CHAPTER 1

A HISTORY OF VIEWPOINTS AND COMPOSITION

A seismic cultural shift occurred in America during the middle of the last century. It was a shift marked by such events as the protests against the Vietnam War, the marches for civil rights, and the birth of abstract expressionism, postmodernism, and minimalism. During the 1960s this cultural explosion and artistic revolution gained momentum in New York City, San Francisco and other urban centers and then spread across the nation. The movement was political, aesthetic and personal, and it altered the way artists thought about their processes, their audiences and their role in the world. This sudden eruption of activity was like a breath of fresh air for many young people, including a group of artists—the Judson Church Theater—who united together at the Judson Church on Washington Square in New York City. The group included the young painters Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, composers John Cage and Philip Corner, filmmaker Gene Friedman, and dancers Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, Laura
Dean, Simone Forti and others. Inspired by their dance composition teacher, Robert Dunn, these dancers wanted to question the assumptions of their own training and how they approached their work. They wanted to create alternatives to the pervasive influence of George Balanchine, Martha Graham and even closer contemporaries, like Merce Cunningham. They wanted to liberate choreography from psychology and conventional drama.

"What is dance?" they asked. "If an elephant swings its trunk, is it dance? If a person walks across the stage, is that dance?"

A number of experiments ensued: performances on rooftops, audiences witnessing events through keyholes, dancers suspended in midair, dancers on rolling platforms. Working with the notion that anything is possible, these artists started to change the rules. Rauschenberg and Johns, for example, not only created designs for the performances but often conceived the events and performed in them. Improvisation became the common language and everyone helped each other out.

One of the fundamental agreements that united this group was their belief in nonhierarchical art and the use of "real time" activities which were arrived at through game-like structures or task-oriented activities. The group wanted to function democratically with all members having equal access to performance opportunities. In improvisations, each participant had the same power in the creation of an event. The aesthetic thinking was also nonhierarchical. Music, for example, would not dictate choices. An object could have the same importance as a human body. The spoken word could be on equal footing with gesture. One idea could hold the same importance as another on the same stage at the same time.

These postmodern pioneers forged the territory upon which we now stand. They rejected the insistence by the modern dance world upon social messages and virtuosic technique, and replaced it with internal decisions, structures, rules or problems. What made the final dance was the context of the dance. Whatever movement occurred while working on these problems became the art. This philosophy lies at the heart of both Viewpoints and Composition.

In the early 1970s, Aileen Passloff, a dancer and choreographer and an influential touchstone in the Judson Church Movement, became Anne's professor at Bard College. Aileen's composition class had an enormous effect on the way Anne began to think about creating work. The students were asked to create their own work based on dreams, objects, advertisements, whatever might seem fodder for creation. For Anne, this was the genesis of a lifetime's interest in applying theories of painting, architecture, music and film to theater. Aileen also inspired Anne to investigate the creative role of each performer.

Later, in 1979, Anne met choreographer Mary Overlie, the inventor of the "Six Viewpoints," at New York University, where they were both on the faculty of the Experimental Theater Wing. Although a latecomer to the Judson scene, Mary, who had trained as a dancer and choreographer, attributes her own innovations to those Judson Church experiments. Her thinking was also ignited by colleagues in San Francisco, including Anna Halprin in Berkeley, Deborah Hay and, particularly, Barbara Dilley, who, with Mary, brought together an all-women's group called the Natural History of the American Dancer.

Mary immersed herself in these innovations and came up with her own way to structure dance improvisation in time and space—the Six Viewpoints: Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement and Story. She began to apply these principles, not only to her own work as choreographer, but also to her teaching. Subsequently, her work has influenced several generations of theater artists.

Mary's approach to the Six Viewpoints was and continues to be absolute. She's adamantly about their purity. To her chagrin and delight, her students and colleagues, recognizing the genius of her innovations and their immediate relevance to the theater, have extrapolated and expanded her Viewpoints for their own use.

To Anne (and later Tina), it was instantly clear that Mary's approach to generating movement for the stage was applicable to creating viscerally dynamic moments of theater with actors and other collaborators. In 1987, Tina and Anne met while working at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA. Over the next
ten years, they collaborated extensively, experimented theatrically, and gradually expanded Overlie’s Six Viewpoints to both nine Physical Viewpoints (Spatial Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture, Tempo, Duration and Topography) and Vocal Viewpoints (Pitch, Dynamic, Acceleration/Deceleration, Silence and Timbre).

Over the past twenty years, Viewpoints training has ignited the imaginations of choreographers, actors, directors, designers, dramaturgs and writers. While the Viewpoints are now taught all over the world and used by many theater artists in the rehearsal process, the theory and its application are still relatively new. The questions arise frequently: What exactly is Viewpoints? What exactly is Composition?

CHAPTER 2

VIEWPOINTS AND COMPOSITION: WHAT ARE THEY?

Viewpoints, Composition: What do these terms mean? The following definitions reflect our understanding and use of them. Even in the context of the work of such pioneers as Mary Overlie and Aileen Passloff, it is impossible to say where these ideas actually originated, because they are timeless and belong to the natural principles of movement, time and space. Over the years, we have simply articulated a set of names for things that already exist: things that we do naturally and have always done, with greater or lesser degrees of consciousness and emphasis.

VIEWPOINTS

○ Viewpoints is a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage.
Viewpoints is a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens onstage.

Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working.

We work with nine Physical Viewpoints, within Viewpoints of Time and Viewpoints of Space. The bulk of this book focuses on the Physical Viewpoints, though Vocal Viewpoints, which we developed later, are addressed in Chapter 9. The Vocal Viewpoints are specifically related to sound as opposed to movement. Physical and Vocal Viewpoints overlap each other and constantly change in relative value, depending on the artist or teacher and/or the style of the production. The Physical Viewpoints are:

**Viewpoints of Time**

**TEMPO**

The rate of speed at which a movement occurs; how fast or slow something happens onstage.

**DURATION**

How long a movement or sequence of movements continues. Duration, in terms of Viewpoints work, specifically relates to how long a group of people working together stay inside a certain section of movement before it changes.

**KINESHETIC RESPONSE**

A spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you; the timing in which you respond to the external events of movement or sound; the impulsive movement that occurs from a stimulation of the senses. An example: someone claps in front of your eyes and you blink in response; or someone slams a door and you impulsively stand up from your chair.

**REPETITION**

The repeating of something onstage. Repetition includes (1) Internal Repetition (repeating a movement within your own body); (2) External Repetition (repeating the shape, tempo, gesture, etc., of something outside your own body).

**Viewpoints of Space**

**SHAPE**

The contour or outline the body (or bodies) makes in space. All Shape can be broken down into either (1) lines; (2) curves; (3) a combination of lines and curves.

Therefore, in Viewpoints training we create shapes that are round, shapes that are angular, shapes that are a mixture of these two.

In addition, Shape can either be (1) stationary; (2) moving through space.

Lastly, Shape can be made in one of three forms: (1) the body in space; (2) the body in relationship to architecture making a shape; (3) the body in relationship to other bodies making a shape.

**GESTURE**

A movement involving a part or parts of the body; Gesture is Shape with a beginning, middle and end. Gestures can be made with the hands, the arms, the legs, the head, the mouth, the eyes, the feet, the stomach, or any other part or combination of parts that can be isolated. Gesture is broken down into:

1. **BEHAVIORAL GESTURE**: Belongs to the concrete, physical world of human behavior as we observe it in our everyday reality. It is the kind of gesture you see in the supermarket or on the subway: scratching, pointing, waving, sniffing, bowing, saluting. A Behavioral Gesture can give informa-
tion about character, time period, physical health, circumstance, weather, clothes, etc. It is usually defined by a person's character or the time and place in which they live. It can also have a thought or intention behind it. A Behavioral Gesture can be further broken down and worked on in terms of Private Gesture and Public Gesture, distinguishing between actions performed in solitude and those performed with awareness of or proximity to others.

2. **Expressive Gesture**. Expresses an inner state, an emotion, a desire, an idea or a value. It is abstract and symbolic rather than representational. It is universal and timeless and is not something you would normally see someone do in the supermarket or subway. For instance, an Expressive Gesture might be expressive of, or stand for, such emotions as "joy," "grief" or "anger." Or it might express the inner essence of Hamlet as a given actor feels him. Or, in a production of Chekhov, you might create and work with Expressive Gestures of or for "time," "memory" or "Moscow."

**Architecture**

The physical environment in which you are working and how awareness of it affects movement. How many times have we seen productions where there is a lavish, intricate set covering the stage and yet the actors remain down center, hardly exploring or using the surrounding architecture? Is working on Architecture as a Viewpoint, we learn to dance with the space, to be in dialogue with a room, to let movement (especially Shape and Gesture) evolve out of our surroundings. Architecture is broken down into:

1. **Solid Mass**. Walls, floors, ceilings, furniture, windows, doors, etc.
2. **Texture**. Whether the solid mass is wood or metal or fabric will change the kind of movement we create in relationship to it.
3. **Light**. The sources of light in the room, the shadows we make in relationship to these sources, etc.

4. **Color**. Creating movement off of colors in the space, e.g., how one red chair among many black ones would affect our choreography in relation to that chair.
5. **Sound**. Sound created by and from the architecture, e.g., the sound of feet on the floor, the creak of a door, etc.

Additionally, in working with Architecture, we create spatial metaphors, giving form to such feelings as I'm "up against the wall," "caught between the cracks," "trapped," "lost in space," "on the threshold," "high as a kite," etc.

**Spatial Relationship**

The distance between things onstage, especially (1) one body to another; (2) one body (or bodies) to a group of bodies; (3) the body to the architecture.

What is the full range of possible distances between things onstage? What kinds of groupings allow us to see a stage picture more clearly? Which groupings suggest an event or emotion, express a dynamic? In both real life and onstage, we tend to position ourselves at a polite two- or three-foot distance from someone we are talking to. When we become aware of the expressive possibilities of Spatial Relationship onstage, we begin working with less polite but more dynamic distances of extreme proximity or extreme separation.

**Topography**

The landscape, the floor pattern; the design we create in movement through space. In defining a landscape, for instance, we might decide that the downstage area has great density, is difficult to move through, while the upstage area has less density and therefore involves more fluidity and faster tempos. To understand floor pattern, imagine that the bottoms of your feet are painted red; as you move through the space, the picture that evolves on the floor is the floor pattern that emerges over time. In addition, staging or designing for performance always involves choices
about the size and shape of the space we work in. For example, we might choose to work in a narrow three-foot strip all the way downstage or in a giant triangular shape that covers the whole floor, etc.

COMPOSITION

- Composition is a method for creating new work.
- Composition is the practice of selecting and arranging the separate components of theatrical language into a cohesive work of art for the stage. It is the same technique that any choreographer, painter, writer, composer or filmmaker uses in their corresponding disciplines. In theater, it is writing on your feet, with others, in space and time, using the language of theater.
- Composition is a method for generating, defining and developing the theater vocabulary that will be used for any given piece. In Composition, we make pieces so that we can point to them and say: "That worked," and ask: "Why?" so that we can then articulate which ideas, moments, images, etc., we will include in our production.
- Composition is a method for revealing to ourselves our hidden thoughts and feelings about the material. Because we usually make Compositions in rehearsal in a compressed period of time, we have no time to think. Composition provides a structure for working from our impulses and intuition. As Pablo Picasso once said, making art is "another way of keeping a diary."
- Composition is an assignment given to an ensemble so that it can create short, specific theater pieces addressing a particular aspect of the work. We use Composition during rehearsal to engage the collaborators in the process of generating their own work around a source. The assignment will usually include an overall intention or structure as well as a substantial list of ingredients which must be included in the piece. This list is the raw material of the theater lan-

guage we'll speak in the piece, either principles that are useful for staging (symmetry versus asymmetry, use of scale and perspective, juxtaposition, etc.) or the ingredients that belong specifically to the Play-World we are working on (objects, textures, colors, sounds, actions, etc.) These ingredients are the compositions what single words are to a paragraph or essay. The creator makes meaning through their arrangement.

- Composition is a method for being in dialogue with other art forms, as it borrows from and reflects the other arts. In Composition work, we study and use principles from other disciplines translated for the stage. For example, borrowing from music, we might ask what the rhythm of a moment is, how to interact based on a fugue structure, or how a coda functions and whether or not we should add one. Or we'll think about film: "How do we stage a close-up? An establishing shot? A montage?" And we'll ask: "What is the equivalent in the theater?" In applying Compositional principles from other disciplines to the theater, we push the envelope of theatrical possibility and challenge ourselves to create new forms.
- Composition is to the creator (whether director, writer, performer, designer, etc.) what Viewpoints is to the actor: a method for practicing the art.
CHAPTER 3

VIEWPOINTS AND COMPOSITION IN CONTEMPORARY THEATER

Viewpoints and Composition offer an alternative to conventional approaches to acting, directing, playwriting and design. They represent a clear-cut procedure and attitude that is nonhierarchical, practical and collaborative in nature. Both address particular problems and assumptions that a young person faces when entering the field, and offer an alternative.

Young theater artists inherit the following formidable problems as they enter into the American theater arena:

Problem 1: The Americanization of the Stanislavsky system.

The approach to acting for the stage in the United States has not changed much over the past sixty or seventy years. Our misun-
derstanding, 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.

In 1923, Konstantin Stanislavsky and his company, the Moscow Art Theatre, arrived in the United States to perform a repertory of plays by Gorky and Chekhov. The approach to acting on display in those productions had a galvanizing impact on young theater artists. Inspired by the performances, and curious to learn more, Americans grasped onto what turned out to be a severely limited aspect of Stanislavsky’s “system,” and turned it into a religion. Highly effective for film and television, this legacy has meanwhile shackled the American theater to an ultra-esthetic approach to the art of the stage. Later, Stanislavsky admitted that his earlier psychological methods, which had been so influential in the United States, were misguided. He then altered his emphasis from inducing emotion through affective memory to a system of psycho-physical chain-of-action, where action, rather than psychology, induced emotion and feeling.

The inherent problems and assumptions caused by the Americanization of the Stanislavsky system are unmistakably evident in rehearsal when you hear an actor say: “If I feel it, the audience will feel it,” or “I’ll do it when I feel it.” When a rehearsal boils down to the process of manufacturing and then hanging desperately onto emotion, genuine human interaction is sacrificed. Emotion induced by recollection of past experience can quickly turn acting into a self-pitying exercise. The Herculean effort to pin down a particular emotion removes the actor from the simple task of performing an action, and thereby distances actors from one another and from the audience. Instead of forcing and fixing an emotion, Viewpoints training allows untamed feeling to arise from the actual physical, verbal and imaginative situation in which actors find themselves together.

Another misconception about Stanislavsky’s theories of acting supposes that all onstage action is motivated exclusively by psychological intention. Therefore, we are often faced with actors who need to know: “What is my objective?” or “What do I want?” before they are willing to make a move. Often this resistance is followed by the statement: “My character would never do that.”

Viewpoints and Composition suggest fresh ways of making choices onstage and generating action based on awareness of time and space in addition to or instead of psychology.

**Problem 2: Lack of ongoing actor training.**

The theater is the only artistic discipline that does not encourage or insist upon the ongoing training of its practitioners. The result is rusty or inflexible actors who often feel unsatisfied or uninspired.

What musician, after graduating from a conservatory, would assume that s/he did not need to practice every day? What dancer would not take class or do bar exercises on a regular basis? What painter, what singer, what writer would not practice every day? And yet, upon graduation from a training program, actors are supposed to be ready for the marketplace without a commitment to ongoing personal training.

Training forges relationships, develops skill and provides an opportunity for continued growth. Viewpoints training and Composition work allow actors and their collaborators to practice creating fiction together on a daily basis using the tools of time and space. This daily practice keeps the artistic juices flowing, creates cohesive ensembles and allows individuals and groups to practice speaking the language of the stage.

**Problem 3: The word “want” and its effect upon rehearsal atmosphere and production.**

The word “want” is generally used too often and too carelessly in our working environment. Is it correct to assume that the actor’s job is to do what the director “wants,” and the director’s job to know above all else what s/he wants and demand it?
The specific language used during a rehearsal impacts the quality of relationships between people as well as the tone of the environment. The word "want"—much overused and abused in our American system of rehearsing a play—implies a right and wrong. It encourages artists to search for a single satisfying choice, driven by seeking approval from an absolute authority above them.

Many young directors assume that their job is to know what they want and to insist on it by saying things like: "Now I want you to cross the stage and pick up the teacup." Actors assume too often that their job, first and foremost, is to do what the director wants. How often can an actor ask a director: "Is this what you want?" before the contribution of that actor is completely negated? Why not ask instead what the play wants? The director and the actor are then united in a mutual endeavor. The word "want," used habitually and without consciousness of the consequences, constructs a parent/child relationship in rehearsal. This parent/child relationship limits resiliency, rigor and maturity in the creative process and inhibits true collaboration.

Can the artistic process be collaborative? Can a group of strong-minded individuals together ask what the play or project wants, rather than depending upon the hierarchical domination of one person? Of course a project needs structure and a sense of direction but can the leader aim for discovery rather than staging a replica of what s/he has decided beforehand? Can we resist proclaiming "what it is" long enough to authentically ask: "What is it?"

The exploration of a theme, the discovery of staging and the excavation of language, for instance, can all be a collective act in which ideas are proposed and adjustments made by all parties. Viewpoints and Composition offer a way to collectively address the questions that arise during rehearsal. Actors, freed from seeking parental approval, are given responsibility as co-creators of the event. Viewpoints and Composition shift the tables so that every participant must find a compelling reason to be in the room, to have a stake in the process, and to claim ownership in the outcome.

**Surrender**

Viewpoints relieves the pressure to have to invent by yourself, to generate all alone, to be interesting and force creativity. Viewpoints allows us to surrender, fall back into empty creative space and trust that there is something there, other than our own ego or imagination, to catch us. Viewpoints helps us trust in letting something occur onstage, rather than making it occur. The source for action and invention comes to us from others and from the physical world around us.

**Possibility**

Viewpoints helps us recognize the limitations we impose on ourselves and our art by habitually submitting to a presumed absolute authority; be it the text, the director, the teacher. It frees us from the statement: "My character would never do that." In Viewpoints, there is no good or bad, right or wrong—there is only possibility and, later in the process, choice.

**Choice and Freedom**

Viewpoints leads to greater awareness, which leads to greater choice, which leads to greater freedom. Once you are aware of a full spectrum, you do not need to choose all of it all the time, but you are free to, and you are no longer bound by unconsciousness. Range increases. You can begin to paint with greater variety and mastery.

**Growth**

Viewpoints becomes a personal litmus test, a gauge for your own strengths and weaknesses, for discovering how you are free and
how you are inhibited, what your own patterns and habits are.
Again it is awareness that offers us this gift—the option to change
and grow.

Wholeness

Viewpoints awakens all our senses, making it clear how much
and how often we live only in our heads and see only through
our eyes. Through Viewpoints we learn to listen with our entire
bodies and see with a sixth sense. We receive information from
levels we were not even aware existed, and begin to communicate
back with equal depth.