*CHAPTER 1*

# Space

CLEARED OF THE CLUTTER OF PLAYS AND CHOREOGRAPHIES, WHAT remains onstage? What lies beneath inventions? To locate the first of the materials, Space, try to find a nonhierarchical perspective by warming up your body so it is fully awake, then climb into Space by simply standing, walking, observing, listening and feeling the space you have at hand. Entering into a physical relationship to Space takes time and you should use every means available to explore and familiarize yourself with this material. Run your hands over the walls and floor, turn at every angle by increments of an inch and see what you are facing. Measure the Space you have entered using the tools of mathematics as my father used to map roads, lay out crops and later hunt for oil. Use your body to begin to know the distances in the room by how many aikido rolls it takes to cross from end to end; walk all the steps in every diagonal.

As you do these practices a catalogue of awarenesses will form and become a part of your physical and visual life as a performer. Find the center. Relocate the center and experiment with what happens to the rest of the Space when you do so. As you engage in this manner you will begin to merge with the Space and be allowed to receive its "thinking," its "art," its "voice." As you begin to measure, Space will take on the ability to direct you, and your visual perceptions will begin to scan a much more profound level of spatial awareness.

With these explorations, the Six Viewpoints is passing on investigations that are the direct result of my own introduction to Space in 1970, in the midst of the Conceptual Minimalist art movement. Walk through a perceptual door to Space, and it begins to be your partner in performance. Standing in Space onstage removes a kind of alienation that can sometimes cause a feeling of loneliness and insecurity. As you become aware that you have a profound material as a collaborator these feelings depart and an integration with Space becomes something that is with you at all times onstage.

With an invitation to come to New York to participate in an exciting new kind of dance based in improvisation, a vivid and life-changing realization was hovering just around a conceptual corner from me. The work being done at that time in music, sculpture, painting, theater and dance still resonates throughout the art world with its radically stripped down nature of the experimentation.

You could say Space was in my blood, coming from Montana, but what began to draw an awareness of Space as a dancer was a solo given to me by Barbara Dilley. She was giving a workshop in San Francisco, having left the Merce Cunningham Dance Company just a few years earlier and currently performing with the ensemble The Grand Union. I had no thoughts of going to New York, enraptured as I was with mountain climbing in the Sierras and dancing in the open air by the Bay. Although I must admit, I was terribly lonely as an artist and bored, lacking artistic stimulus. Dilley's solo was, I believe, her first choreography, created for herself in 1968 and titled Blind Bird Box Dance. It was based on the concept of "dancing the energies in the space." And those were my instructions.

I was to rehearse on my own in a beautiful studio full of light. I went through weeks of hell not knowing what I was looking for and where to start. I would leave the studio feeling dizzy and nauseated by the presence of so much space and nothing to do in it. I resolved the problem by studying aikido. I cannot remember whether Barbara had suggested this or not. Aikido directs the energy of the space and of the opponent's movements as a combated skill. I began to be able to perceive the energy flow in my rehearsal studio and eventually could work for hours just letting it push my body as a part of the flow. I had gained an invisible dance partner/choreographer.

Barbara seemed pleased with my performance and I was rewarded with an invitation to come to New York to work with her on her next project, a performance at the Whitney Museum. For my part I was impressed with how a simple thing like Space could be so engaging to perform. Much to my amazement, I had located Space and had begun to grapple with this material. I had not discovered that it was possible to encounter it as a discrete focus beyond a specific dance.

Any student of the Six Viewpoints, once they have begun to discover Space through "standing in it," must immediately begin to test its efficacy as a performance medium. Just as the artists in SoHo in the seventies, myself included, discovered, you must establish that a performance based on Space will work. You need to test Space to see how it responds as an effective communicative language. For this you need the Petri dish of a community where you can make small works and perform them for an audience. Through direct testing you find your guides. Like taking a boat through the Northwest Passage, you have to be in a situation where you are called upon to make your communication with Space work. You need to test if your skill with Space passes as art or not. I tell my students, "Let the materials teach you. They know more and have better ideas." Certainly the Space of so many stages has taught me and continues to teach me to work with the thrill of its physical presence.

All performance techniques—and Space is a performance technique, just as there are mountaineering techniques, ice flow navigation techniques, and ballet—must be tested for efficacy by the artists who use them. No progress can be made by copying a look or a formula when it comes to making your own work with the raw materials.

Although I had studied Cunningham technique and felt a part of his influence, I finally met Merce Cunningham as a participant in one of the Pro Series in the late 1980s. He and his company were performing their entire repertory as the basis of the Vienna Summer Dance Festival, the Tanzwochen Wien. Some years later in the early 1990s he came to teach a workshop for the Pro Series at the Tanz Wochen, a project for which I was partially responsible for setting up.

At this workshop he introduced his 360-degree use of Space. This concept had evolved, out of his collaborations with filmmaker Charles Atlas, to address his frustrations in

having to alter his choreography to suit the confined space of a camera lens.

As a part of the Pro Series Workshops, I led a kind of study group that worked on coming up with insightful questions for interviewing choreographers visiting the festival. The evening of our arranged talk with Merce Cunningham, one of my students asked him if he ever got tired of what he was doing. He said yes. There was a gasp from the audience at the audacity of the question and also at his reply. Then he very earnestly told us that when that happened, he took a walk around the block and he was back to work. I believe that he was in his late seventies at the time. That kind of dedication is only found when the artist has tested their work and found it to be valuable. If their interrogation of the materials and concept they have chosen is well founded, the dialogue is inexhaustible.

Looking back I can see how the process of comprehending this material was slowly wearing away my inherited dance self-involvement. I was beginning to shed bad habits that had materialized as space blockers: dance techniques and choreographies that filled the Space with movements lacking any deep relationship to the studio or the stage. At the time I moved to New York, after Blind Bird Box Dance, I would not have been able to issue the instructions at the opening of this chapter. I still had no comprehension of the cascade of deconstructing, "particalizing," nonhierarchical epiphanies that were to follow. Almost four months after I moved to New York, in a rehearsal at 112 Green Street with the Natural History of the American Dancer company, I found myself joining Suzie Harris singing "au naturel, au naturel, we want to be au naturel!" We were celebrating our efficiency as readers of the natural elements in the stage. For me that process had begun in earnest with our rehearsals for the Whitney concert.

We rehearsed virtually every day in a completely nonverbal artistic meeting. Like mountain climbing, you begin and work your way through. The spoken word has nothing to do with it. Space emerged as a clear language of our dancing. We were given the time to discover it with our bodies as it emerged on its own. Space came with its own languages, such as heightened awareness of visual patterns and connections. All of the SSTEMS slowly emerged with their own nonverbal languages and principles appearing out of the physical engagement with the dancing. The dancers were

Barbara Dilley, Rachael Lew, Suzie Harris, Cynthia Hedstrom, Carmen Beauchat, Judy Padow and myself. We came into the studio and researched with no formal instructions or imaginings of what we were looking for. To me this is the ultimate artistic freedom. And we found so much from willingness, thoughtfulness and diligence.

As has happened often over the years, after our first public performances that year at the Whitney, I was proud of the enlightenment I had achieved. Unknown to me at the time, as a dancer I was far from a true understanding of Space. I had acquired an intense relationship and love of Space and had begun to comprehend that I had entered into a sort of village within an art movement. I was finding out the languages and secret methods of its practices. The inhabitants of this village, my fellow dancers and artists of every medium, would attend each other's performances, ad hoc painting and sculpture openings, and listen to new music compositions several nights a week. I remember hearing Philip Glass introduce his work as I sat on a folding chair in a parking lot, with the notes repeating and slowly rising to the sky in a spiral it seemed. At the same time, my project, what would come to be known as the Six Viewpoints, was collecting more and more deconstructive structural information. The materials emerging in our rehearsals would be labeled the six SSTEMS. The SSTEMS, the six viewpoints through which to enter performance, would form the name of this philosophy and practice.

We had had a wonderful and intense time at the Whitney Museum. Communicating in that way with that group of women was a deeply formative experience for all of us. When the performance was over we wanted to extend our work, and formed a collective performance group under Barbara's original title, The Natural History of the American Dancer. We decided that each of us would make and perform a solo to officially introduce ourselves to each other. The beauty of Space had been weaving in and out of our work for months so I decided to make a solo in an unusual place to show my admiration for the material. I would soon learn just how much less educated and newer to the scene I was than the other six women.

Still fresh from California, I thought it would be smart and "avant-garde" if I did a solo outdoors. So there I was, standing across the street from the gallery at 112

Greene Street, where we most often rehearsed on the second floor, Suzie Harris's loft . When I finished my dance there was a terrible silence from the company. The thought passed through my mind that I had just finished my association with them. I was out! Then Suzy asked Rachael if she wanted to make a comment. No, Rachael did not want to speak. So Suzy asked me: "Do you know where you are?"

I was shocked. What a question. I said that I was in New York City. She said, "Yes, but do you know where you are?" I began to panic. I could not imagine what she meant. Finally Rachael said, "You are about two feet from the building behind you, three-quarters up the block, and 12 feet from the building across the street." In that instant I was transported from a partial, performance use of Space to a much greater understanding of Space. I realized that I could have a dialogue with Space as a discrete material. The final act of deconstruction fell into place and I came to occupy a position as an artist in this vast material. SHAZZAM!!!

A few days later I returned to Montana to spend the summer studying "where I was." I had entered into a lifelong dialogue with this exquisite material. My research began in the unrelenting horizons of treeless prairie 30 miles from the Canadian border. I remember standing in my parents' kitchen in Shelby, Montana: The table is up against the wall below the window. I am at a very odd angle to the room . . . . After a month, I began to truly see and feel Space. Once back in New York with our company, I extended my research in rehearsals and in performance. Later I would choreograph with Space and teach others about "Space consciousness." I had found the first of six materials that are the foundation of Viewpoints theory.

As you explore Space outside of its use in theater or dance, a profound realization, a performance presence, settles into your being. That presence is the consciousness of standing in Space on a visual and interactive plane that overlaps the performing and visual arts. With practice, you gain the means to tip your work in any direction by placing more or less emphasis on Space. A choreography can be based primarily on spatial patterns, as in the work of Lucinda Childs and her complicated counting. Her ensemble, using only steps and skipping, with arms held low in an almost pedestrian manner to reduce their visual impact, performed Space as a visual/dimensional entity. Her work with Space broke barriers in dance, and the art form crossed over

into visual arts territory. The same dramatic effect can be witnessed in the works of Robert Wilson. His use of Space as one of the main sources of narrative has given his work worldwide and operatic impact. He is respected in both performance and the visual arts as a groundbreaking artist.

As a performer, there is nothing quite like being trained to consciously stand in Space without depending on elaborate movement, music, story or character. Both Childs and Wilson require dancers able to perform this task. Historically, Space was subordinated to the story and used as blocking, or arranged primarily to fill the needs of the onstage movement. When a one-on-one relationship with Space is fully realized, Space awareness itself can become a primary artistic driver of the performance. The fully developed relationship with Space is not a "skill" that can be simply copied stylistically. Hours of standing in Space is required to truly occupy the stillness, to hold the action of Space.

As you read through this chapter and encounter any difficulty in understanding Space as a discrete material, remember that there is nothing fundamentally unfamiliar in the concept. Understanding Space is an innate ability that most of us possess to varying degrees. Investigating Space through the Six Viewpoints, along with the other materials in the SSTEMS, is direct and obvious. When you add observation of distances between yourself and fellow performers, and pay attention to the spatial patterns you make together, you will develop an awareness of Space as a unifying effect. The practice of Space awareness has been in use since the seventies to instill ensemble performance skills.

In contrast to marching in drill formation or other externally directed ways of forming an ensemble, the Viewpoints' acute spatial awareness introduces a practice that functions as a self-directed language. A dialogue free of external instructions brings performers into a unique dynamic unity. Focusing on such basic elements as "where am I, where is everyone else, where are the walls, where are we going, what does this look like spatially to the audience?" can achieve a particular unity while maintaining individual independent perspective. "Listening" to Space starts with a conversation that gathers into a heightened sense of cooperation.

When you are teaching the Viewpoints or rehearsing with performers who do not know the Viewpoints, it is easy to see which performers are not familiar with or are having difficulty with becoming aware of Space. Without a developed spatial perception, they unconsciously behave as if they are the center of attention. Performers who lack spatial awareness tend to gravitate towards the center of the stage, are not able to perceive the placement of others as important information and do not experience any visual impact of their own movements in Space. Space is only where they are and center stage just seems the right place to stand, since the rest of the stage feels empty and meaningless. Rooted in one spot, these performers are immobilized and deliver their lines or dance moves with one spatial focus. They have a tendency to fixate on their scene or dance partners rather than on the pattern between them. In their minds, a partner is the only other important focus since they are surrounded by useless voids. It is always amazing to me that to recover from this space blindness, all that is needed is a session or two of "Walk and Stop in Space" with the suggestion to observe and interact with what is surrounding them. For most of my students it is simply a case of waking up something they once knew intrinsically.

In traditional theater, a traditionally spatially aware actor might have a dialogue like this:

> *"I am standing upstage left; I want to cross downstage right to sit in a chair. When I proceed in the opposite direction first, just a few steps, it enlivens the space and emphasizes the crossing toward the audience. The arc temporarily takes me closer to the other performer, gives me more time to say my line and gives me a variety of angles to make eye contact from. I can also look back at the space I just left, signifying a slight feeling of regret."*

He or she is still using Space as blocking, although aware of the grace it affords their needs. If, however, the performer can trust in the articulation of Space as a full material, the "cross" to the chair could become something like this:

> *"Wanting to sit in a chair but turning the hierarchy of the Space into a horizontal experience, I arrange to have the chair moved to three locations and I finally sit*

*down. Now I have the other characters arrange all the furniture to be in exactly the same relationship to the new position so that everything is now in the original position but the entire set has been adjusted to a new orientation onstage. Space is now alive as an important part of the piece of theater and the audience is alerted to the possibility that anything might happen."*

Some years ago, a group of my students were working with Space in a small park in New York City, opposite the city's great spatial landmark, the Flatiron Building. It was lunchtime on a beautiful day. My students were practicing being invisible, so as not to impact or disturb the dining office workers crowded on the pathways and benches. The work was going quite well, and no one seemed to notice the students walking in strange patterns, stopping in various formations, sitting, and lying down to change their vertical relationship to street lamps, water fountains, and statues. This went on for 15, 20 minutes, with everything flowing smoothly. Then a woman pushing a baby carriage came to an abrupt stop a few feet away, transfixed, with an intense, concentrated energy on her face. Not only could she see all of the students within the crowd, but she seemed to fully and intuitively comprehend what they were doing!

I was curious about what caused the cloak of invisibility to drop so easily as she approached. I explained that we were a theater class from NYU. The woman turned with a bewildered, almost beatific glint in her eyes and said, "Since my baby was born I haven't had any space. For months and months, just me and the child. You and your students have given back to me a sense of space. Thank you. Thank you." As she walked off, pushing the stroller at a calm, leisurely pace, her body seemed to open up to the world around her. At that moment I felt a flash of profound gratitude to Space and what I had come to know about it. How elegant and communal it can be. How essential to life it is, how playful and important for our minds and for a healthy presence on the planet. While we were trying to keep to ourselves inconspicuous working in Space, she saw us the way a hungry person can smell food when others who are well fed cannot. She was able to see Space because she was in great need of it.

# Standing in Space

*The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*

Mary Overlie