

CHAPTER 4

Emotion

THE MATERIAL OF EMOTION IS A NATURAL PHENOMENON OF performance. Question: what occurs when a performer stands onstage before an audience? Answer: the performer is present. The Six Viewpoints define Emotion, at its most basic level in performance, as the active self-awareness of the performer. I call this self-awareness *presence*.

To begin to understand presence, the performer starts by collecting data. The surface tension on the skin, breathing patterns, eye movements, swallowing, the tension in the muscles of the jaw, hand movements, shifting posture, thoughts, moods, wandering concentration, memories, concentration, wandering ideas, avoidance or acceptance of the gaze of the audience and the feeling of acceptance or rejection—these are all objects of careful observation. Becoming present is to become aware of the mind and body shifting like sands in a desert.

Many performers edit out these minute details of their own state of being; it does not occur to them to include this level of detail from themselves. This editing results in a partial disengagement, an incomplete state of being, an abridged version of existence. In my opinion editing the self in this way ultimately creates a less powerful performer.

Unless gifted with presence awareness, the performer must work against a protective impulse or hiding mechanism that is triggered by lack of trust. Human instinct advises us to hide information, to avoid being fully witnessed by “the others,” as a survival device in daily life. Unless a performer can establish trust in the audience and begin to dismantle their cloaking actions of “not being there” they will continue to unconsciously hide onstage. For dancers and actors the ability to release this protective mechanism allows them to draw closer to the audience and the audience to draw closer to them. In both acting and dancing, skilled presence work allows for greater visibility, since the performer is not only reaching outward but inviting the audience to come closer and watch them execute these roles as human beings.

Traditionally Emotion is handled in a noticeably different manner in dance than in theater, yet there is common ground. Let’s interrogate performers’ histories and then consider the training differences in emotional communication. This subject is revisited in a philosophical interrogation of the audience found in chapter 12, “The Piano: The Interface between Artist and Audience.”

Traditionally in acting the playwright filters the material of Emotion through the plot of the play. In dance, this material is filtered through the physicality of the movements in the choreography. In both cases the performer must approach this task of the performance of Emotion by drawing on their own past experiences, or by focusing on evocative images.

In theater, in the 20th century, acting methodologies were formulated to achieve a realistic and truthful portrayal of Emotion in service to the play. Theater practitioners—Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, the Strasbergs, Stella Adler, Stanford Meisner, and Grotowski—all developed invaluable approaches to Emotion that are the standard of Western acting to this day.

Modern dance choreographers Martha Graham, José Limón and later Pina Bausch developed physical vocabularies into techniques designed to capture and express unique emotional content. Dancers learn to evoke Emotion through the physical techniques of the choreographers. In earlier times classical ballet dancers were taught a type of pantomime symbolizing various emotions such as love, fear and

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longing. As classical ballet moved into the modern era the choreographic narratives evoked animal images such as the presence of a bird (*The Firebird* choreographed by Michel Fokine with music by Stravinsky) or a faun (in *Afternoon of a Faun* choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky with music by Debussy).

A performer who has mastered the material of Emotion, from the perspective of the SSTEMS interrogation of the Six Viewpoints, has the ability to exist fully onstage under the gaze of the audience, communicating human to human. This total interface between the performer and their audience is what I label presence. Rather than replacing traditional approaches to emotion, presence can provide a fascinating basis. To be present in your own breathing, sensing, thinking, seeing, hearing and processing is for some performers natural and a part of their acting technique; for others this stance can be more difficult. In either situation, investigating Emotion as presence invites a poetic view of the discipline of performance and can be enormously helpful as an artistic tool.

The technique of presence reminds me of the Zen koan. Both are minimal, elegant and yet contain so much in such a small act. Powerful aspects of performance, being in contact with a microscopic awareness of yourself and how you are received that is often hidden by conventional acting and dancing, can surface when Emotion is reduced to presence. This "koan" begins with placing the performer onstage without anything, narrative or choreographic, to perform.

Presence essentially changes the game plan of most performance training. The ability to perform your own presence is essential for the performer in establishing a wide and grounded understanding of the natural basis of communication in the theater. Through the Viewpoints presence training the performers discover not only themselves but also better understand the audience.

Here is how, based on my observations, to begin building an awareness of the performer's more expanded self, eventually leading to a greater command of presence. First, have the performer sit in front of a class, with nothing to perform, and collect data about themselves as they consciously allow themselves to be watched. A narrative of this activity might look like this:

Ahh, here I am and they are watching me. This is causing my breathing to be fairly shallow, there is a rigidity in my body and especially in my spine; I don't feel comfortable with them watching me; now a wave of sensation is rippling up the surface of my back; I am acutely aware of my shoulders for some reason; I need to allow them to see that I am uncomfortable. My focus could be more acute; I am in a mild fog. I would like to swallow and instead grind my teeth lightly; they can see me grinding my teeth. I have stopped breathing for a second. I shift my ribcage and take a deep breath that moves my last three ribs. I just dropped my eyelids; I am going to keep them down and let myself know that they can see this gesture, this action, the vulnerable position. I look up, smile nervously at my audience, taking a ragged breath. This is my current state of being.

As performers bringing this version of themselves to life, they must occasionally dare to look directly into the eyes of their audience. This act assures that they are not avoiding any aspect of acknowledgment that they are there before a witness. If all is going well, the performer will accumulate the ability to be *present* and gain a thrilling experience: the gift of being seen. It is important to note that in order to perform this practice you must try to embrace the idea that you are loved and allowed to sit there. Some performers can actually feel that they are not wanted onstage.

It is important to note that things can go wrong in the practice. To avoid the task of being present students will sometimes resort to faux realistic activities such as pulling at their clothes or fixating on a button. These make-believe activities usually enter into a continuous rhythm that keeps the student distracted from the reality of being before our eyes. When these behaviors are observed the teacher must remind the student to refocus on what is being seen, on what is present in themselves.

In an effort to introduce Emotion as presence to students at the Experimental Theatre Wing, I began calling the practice the Dog-Sniff-Dog World. Pure presence is a shared instinct, easier to observe in dogs but still always there in every meeting of human with human as well. We are all capable of reading through presence the countless indicators of state of mind and emotional condition. I think New Yorkers enjoy engaging in this under the protection of the semi-anonymity of streets and

subways. To demonstrate this Dog-Sniff-Dog World I suggest to my students that we could bring someone in from the street and have them simply stand in our studio for three minutes; upon their exit the class defines their state of mental and physical health and articulates the major traits of their personality. This instinctual ability is ingrained in us. We only block it because we are wary of getting caught or being placed in a dangerous situation. I think performers should interrogate their own presence, and by doing this they become independent performing artists capable of approaching the audience directly and with great subtlety.

When you are able to experience and perform presence on the level of the Six Viewpoints you will find a new meaning and understanding of what can and does transpire in performance.

All of my favorite performers and directors have a clear grasp of presence, whether it is in their own performance or in the content of composition, from Dolly Parton to Robert Wilson, from Johnny Depp to Yvonne Rainer, from Richard Foreman to Philip Glass. In my view the specific content and esthetic does not truly matter. This direct contact with the audience, along with the clarity of what is being delivered, gives the performer an exquisite feeling of being included in communication with the audience.

In several of my early dances, *Adam* and *Painters Dream* for instance, I explored the element of presence as one of the main experimental focuses.

In *Adam* I decided to make a solo about my father Olav. I am not a biographer or a portrait artist. I used him to study how he used presence. He rarely spoke yet was in constant communication with all around him. As a farmer, surveyor and lover of nature he was emotionally present with nature. I thought that if I made a theater piece based on his presence, I would have a unique opportunity to study a nonverbal state of Emotion.

I structured this solo as a kind of haiku, paring down the physical staging to the bare necessities. This seemed appropriate to his way of being and to the possibility of examining Emotion under a high-powered microscope. The solo contained the following elements: lying on a mattress in three positions, sitting in one position,

walking five steps forward on a diagonal, standing, walking five steps back, and repeating these movements in any order with any timing for 20 minutes. The experiment was to see if the audience could read, through my presence, my thoughts and emotions, as I had read those of my father many years ago.

The solo became a cornerstone of my research into Emotion. Through this work I learned how to relax in front of an audience, to allow them to read me, and to refrain from covering my fear of being watched by being entertaining. The audience reported that they found the performance a highly emotional experience. They felt that they could read my thoughts. They could read me! This solo eventually formed the basis of the presence practice that is now part of the Viewpoints classroom.

When an actor or a dancer comes to stand as an equal observer/participant with this material of Emotion through presence, they can start to perceive how accurately, in the emotional world, people can read the presence of other people and establish a performance that fully converses with the audience.

In this presence practice, the performer begins to grow in performative and conceptual substance. Over the span of a semester I watch as this experience of presence grows and takes hold in students' concept of what can happen in the theater. They feel increasingly at home and welcomed having tested the waters of their own presence. A fragile but powerful performer emerges: the uncloaked human being! Through the interrogation of their natural presence the performer can experience the thrill of being fully present in front of the audience.

Standing in Space

The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice

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