios: Introducing the Story Viewpoint

We are going to first generally define story as associations and personal images which progress. Images have definitely been stirred up and have been present in our work with space, time, shape and kinesthetic sensation but we declared them off limits. We noticed them but didn't entertain our images, associations or personal stories. We are now going to let these elements not only be present but begin to take over as our prime mover.

Story is a succession of related images. We allow these images to relate to each other directly, not by perceived content, but by simple inclusiveness and acceptance of their juxtaposition. The fact that one image tumbles out after another is enough to justify their order. What transforms these images from babble into language is our own trust and investment in their coherence. We are cultivating again a kind of inaction, or conceptual gap, where we can experience this free flow of imagery without imposing narrow cognitive directives. These directives often take judgmental forms; "this makes sense, this doesn't make sense". If we allow a gap in judgment a story unfolds which is driven by some necessity to be told—both its source and its reason d'être are unknown in the cognitive, linear sense of understanding but become clarified by the willingness of the performer to give each moment full physical and emotional commitment. In this way the story is not preconceived.

Let's go ahead and enter the space and separately investigate moving from this source. See if you can call it up or generate it in some way and begin to allow it to move you.

How did it go?

Well of course when I want these images to come they just refuse. I am so used to moving without them that it is hard to get them started again. It is so weird that when they weren't allowed they were just all over me and I couldn't just work right away with space.

Where do these images come from? Do we make them up? It is hard not to force them or fake them.

I found myself just moving like I always do from gravity and stuff like that and then the images would come and I could work with them for a while and then I would go back to just moving maybe from shape or time or something. Is this all right or do I have to be really strict about it?

I get afraid of being literal and starting to do bad mime or bad acting.