

Lorenzo Montanini

SITI Training: Viewpoints and the Suzuki Method for Cross-Cultural Collaboration

The training that the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI) perfected during its thirty years of existence is its most relevant heritage. SITI believed that training was a crucial part of a performer's education and ethos. Its constitutive elements – Viewpoints and the Suzuki Method for actor training – are here put in a dialectical opposition that nurtures hybridization. This article investigates how, in fact, these two trainings intersect and also form new 'languages' (that is, systems of representation) whenever they are performed. A contextual analysis of SITI's training as a foundation for making work and as a means for educating actors provides a clearer understanding of why and how SITI training is an instrument that facilitates and fosters cross-cultural collaboration.

Lorenzo Montanini is a theatre director whose work investigates the boundaries of theatre in a multicultural context. He has taught for more than fifteen years in universities in Italy, including RomaTre, Università di Macerata, and Università l'Orientale di Napoli, and, more recently, at Rose Bruford College and Queen Mary University of London.

Key terms: Anne Bogart, Mary Overlie, Tadashi Suzuki, ensemble, physical training, *hexis*, communities, embodiment.

SUZUKI AND VIEWPOINTS training, as pioneered and practised by SITI Company, have been the foundations of the company's work for thirty years and have been disseminated in drama schools, universities, and other institutions all around the globe. Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki founded the Saratoga International Theatre Institute Company (SITI) in 1992, to redefine and revitalize theatre in the United States. The company, originally conceived as a summer institute in Saratoga Springs, evolved into an ensemble of artists working, teaching, and training together to challenge the status quo and offer (as stated on the company's website) new ways of 'seeing and of being as both artists and as global citizens'. SITI ended its activities in 2022, thirty years after its foundation.

In a country where the field of theatre training was dominated by Method Acting (an Americanization of Stanislavsky's teachings), SITI's approach openly positioned the company and its work against the canon. Anne Bogart and SITI strived to make theatre that is

against realism and naturalism, in an effort to defy a set of codes, styles, and signs that were (and mostly still are) dominant in Anglo-American theatre. Nevertheless, SITI productions played in major institutions such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), its actors taught in leading drama schools and universities (Juilliard, UCLA, Columbia, NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing, and many more), and, when working outside the company, some of them acted in Broadway productions.

SITI always practised and taught the training sessions separately but jointly: their workshops were usually composed of one or two hours of Suzuki training, followed by a break, and then by the same amount of time dedicated to Viewpoints. The intersection and melding of the trainings, often referenced by SITI during the practical work to give practitioners their bearings, is a process that is left to personal sensibilities and understandings, leaving space for participants to assimilate and adapt without dictating a precise methodology or steering a way to use one to better

understand the other. Nonetheless, the performers who trained with SITI were always exposed to both, which meant that the common *locus* of the trainings, the place where they intersected and interrelated, was the body of the participants. How these trainings informed each other and contributed to the development of a performer, and how this encounter could be used as an instrument for cross-cultural collaboration, are explored in this article.

To avoid confusion and to simplify matters, the simultaneous practice of these two distinct trainings is referred to here as 'SITI training'. Not only does this simplification save needless repetition, but it also provides clarity and precision in naming this activity, which is neither simply one training nor the other but a complex matrix of relations in which Viewpoints and Suzuki training cannot be treated as merely the sum of two different trainings. Viewpoints and Suzuki training are taught in some of the leading drama schools of the English-speaking world, as well as in China, Southeast Asia, South America, and many European countries. The fact that the training became global is a necessary but insufficient condition to mark its effectiveness across cultures. In a neoliberal world, globalization could very well be the sign of a hegemonic culture prevailing over others. SITI Company was, after all, based in the USA, its working language was English, and most of its work was about North America, as Bogart has often stated.

The Suzuki Method for Actor Training

Positioning SITI training within one specific discipline or one branch of knowledge – the kind of knowledge produced by practical and theoretical activities – would prove difficult. The Suzuki Method was developed by Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki and the Suzuki Company of Toga, and is a 'rigorous physical discipline drawn from such diverse influences as ballet, traditional Japanese and Greek theatre, and martial arts'.¹ Suzuki gives some specific examples, quoting, for instance, the *sanbasō*, which is an ancient dance, later assimilated by Noh, that includes stamping

of the feet to evoke a 'sense of peace and harmony'.²

Suzuki founded his first theatre company, Waseda Sho-Gekijo (Waseda Little Theatre), in Tokyo in 1966. In 1977 the company was renamed SCOT (Suzuki Company of Toga) when it moved to the small town of Toga. During those years (1960–70), Japan was in a state of turmoil: protests against the USA–Japan Security treaty (the *Anpo* protests) and workers' strikes characterized social life, while occupation by foreign forces, which had just ended, heavily influenced Japanese culture. 'Western' culture and lifestyle had a vast impact on Japan; an interwoven network of rapidly changing events and socio-cultural responses to these historic events challenged Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*). Suffice to say that, in the space of twenty years, Japan's relation with the USA went from the atomic bomb and the occupation, during which imposed law and foreign influence subverted millenarian traditions, to a time when the 'West' became fashionable and desirable, from clothing to theatre. These were Suzuki's formative years, during which theatre in Japan saw the birth of *angura*, an avant-garde that came into existence in reaction to the realism of post-war *shingeki*, which saw the staging of western plays in a naturalistic style. Suzuki thought *shingeki* privileged European interpretations of the text, copying an imported sensibility that did not belong to Japan.

Suzuki's method for actor training is directed at rediscovering the performer's animal energy, as the director calls it, in an effort to reposition the actor as the primary element in the theatre. This method works on the centre of gravity, stillness, energy production, and breathing, all focusing on the lower body, with particular attention to the feet. The director believes that 'consciousness of the body's communication with the ground is a portal into greater awareness of all physical functions'.³ Akin to Meyerhold's emphasis on execution and control, the training does not deal directly with psychology, character, story, or emotion, but works on the 'invisible body'; that is, the functions that deal with gravity, energy, and oxygen.⁴ These are part of the automatic functions of our body and

they are essential for our survival. Developing the capacity to control the centre of gravity, breathing, and the use of energy will give the body strength and agility, which are the foundation for communicating through voice and language.

Suzuki training focuses on the body of the performer in the belief that drama is enacted *within the body* rather than in relation to a character or a dramatic situation. This means that the training effectively deals with what Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*, specifically with *hexis*, which is a 'permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking'.⁵ Some movements (like the way we walk or sit), some behavioural gestures, one's own posture – all take place below the level of consciousness and are predispositions in that they are part of a person's culture. The term 'culture' is used here very broadly to indicate historical, geographical, social, economic, and cultural characteristics that define a group of people. The social world is objectified, embodied in a range of expectations and probabilities that determine the likelihood that a group of people choose one action rather than another. Suzuki believes that cultural existence is inseparable from embodied nature: feeling and thinking, emotion and intellect, are, therefore, accessed through the body.

Bourdieu is exceptionally useful in defining one of the key elements of the physical approach to actor training. 'What is "learned by the body"', he writes, 'is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be branched, but something that one is.'⁶ Here lies a seed of the universality hidden in Suzuki's method for actor training, and it is one of the elements that make this cross-cultural. Seeking what is objectively *human* and can work across cultures in performance does not mean looking for what belongs to nature (as distinct from culture). It means recognizing what is shared; that is, the characteristics that define the bodies of human beings and the former's primary functions: for example, we all need to breathe in order to speak and produce sounds. The latter coincides with what is culturally specific (*hexis*). As Philippe Descola notes, a dualistic approach (nature versus culture) has

shown its limits historically and sociologically, while there are many different ways to categorize continuities and discontinuities among human beings.⁷

Suzuki's method trains the body-mind system through a series of strictly coded physical forms, and his work allows the distinction between culture and nature to surface to consciousness, giving the actors space to question its existence – not intellectually, but through the body. The exercises interrogate whether or not the perceived limits of one's own strength, resistance, and control are intrinsic limitations of our bodies or are learned habits that became ingrained in our physicality. Or are they limits of one's own perception and belief? Suzuki's training works on the plasticity of *habitus*, effectively expanding the possible responses to the expectations of the situation of being on the stage. This incarnated, practical knowledge is acquired through an exploration of one's own individual *perimeter*, which defines the performer's physical and socio-cultural-body.

At the same time, Suzuki training holds up a mirror through which the performers can see themselves and be confronted with their own *hexis*, and experiment with its elasticity. It aims to build up strength and control over the invisible functions that are part of our nature/culture, which, through practice, become visible, tangible, and turn into expressive 'tools'. The body becomes theatrical matter because the drama is incarnated, and it is situated between the performers and their own bodies.

Suzuki's training, then, does not aim to neutralize the body by eliminating habits but to provide a 'grammar' of the body. While every point of view is culturally specific, and Suzuki's cannot escape this factor (nor does he wish to), Suzuki believes that there are gestures that exist on a level beyond cultural specificities. The trainees are asked to inhabit the space between their bodies and the forms dictated by Suzuki's exercises so as to investigate the possible distance between them. This space is the gap between the *actual* self (that is, the body of the performer) and the *ideal* self (that is, Suzuki's vision of how an actor should be in order to achieve absolute

freedom in performance). The term 'ideal' is there to signify how distant an actor's way of being should be from everyday existence, and yet, Suzuki says, the focus of the work is the process, not its final result. Thus the training keeps the performer, who is conscious that this limit is out of reach, in a constant tension in this striving towards unattainable perfection.

Suzuki asks his actors to begin by differentiating between two main states: stillness and movement. He then proceeds to formulate a number of finite combinations in which the body can inhabit those two categories. He observes that 'the contemporary actor's first duty is to objectify those bodily situations, determine the emotional context that words will create under each set of circumstances, and then be conscious of these relationships'.⁸

Training, through embodiment, as described before, is automatically appropriated, and thus also translated by each body. Suzuki observes that the foreign feeling that North Americans and Europeans often express, when they first encounter his work, stems from a double response: these actors have often been involved in naturalistic theatre, and the fact that the training he offers aims to eradicate 'the ordinary, everyday sense of the body' displaces them, subverting their expectations;⁹ further, they see Japanese bodies that, from cultural tradition, have a different relationship with the ground, which is expressed, for example, in a different way of sitting thought more suitable for the training. (In the so-called 'western world', adults very rarely sit on the ground in informal, let alone formal, contexts.)

Even so, habits or different body shapes are neither particularly advantageous nor disadvantageous to practitioners for performing a training intended to stress the very skills needed to act; and the training reveals, at the same time, the participants' singular weaknesses and strengths. The required shift of the training comes from learning how to be a fictional character to how to be on the stage. Suzuki's methodology may well be deeply rooted in the director's culture, but the fact that it situates the dramatic action within the body of each performer, and also in relation to

other bodies, effectively transforms the training into a useful means for cross-cultural collaboration (as will shortly be explained). When the training is exported outside Japan, this duality of focus (internal and relational) locates the work outside its source culture.

In the exercise called *Stomping and Shakuhachi*, the trainees are asked to stamp vehemently for three minutes while following the rhythm of a piece of music. Knees are high, and feet are always parallel to the floor.¹⁰ After the last collective stamp, the ensemble falls on the ground, in unison. The fall should not produce any sound. A short silence follows, after which the music changes into a delicate, melodic flute. The *shakuhachi* begins. Slowly but steadily, the performers rise in different tempos and movements. They now walk peacefully towards the audience.

The walk appears simple, but the toil has not finished. The effort during this part of the exercise is to keep the centre of gravity moving at a constant speed and in a straight line towards the audience. The way human beings walk, maintaining balance, produces a short pause in the movement of our centre of gravity, which happens in the act of shifting weight from one leg to the other. In this exercise, the aim is to walk forward while keeping the centre moving at all times, without accelerating or slowing down. This upsets the balance at every step: the centre of gravity, located in the pelvic area, goes off balance when it passes ahead of the supporting leg; the back leg, meanwhile, is advancing, and cannot offer support until its foot has touched the ground again. Instinctively the back leg accelerates forward to reach the ground before the centre leaves the vertical axis of support. Alternatively, the centre stops waiting for the moving leg to be ready to support its advance.

The performer tries to control this habitual, impulsive movement, to hold back in order to maintain the constant speed. If, during the first part of the exercise, the effort is clearly visible, during this particular part everything happens internally. The result is a walk that possesses an uncanny quality: that of the performers almost hovering forward. At the end of the exercise, the entire cohort forms a line

downstage, toes aligned, arms to the side, their gaze forward.

The complexity of *Stomping and Shakuhachi*, which is one of the signature exercises of the Suzuki method, is meant to test strength and endurance, and to train breathing, movement control, precision, and pace. It then requires performers to fine-tune their capacity to control habitual movements for, when the body has been rocked by long and repetitive stamping, its breathing is perturbed and so the strength required to stand up and walk is extraordinary. Here is usually the moment when the command is given to speak. Practitioners struggle against their instinct in an effort to control the automatic response of the body. Suzuki, meanwhile, is asking them to muster strength and balance, and achieve a sense of quietness in the midst of a tempest of physical bodily responses. As noted above, the dramatic tension is located *within* the body of the performer, which works against the objective criteria of the fixed duration and rhythm of the 'stomping' music, the use of the space, the ensemble effort towards movement in unison, and each individual's physical limitations (stamina, muscle strength, shortness of breath).

Given that the form of the exercise is set, its specificity and criteria dictated by the training, the actual obstacles vary from individual to individual: when I stamp, I am faced with obstacles and physical and other idiosyncrasies that are not necessarily shared by others. The *objectivity* just mentioned lies in the fact that the training is a practice with its own logic: it relates and responds to the world as it appears to a human being in the space of performance rather than according to a supposition of how the world would be conceived by a mathematical, non-corporeal intellect. The exercises are intended as a means to discover a self-awareness of the interior body, and the actor's success in doing them confirms his ability to make that discovery. The actor 'learns to become conscious of the many layers of sensitivity within his own body,' writes Suzuki.¹¹ To objectify, therefore, does not mean to deny specificity; it means, for the body, studying the dramatic tensions inherent in it; it means testing the actors' control over

their own breathing, balance, speed, articulation, and strength.

Understanding and finding the *perimeter* of one's own expressivity in performance, and its relation with the *other*, is hence integral to this work and of paramount importance to it. The group is always divided in two, thus giving everyone the chance to watch the other half perform, as well as be observed while performing. Each performer in the ensemble tries to keep up with the exercise and everybody else's pace, even as they work within their capabilities and against their own limits. As George Steiner writes:

To experience difference, to feel the characteristic resistance and 'materiality' of that which differs, is to re-experience identity. One's own space is mapped by what lies outside; it derives coherence, tactile configuration, from the pressure of the external. 'Otherness', particularly when it has the wealth and penetration of language, compels 'presentness' to stand clear.¹²

The fundamentally relational nature of the Suzuki training has often been overlooked, but it is vital, and certainly of as much importance as its internal focus. It is the ensemble that, most of the time, offers the performers a mirror and a measure, and that sets the pace and the challenges in response to the leader of the training session. The constant negotiation embedded in ensemble activities, like the stomping described above, the simultaneous fall, or the act of speaking the same text as a chorus, needs to take into account individual sensibilities and limits (someone might be out of breath before someone else, for example). It also needs to take into account cultural differences (non-native English speakers may take a little longer to say Shakespeare's words). Self-reflection is achieved through a relational practice in a triangle between the self, the exercise, and the other trainees.

In this social structure specific to the training room, one person is needed to lead the training, coordinate the exercises, and give commands. SITI Company members always used to rotate, taking turns to lead Suzuki training sessions. This offers a different perspective and different embodiment every time. The idea of *otherness* incarnated in the

different bodies – and cultures – but united in the same effort is an integral part of Suzuki's methodology in international contexts.

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of *intertextuality*, and again Jacques Derrida's of texts being in a *mimetic* relation to other texts, can be applied to the field of the theatre and to that of theatre training as well, underlining how practices accumulate additional meanings through interchange and mutual influence.¹³ Many of the characteristics discussed so far resonate with theatre practices that were developed by Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski (as well as by Vsevolod Meyerhold and, later, Peter Brook). Barba's notion of *incultured* bodies, for example, and their transformation into *accultured* bodies, has similarities with Suzuki's eradication of the everyday sense, the ordinary sense, of the body. The 'animal energy' to which Suzuki refers, as the primary and 'forgotten' way of being human, seems to suggest that there is a universal human essence, as Barba believes there is.

By the same token, Suzuki training also appears to be going in the same direction as Brook's quest for a universality findable in the social world – this through Suzuki's creating a space where a variety of social agents and the signs they produce can indeed co-exist and interact. While a more nuanced and detailed analysis of these similarities is necessary, it is worth noting that Grotowski saw *Dramatic Passions II* (the first production directed by Suzuki, which had opened in Paris in 1972), travelled to Japan in the following year to watch the Waseda Little Theatre as they trained, and then invited Suzuki to Poland. In 1973, the French theatre journal *Le Point* praised Suzuki as '*le Grotowski japonais*'. A few years later, Suzuki held a workshop attended, among others, by Grotowski and Brook. The emergence of a global theatre-training culture in the 1970s in Europe, and interest in it in the East, determined reciprocal influences that were subsequently assimilated in, and translated into, varied training practices, at the same time leaving some recognizable traces in Suzuki's own method.¹⁴

Simultaneously, Suzuki is concerned with globalization, which, in his eyes, means the propagation of a hegemonic socio-cultural

and economic paradigm, namely the North American one, seeing the risk that 'systems designed to streamline operations and increase profits [will] permeate the globe'.¹⁵ If dictated by such systems, the circulation and production of meaning are in the hands of mass media, which will further strengthen the hegemonic culture. Suzuki's philosophy and practice are, therefore, an attempt to recover the animal energy mentioned above, and, through that, to exert social force.

His actors, then, aim to be social agents who can wield influence on society through the theatre: by engaging with animal energy and reconnecting nature and culture, differences of class, history, culture, education, and geography can be overcome. The animal energy the director refers to is consequently pre-cultural in that it precedes language and all the processes and practices that generate and exchange meaning. The body is the *locus* in which culture and nature are intertwined and entangled, and only through the rediscovery of this primitive energy will actors become mindful of their mutual differences. This is what Suzuki means when he writes that 'culture is the body': for it is in the body that the cross-cultural potential of his theatre training and practice lies.

Viewpoints Training

Viewpoints training originated within the New York contemporary dance scene in the 1970s. It was invented by Mary Overlie as a way of looking at performance as a physical entity,¹⁶ and was later appropriated by Anne Bogart, Tina Landau, and the SITI Company, who transformed and adapted Viewpoints as a 'philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage'.¹⁷

While a full discussion on appropriation does not belong to this article, it is necessary to observe the passage of the Viewpoints from Overlie to Bogart and SITI. Bogart and Overlie were both faculty members of the Experimental Theatre Wing at New York University and worked on several student productions together, and it was Overlie, the creator of the Six Viewpoints, who introduced Bogart

to them. In the spirit of an appropriation that is the opposite of dogmatism and is a dialectical way of approaching tradition and creation, Bogart and SITI started working on the Viewpoints, adapting, changing, and shaping the Viewpoints with their own intentions, while attempting to understand the Viewpoints' inner nature. 'The task of an artist,' Bogart writes,

much like that of a scientist, is to re-combine or edit existing materials in order to create something new. Ideas are adapted, extended, or improved upon, based on the needs, circumstances, and limits of the time. Every work of art contains a recognizable reference to another work and this can be traced historically throughout the development of the arts and sciences. Innovation, and indeed originality, arises from the act of recombining and editing what has come before.¹⁸

American playwright Charles Mee, SITI's friend, fellow artist, and collaborator on many productions, describes on his website the pre-sets of his work: 'Whether we mean to or not, the work we do is both received and created, both an adaptation and an original, at the same time. We re-make things as we go.'¹⁹ While their intentions and dispositions were clear, the fact that SITI's Viewpoints became popular all around the globe, and their version is the one that is taught in major institutions, generated friction with Overlie, who saw her creation being taken away, changed, and popularized with Bogart's name attached to it but not her own.

Both Overlie and Bogart acknowledge how the cultural and political movements that characterized life in the USA during the 1960s and the 1970s had a profound influence on their artistic practice: 'The marches for civil rights, the birth of abstract expressionism, postmodernism, and minimalism . . . [and the] cultural explosion and artistic revolution that gained momentum in New York City, San Francisco, and other urban centres' are some of the events quoted at the beginning of Bogart and Landau's seminal book on the Viewpoints.²⁰ Overlie recalls in the first pages of her book 'the atmosphere of the SoHo art scene where I lived and worked', the advent of postmodernism, and 'the work of Philip

Glass in music'.²¹ New York City and San Francisco during these years were central overlapping worlds where burgeoning notions of interculturalism and universalism belonged to larger impulses towards socialism, internationalism, equality, pacifism, and civil rights. This, very briefly, was the socio-historical context that fuelled Overlie's and Bogart's artistic research, and which contested the primacy of the play-text, on the one hand, and that of the actor as character, and psychology, on the other.

Overlie's Viewpoints come from an idea of performance without content, countering the idea that intellect and the interpretation of content sit higher on the scale of values than sensation, and so movement and performance. The Viewpoints were 'dedicated to reading the stage as a force of Nature'.²² The very notion that performance can be without context, and the relativism of performance (but also its yearning for a universal form of communication between cultures, social groups, and geographies), led to ahistorical work and thinking, which was oblivious to how the point of view from which the world is seen plays a fundamental role in determining what can or cannot be seen. And, in parallel, it opened up the possibility of unmediated cross-cultural exchange through the theatre in search of the essence of individual and collective experiences. SITI's productions, by contrast with Overlie's work (Overlie was a choreographer and a dancer rather than a theatre-maker who used language), were almost always unmistakably and overtly North American or about the United States of America.

The Viewpoints have a non-hierarchical, postmodern approach to creation, which means that no performance element (words, movement, music, lights, design, and so on) has more importance than the rest: there is no fixed hierarchy. This relativism does not suggest that every point of view is of equal value, but it simply points out that they exist. The belief is that, once it has been established that a performer is as important as light or a set piece or a whole play-text itself, then a new set of values can arise. The latter can determine a new hierarchy specific to each and every

theatre production, every scene, and every moment.

SITI's nine Viewpoints are subsets of Time (Tempo, Duration, Kinaesthetic Response, and Repetition) and Space (Shape, Gesture, Topography, Architecture, and Spatial Relationship), and they categorize the world of performance. Classifications such as these establish a set of values. The question that arises is: According to what criteria are things grouped together? Foucault writes that 'there is no similitude and no distinction, even for the wholly untrained perception, that is not the result of a precise operation and of the application of a preliminary criterion'.²³ The act of distinction, which marks similitudes and differences, as the Viewpoints do, is therefore not decided by some universally determined natural characteristic or property of the element that has been sorted and classed.

The Viewpoints, as already noted, were born as a 'philosophy translated into a technique', to study, train, and develop performance. The work was developed through, for example, analysis of the actions that we do in our daily lives, and then applying the parameters found through these precise observations to generating movement. Overlie refers to the vast landscapes of Montana where she grew up as an inspiration for conceiving the Viewpoints. She started seeing patterns and resemblances by observing how nature changes, flocks of birds, and the vagaries of the wind. During SITI's Viewpoints training sessions in New York City, the participants were invited to look out of the window and observe people waiting for the green light so as to cross a busy Manhattan street; the sudden movement, almost in unison, of the crowd walking forward when the green light came on was one of several patterns of movement that emerged clearly as an action of collective will (to cross the road). Collective will to do is, in the case of SITI, an act of agency.

Language, rather than defining things themselves, creates and defines relations between them. Gesture (one of the Viewpoints), like the gesture of raising an arm, can be looked at simply as a Gesture (that is, a movement with a beginning, middle, and end). But it can also be seen as a change of Shape in the body of the

performer. Further, the new straight line that the raised arm produces can be seen to be part the Architecture of the space (to which the body of the performer belongs) or as being in relation to it. Focus can be on the time the performer takes from the beginning to the end of the movement (Tempo). The categorizations used here do not seek the meaning of the gesture of the raised arm, which, the training proposes, is determined by its context, by its agent, and by the gaze of the observer. The action of raising the arm does not belong exclusively to any of the Viewpoints, but it is observed through the lens of different Viewpoints, and is different every time.

By describing the relationship between a movement that a performer makes and the point of view from which it is seen, the Viewpoints reveal their *heteroglot* nature: the training invites a polyphony of voices, a stratification of individual responses, both in language and action. The same movement can be executed and described through different Viewpoints, and this interpretation is dependent on the person who is either acting or witnessing the action. In opposition to Suzuki's approach, where an individual, authorial voice gives the method unity and style, the Viewpoints aim at creating a common place where cross-cultural dialogue is possible. 'All languages of heteroglossia,' writes Mikhail Bakhtin, 'whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values.'²⁴

For Bakhtin, language is first and foremost speech, which constitutes language's most dynamic, embodied, and lively expression. Words are ever-changing and alive, and they are never in a singular relation with the object they point to. Since Bakhtin's main concern was language and its use in the field of literature, his theory must be adapted to the theatre, encompassing, primarily, all the signs that our bodies produce in space and that are not visible in literature. These include facial expressions, movements, gestures, hesitations and approximations, gaze, intonation, volume, accent, and so on. Bodies are cultural, as

Suzuki noted, and so are all their corporeal expressions. Ergo, in theatre, the signs produced by bodies in space add an extra layer to what Bakhtin is proposing.

In a Viewpoints group improvisation, the performers never talk, move, or create in a vacuum. They always respond to the rest of the ensemble and to the space surrounding them. In short, the performers produce signs (through language and through corporeal expression), and at the same time receive them in a continuous exchange and effort to function together, to create together, and to achieve mutual understanding.

Every improvisation is a negotiation between individual and collective agencies in a constant swing of what SITI calls *feed-forward* (acting according to one's own will or agenda) and *feedback* (following someone else's). The language of Viewpoints training is *heteroglot* because it is the collection of all these voices, of the points of view that they carry with them, and of all the negotiations happening within the space/time of an improvisation. The performers enter this dialogical space knowing that they will have to adapt, to merge, or to recoil, knowing that they have the freedom to lead or to follow. The training aims at generating theatre that is non-hierarchical and that can embrace and intercept this polyphony of voices, because the actors are co-creators of the event.

In an international context, the participants come from a variety of countries, cultures, and classes. Consequently, the result is interplay between cultures, which influence each other, affecting individual and group behaviours in the malleable space of Viewpoints training.

The vocabulary created by the training asks to be appropriated by the performers so as to bring to light the intersection, as well as the interrelation, between different points of view. It is also for the purposes of deconstructing actions, gestures, utterances, and images, as well as of viewing them through the lens of one viewpoint in its interrelation with another. The Viewpoints thus develop a set of codes, which, on the one hand, train the performers to generate and see associations and relations and proximities and resemblances. On the other hand, it is a practice that

responds to a different logic whose aim is the practice itself and not the generation of knowledge. The 'logic of practice', as described by Bourdieu, is one of the symbolic systems that owe their practical coherence to the fact that:

they are the product of practices that can fulfil their practical functions only in so far as they implement . . . principles that are not only coherent and compatible with the objective conditions – but also practical, in the sense of convenient, that is, easy to master and use, because they obey a 'poor' and economical logic.²⁵

It is this 'poor' logic that guides some of the responses which are part of the basic exercises of the Viewpoints training and, in fact, prove to be its foundation. An actor might, for instance, see a ball bounce and start jumping, imitating the movement of the object. (These are the Viewpoints of Repetition or Kinaesthetic Response.) Another actor might start to clap, initially following the pace of the bouncing ball. The embodied approach to creation, which does not respond to psychology, character, story, or emotion (none of which is part of SITI's Viewpoints), should, in SITI's perception and intention, give performers a more direct and intuitive access to making work. This access is not mediated by intellect: its main entry point is the body in space. What may appear to be random responses are given coherence and cohesiveness through form.

When the ensemble has gone through all of the individual Viewpoints, and has accumulated enough experience and knowledge of the vocabulary of Viewpoints work, it progresses to Open Viewpoints sessions. These are improvisation exercises that constitute most of the training practice and are usually regulated by a time limit, sometimes by positions in space, and generally by body shapes for the beginning and/or end of the improvisations in question. When it comes to international groups, an Open Viewpoints session might include different languages, abstract as well as codified movement (ballet, for example, or traditional dances), and texts in any language by any author. The performance is created, then, by the propinquity of these elements, and it is defined by their togetherness. Every single Open Viewpoints improvisation generates its

own language, created at every new iteration of the exercise done by its participants.

Bogart proposes that theatre is always a social act:

What distinguishes theatre from all other art forms is that the theatre is the only art form that is *always* about social systems. Every play asks: Can we get along? Can we get along as a society? Can we get along in this room? How might we get along better?²⁶

Open Viewpoints offer a practical way to experiment how a group of people may function together in the space of performance. They are objectively regulated (by the exercise that may give time limits, beginning/ending positions, source materials) and regular (in the sense that they encompass definite and recurring patterns through the use of Repetition, for instance), without being the product of mere obedience to rules. The lack of an established hierarchy gives performers the chance to reshuffle and rethink everything, every time. To paraphrase and accommodate Bourdieu, these are practices and representations that are collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.²⁷

How does such collective orchestration occur? In a given improvisation, for example, one performer could start skipping on one leg, establishing this movement through practice as the only way to move around the space. If the rest of the group starts adopting this rule, it quickly becomes part of the world of the iteration of the exercise, turning it into a pattern that defines the ephemeral improvisation being done. This is how the Viewpoints bridge from training into the creative work that will eventually shape characters, relations, or entire productions. By labelling the form and separating it from content, the Viewpoints ask to be embodied so as to give flesh, matter, and sound to the non-corporeal categories of time and space. When Shape is no longer an abstract concept but becomes a body in space, it assumes the cultural specificity of the bodies that incarnate it. We could say, in semiotic terms, that the Viewpoints aim to be a pure *signified*, waiting to be filled with ever-changing *signifiers*.

It is worth noting that this democratization of the process of making theatre, which effectively reshapes the rehearsal room, and the agency of the actors, from training to the creation of new productions, is not always reflected in a democratization of the access to SITI training. SITI's main international programme was hosted by Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. US student visa requirements ask foreigners to prove they have a minimum balance in their bank accounts to pay for living expenses for the duration of their stay, on top of the programme's fee (which already included all these expenses). International applicants therefore had to give evidence of their 'financial ability' as defined by the Department of Homeland Security, which, for all intents and purposes, is proof of wealth. As a result, the programme could only attract a specific group of people, despite SITI's best efforts and intention. Theatre, and theatre training, come out of society and cannot escape it. They are inevitably affected by economics, politics, and education.

SITI Training

It should be clear from the previous paragraphs that Suzuki and Viewpoints training not only originated in entirely different contexts and are concerned with different issues, but also offer diverging (or colliding) practices and philosophies that contradict each other. Suzuki's humanistic perspective (to name one fundamental distinction) is at odds with Viewpoints' postmodern sensibility. According to the former, human beings are always at the centre; for the latter, such hierarchies do not exist.

Every actor, director, or performer who enters SITI training does so with a socio-cultural baggage. 'For in each one of us, in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday,' writes Émile Durkheim: that is what lies underneath our skin, the *habitus* that makes us behave the way we do.²⁸ Actors train to learn the rules of the game of acting and to learn how to respond to the expectations of this game. They enter the game bringing along

the 'person they were yesterday', and they have to respond to the expectations and to the objective rules of the field. These differences determine the multiplicity of strategies (according to experience, culture, identities, and so on) needed to organize their actions. Suzuki training works on the performers' bodies, in the way described before, ultimately bringing to the surface the plasticity of individual responses to the expectations of being on the stage. The training thus works on the 'person we were yesterday', with its predispositions, propensities, and inclinations, against such objective criteria as: Can I be heard? Can I produce enough energy to sustain performance? Can I stabilize my centre of gravity? Cultural as well as individual differences emerge when the performers witness each other's struggle and observe the multitude of bodily responses to the training.

This disposition, acquired through Suzuki's training, is then transferred into Viewpoints practice. Its vessel is the body of the actors. The plasticity, the precision, the strength and readiness, acquired through Suzuki's training, become essential in Viewpoints training. Viewpoints studies and trains relations between performers; between the performer and the space; between performers and time; between performers and their audience. The elasticity mentioned above gives depth to these interplays, which amount to more than any meagre imitation or intellectual understanding. The body language developed in the training provides a vocabulary of gestures and movements that all the performers begin to recognize as part of the world of SITI training. Across a sea of cultural differences, these similarities are the building blocks of a shared physical language, which gives the trainees familiarity with each other, and facilitates collaboration.

Bogart believes that theatre and its making are always about community. Each and every production, down to every single show, is about the specific group of people that finds itself in that particular space at the exact time. It is the shared experience that defines theatre and constitutes its main *raison d'être*. During a performance of *Macbeth*, for example, the play becomes inextricably related to the time and

place where it is performed; borrowing from Bakhtin, we could say that every show has its 'chronotopic' specificity.²⁹ This specificity is the result of the encounter between the play-text (if the production is based on one), the ensemble who performs it, and the audience in a given time and place. Bogart posited that this dialogical structure is the very fabric of theatre, whose matter is society itself.³⁰ It is only natural, then, that Viewpoints is a relational practice: it studies and cultivates interactions between groups of people. In a globalized world dominated by consumerism and individualism, and saturated by media, SITI's training addresses these issues by looking for points of solidarity across communities and cultures. 'We need to learn to recognize how many communities there are in your life and how many ways you are part of these communities,' Bogart writes. 'Our lives are multiple by definition, so anything that emphasizes and exercises that multiplicity is important in the context of our present climate.'³¹ In a cross-cultural context, therefore, the actors seek to establish how the multiplicity of communities to which they belong interconnect, and to define the distances between their identities as well as their commonalities.

Bogart also often voiced her frustration with the passive role of the audience in US theatre. Instead of being fed stories and spectacles that make everyone feel the same thing (which is what Hollywood movies tend to do), Bogart is interested in creating 'a moment on stage that triggers *different* associations in everybody in the audience':

It's much harder to do that. I try to set up contradictions on stage. In between those contradictions lives something very bright. I try to think of the audience as detectives; I'm leaving clues for them. The older I get, the more I try to do the least I possibly can on stage, so that the most happens in the audience's head.³²

Viewpoints training enters this discussion, becoming a practical response to the questions raised above: What is the relationship between the playtext and the ensemble? Why this particular play? Why now? What defines the community of individuals that is

creating this piece? The training opens up a space where all the cultural differences, their clashes and intersections, can – and need to – become part of the work. It cultivates an idea of theatre in which a diversity of responses, identities, and cultures are invited in and made part of the event.

In this context, audiences and actors will not always have the tools to decode all the signs that are produced by the different actors. To bridge this gap, the training provides a language, the nine Viewpoints, as well as a physical *hexis*, built through Suzuki's practice. This does not mean that everyone will literally speak the same language, nor that they will perfectly understand each other. Language here needs to be understood broadly as a system of representation that permits a dialogue to take place through utterances as well as through the body. Performers need to speak enough of the same 'language' to work together, to recognize if someone is working on the Viewpoint of Repetition, or Architecture, and so on.

Meaning is thus produced in the interaction between these different groups instead of being dictated by an authoritative voice, whether the director's or the playwright's. It is not the conscious act of a single intellect, but a polyphonic composition ('Composition' is the name of the technique SITI used to create its productions) of distinctive voices. SITI training aims at giving the ensemble the instruments needed to stage the aforementioned contradictions. As with every theatre practice, SITI training forms a culture of its own, which is the result of the hybridization of Suzuki and Viewpoints training in the way described above. It is a training culture that is supported by these two very distinctive trainings, which does not seek to cross-breed. Suzuki and Viewpoints, in SITI's practice, pass close by one another, but do not meld.

Thus the crucible of these two practices, and their respective cultural specificities, do not produce an arbitrary, naive melting pot. Its systems of symbols, values, and the respective body techniques run parallel, building strata after strata on top of each performer's body and culture. Theatre is part of society, which is to say that it contributes to the organization

and re-organization of images, symbols, values, habits, and so on. Consequently, SITI training is cross-cultural, as it favours this mix and cross between performers and their socio-cultural baggage. The resulting work is a juxtaposition of styles, a stratification of sensibilities and of minds and bodies. It is a cross-exchange of familiar and borrowed cultural fragments. It is a trial-and-error process.

It is also worth mentioning that SITI always intended Viewpoints (and Suzuki) to be training, and not a substitute for a theatre production or a style. SITI and Bogart are aware that, if too codified and recognizable, the Viewpoints can turn into a style of performance (such as *commedia dell'arte* for example), and are adamant that it should not constitute performance in itself. The training can (and indeed often does) fail. Every encounter can generate misunderstandings and incomprehension, inside and outside the boundaries of the theatre. The intricacies of these interchanges are homologues with the complexities of social interactions, which means that the theatre, like the broader field of art, does not live outside of society; theatre does not constitute a world in itself, impervious to all that is happening around it.

Colombian actress and activist Gina Jaimes works on the peace-building process that began in her country after the peace agreements between the Colombian government and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia). As part of her work, she travels to rural areas to coordinate and facilitate encounters between social groups that were part of opposing factions. During an interview, she told me the story of a group of women who were offered a platform to speak publicly about the violence that their children had suffered during the civil war.³³ When faced with the need to speak on stage, many asked for a chair. When talking, their legs were shaking too violently to allow them to stand. Others had a voice so feeble that it could not be heard. Jaimes, who had extensively trained with SITI for her work in the theatre, recognized in their struggle the material and symbolic need for balance. She invited them to train with her for a brief time. A few accepted and went through some of the basic exercises

of SITI training, which Jaimes adapted to their bodies, their age, and the context in which they lived and had to speak. The training helped them to find their bearings in a completely unfamiliar context – a public stage where they had the chance to dramatize their stories. Suzuki training grounded them and gave them the strength and balance needed to stand on the stage and be heard. Viewpoints was used to facilitate the collective creation of the brief theatre sketches that recounted their stories.

SITI training came a long way, from Greenwich Village in New York, via the remote mountains of Toga in Japan, to sustain the voice of a group of Colombian women who had lost their children to the civil war. This is testament to how Anne Bogart and SITI company always worked towards an idea of theatre that embraces cultural differences in its search of a universally understandable human truth.

Notes and References

1. See the SITI Company website, <<https://siti.org/sititraining/>>.
2. References to ballet can also be found in Tadashi Suzuki, *Culture is the Body: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. Kameron H. Steele (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2017), p. 69–70.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
4. The extent to which emotions are psycho-physiological expressions, or reactions (thus part of the nature of human beings), or else social behaviours, whose expression is affected by a large number of factors (thus part of what we broadly call culture), is still widely discussed. One work that is useful for understanding how the expression of emotions works in different contexts and cultures, and is therefore relevant for the field of cross-cultural theatre, is Jean L. Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971).
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 70.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
7. See Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): ‘The project of understanding the relations that human beings establish between one another and with nonhumans cannot be based upon a cosmology and an ontology that are as closely bound as ours are to one particular context. To this end, we need first to show that the opposition between nature and culture is not as universal as it is claimed to be’ (p. x).
8. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 75.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
10. Suzuki refers to the traditional *roppō* movement (literally ‘to stamp in the six directions’) as one of the many stamping gestures present in Noh and Kabuki. Similar gestures and actions are present in traditional dances all around the world: see Suzuki, *Culture is the Body*, p. 72–3.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
12. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 362.
13. To see how and why M. M. Bakhtin’s notion of ‘intertextuality’ can illuminate the field of the theatre through a sociological lens, but also how theatre, in her vocabulary, is ‘social through and through’, see Maria Shevtsova, ‘Appropriating Pierre Bourdieu’s *Champ* and *Habitus* for a Sociology of Stage Productions’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, XII, No. 3 (2002), p. 38–40. For further insight into Bakhtin’s fundamental importance for the conceptual frameworks of the sociology of the theatre, together with her research on multiculturalism and communities, both of direct relevance to my essay here, see Maria Shevtsova, *Sociology of Theatre and Performance* (Verona: QuiEdit, 2009).
14. The history of these mutual connections and encounters can be found in Ian Carruthers and Takahashi Yasunari, *The Theatre of Suzuki Tadashi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
15. Suzuki wrote extensively about the problem of globalization, its effects on theatre and society, and the risks of importing into another culture the set of values that belongs to North American neoliberalism: see, for example, *Culture is the Body*, p. 130.
16. For a more detailed history of the Six Viewpoints and SSTEMS, see Mary Overlie, *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory and Practice* (Bozeman, Montana: Fallon Press, 2016).
17. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2005), p. 7. An important part of the Viewpoints training is creating and sharing a specific language to name and label what is done on a stage, while action and movement are the focus of the activity itself. Viewpoints training has therefore a dual focus: one on the language used to describe performance, and one on the very act of performing.
18. Anne Bogart, ‘Copy, Transform, Combine’, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, XL, No. 1 (January 2018), p. 5–10 (p. 6).
19. Charles Mee’s work is available to read and use freely as a resource to make work. See <<https://www.charlesmee.org/about.shtml>>.
20. Bogart and Landau, *The Viewpoints Book*, p. 3.
21. Overlie, *Standing in Space*, p. vii–ix.
22. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
23. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xxi.
24. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 291–2.
25. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 86.
26. Anne Bogart, *What’s the Story: Essays about Art, Theatre, and Storytelling* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 126.
27. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 53.

28. Émile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and development of Secondary Education in France*, trans. Peter Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 11.

29. Bakhtin writes about the *chronotope* as the intersection of the axes of time and space, their interconnectedness and inseparability, and their relationship to art – specifically literature (*The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 84–258).

30. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, distilled under the title ‘Content’, see Anne Bogart, *And*

Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 105–25.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 112–13.

32. David Diamond, ‘Anne Bogart and Kristin Linklater debate the current trends in American actor-training’, *American Theatre*, January 2021, <<https://www.americantheatre.org/2001/01/01/balancing-acts/>>.

33. Gina Jaimes, unpublished interview with the author (Colombia, August 2022).