

## Preface

THIS BOOK IS STYLED AS A SERIES OF SOCRATIC DIALOGUES interrogating the stage and performance as natural phenomena. Folded into these dialogues you will find: (a) a curriculum setting out a progression of study; (b) the relevant history in order to understand the intent of this study; and (c) a complete Practice Manual describing the Viewpoints classroom practices, each followed by descriptions of the desired results. Such a structure allows the Six Viewpoints to be integrated into a nonhierarchical pedagogical and artistic practice. Nonhierarchical refers to any situation characterized by impartiality.

The Viewpoints approach both dance and theater as physical entities akin to natural landscapes that can be entered and traversed. In this specific gaze at the art form of performance, creating plays or choreographies in the traditional sense is not directly addressed. These two creative entities are left in the hands of the artists with the hope that the Viewpoints shed some light on their individual practices. In other words, the Six Viewpoints do not offer up a safari through the landscape of performance as a relatable, convenient and safe journey for the traveler. The Viewpoints is dedicated to reading the stage as a force of nature. Culling the experiences of performance like a mountain climber, the performer explores the basic material with their own body, their own presence.

Always deeply reflective and independently minded as a child, I once thought I would be a painter like my beloved next door neighbors. I grew up physically embedded in nature and mentally enthralled with art. When I discovered dance, the two came together: I thought about choreography as painting with my body, and as I advanced I discovered that the stage was half canvas and half mountain. That the walls of the theater were like canyons, the visual presence of the body like shapes of boulders and trees, movement was the same as the kinetic world of the rivers and the wind. That time moved on and on from second to millennium, from the beginning of time to encircling me in my breathing, that emotion was present in my presence, and that logic or story was there before I entered the space. I set about looking for the languages to express this existence, the materials of my performance world. The phenomenological nature of this journey, now called the Six Viewpoints, allows me to question what is present in traditional forms and what lies beneath and beyond formal art.

*"The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces—the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal—trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement."*

BARRY LOPEZ, *Arctic Dreams*

The Six Viewpoints' regard for the stage as a physical entity allows us to encounter information before the creative act of making. By a specific process of deconstruction, six materials located as the Six Viewpoints—Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement and Story—are separated from the creative act and emerge as conversations. This dialogue includes but does not favor the actor, dancer, choreographer or director over the materials of performance. In the process of discovering the languages of these materials, they are placed on an equal footing. As this occurs, just as in these quoted passages by Barry Lopez, an element of estrangement between the performer, the stage and the audience is dissolved.

## P R E F A C E

*"The beauty here is a beauty you feel in your flesh. You feel it physically... Other beauty takes only the heart, or the mind."*

*"... this affinity for the land, I believe, is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair."*

BARRY LOPEZ, *Arctic Dreams*

The Six Viewpoints grew out of observations and experiments that have been organized into a systematic approach to performance. The drive to find this structure is part of my evolution as an artist and reflects the philosophical, social and spiritual influences of my childhood and of an era that made great strides creating new languages in many fields of art.

The work of Philip Glass in music; Richard Serra, Richard Nonas, Donald Judd in sculpture; Dan Flavin and Keith Sonnier in painting/visual arts; Yvonne Rainer, Barbara Dilley, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton and Stephen Petronio in dance; Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Joanne Akalitis, Liz LeCompte and Lee Breuer in theater are all extraordinary examples of an era of esthetic game-changing art. From my perspective these artists investigated their art forms through a natural, phenomenological interrogation of their mediums, deviating from the traditional path of creative invention. My favorite art of the 1970s focused awareness on the most basic materials, seeking art that could be found in what already existed in the forms before the artist is even present. This work was dedicated to bringing these fragile and profound sources to the audience.

The Viewpoints evolution draws on many sources:

- my childhood in Montana
- my teachers in a new age of dance
- the atmosphere of the SoHo art scene of the seventies where I lived and worked
- dance artists whose work, I believe, was interrogating their own bodies as physical/natural phenomenon

- my many years of choreographing and performing
- my many years of teaching: at the Internationale Tanzwochen Wien in Vienna, Austria; other locations in Europe and America; and as full-time faculty of the Experimental Theatre Wing, which I helped create at Tisch School of the Arts Undergraduate Drama, New York University

This book follows my esthetic of allowing students, artists and the audiences to find their own way. You will find no formulas or directions about how to make good theater or dance. In my opinion, art and the experience of viewing art must come with a challenge: to re-learn what is already known. If students are given a solid foundation in the process of interrogating, along with viable technical skills to meet the conditions of interrogation, they will be able to find new truths and new perspectives, and the audience will be able to follow their findings.

- The Viewpoints training:
- launches students on their own physical interrogation of the materials
- discusses results of investigations
- proposes challenges to make new discoveries

The Practice Manual at the conclusion of this book is designed to bring together artist, audience and the materials of performance.

The art of performance has been analyzed and theorized over many generations in the interest of improving and extending technical and artistic knowledge. The Six Viewpoints does not seek to challenge history or to replace it but to simply add to this knowledge. Directors, choreographers, actors and dancers have always worked with the materials that are being interrogated here. The title, Six Viewpoints, refers to a unique and radical emphasis on infinitesimally small particles of awareness.

Deconstruction of ever-narrowing iterations is used to separate the physical stage and physical performance into Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement and Story. Separating the form exposes a different plane of knowledge, one that allows for a new integration of the materials.

The interrogation of art can be broken down into three distinct movements:

- the Classicists assumed that the stage was there to practice and celebrate form
- the Modernists assumed that the stage was there to examine the lives and difficulties of human existence
- the Postmodernists assume that the stage is there to enact microscopic interrogation of our physical, mental and emotional world

As a postmodern structure, the Viewpoints believe that:

- there is no need to add an extra narrative into performance, because performance is a dialogue with the natural elements themselves
- viewers have the visual and mental capacity to organize and understand what they are witnessing since they are familiar with the raw materials from the artists' daily life
- there is a message and intelligence before the artist arrives onstage

The Six Viewpoints contains a second structure, the Bridge, to accompany the natural investigation of materials (Space, Shape, Time, Emotions, Movement and Story, or SSTEMS). The Bridge is formulated from nine interrogations I conducted. It functions as a stimulus to investigation, as a way of substantiating the ideas surrounding the Viewpoints, and also contains a vital teaching curriculum. Each interrogation forms a laboratory aimed at understanding the practice of nonhierarchical treatment of the stage and performance. This series of laboratories create a type of double helix in which the six raw physical materials, the SSTEMS, are accompanied by conceptual guides that clarify the interrogations.

The traditional hierarchies of story/emotion in acting and movement/music in dancing are structures dictating the use and value of the rest of the stage's materials. The Six Viewpoints employs this double helix-like structure to require the artist to function as a trained observer, equal partner and free agent in conversation with all materials. A transition is required to discard the traditional creator/originator

definition of the artist. The study of the SSTEMS and the Bridge is that transition.

The evolution of the Six Viewpoints came about as naturally as the study that they represent. Before I knew dance, I was a wild and unfettered child surrounded by the vast, "empty" spaces of Montana. I lived on a hillside that ran into mountains continuing for nearly a hundred miles straight into Yellowstone National Park. Anything in that landscape that could provide a chance to experience movement was irresistible: the hills to run on, the creek to float, the railroad track to balance on, the trees to hide between, grass to slide down on improvised cardboard sleds at breakneck speed, and sleds on snow in winter. Later would come skiing, mountain climbing and camping at high altitudes.

While still a child in Montana I developed a hunger to learn the technical languages of choreography. Impressed by discussions between fine art painters who lived across the road I embarked on my pursuit of a physical equivalent of ancient visual languages of perspective, entry of light on the canvas, dialogue between the center of canvas in relationship to the edges, etc. At 17 I ran away from home catching a freight train to San Francisco and at 24 was invited to join the New York City dance company *Natural History of the American Dancer*, Performing Lesser Known Species Volumes 12 thru 24 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. I moved to New York and carried out my search in three primary laboratories:

- the early SoHo galleries and artists' lofts where I witnessed and was involved in much creative outpouring
- intense improvisational rehearsal and performance with *The Natural History of the American Dancer*
- my own studio at 530 Canal Street, where I choreographed and improvised with my dance company

Each step of my journey is reflected in this interrogation of the SSTEMS and the Bridge.

## INTRODUCTION

# The SSTEMS

*Space—Shape—Time—Emotions—Movement—Story*

**MATERIALS.** THE VERY WORD MAKES ME WANT TO STRETCH MY JOINTS, engage my body and go to work. The project of the following six chapters is to bring a perspective to the materials of the stage and of performance, allowing these elements to take the lead in a creative dialogue. This action of affirmation emanating from the stage allows the artist/performer to reach beyond creative imagination. The Six Viewpoints invites a one-on-one, knowledgeable, integrated, physical relationship with the art of performance.

To begin, you might try the following curriculum: read each chapter on the SSTEMS and at the same time take each of the SSTEMS one at a time using each of the practices found in succession in the Practice Manual. In your approach follow this advice:

*Turn off the impulse to control or own the material.* Listen and see what already exists, instead of trying to manipulate a material into something that looks like art or theater or dance to you. Simply be there in it, be aware and be curious. This may be uncomfortable at first. It may also be a great relief. Getting to know the SSTEMS can impart a sense of freedom and connectedness based on a simple existence with what surrounds us.

*Work very specifically with the individual material.* Resist the impulse to add several SSTEMS to any practice unless you make a conscious choice to mix focuses. This is critical to hone your awareness and understanding of each separate material.

*Gather as much "useless" data as you can.* This information may in fact seem contrary to the desire to make art. It is with this useless data that you can tune in the languages of the SSTEMS.

*Take time to explore.* This interrogation requires time to allow the body to absorb information. The length of time it takes to become a good SSTEMS linguist will vary from person to person, but I recommend at least 36 hours of data collection in each SSTEMS as a good starting point. Your learning will accumulate naturally without an objective and you will be in conversations that can lead you somewhere.

# Standing in Space

*The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*

Mary Overlie