

What's the Story: Essays About Art, Theater and Storytelling  
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Anne Bogart

## Chapter 5

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### Opposition

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The essence of art is form: it is to defeat oppositions, to conquer opposing forces, to create coherence from every centrifugal force, from all things that have been deeply and eternally alien to one another before and outside the form.

(Georg Lukács, philosopher)

When I was artistic director of Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, I invited Molly Smith to direct a play as part of our 1989-90 season. Molly is an impressive, confident woman of action who founded the Perseverance Theater in Juneau, Alaska, and later became the highly successful artistic director of Arena Stage in Washington DC. At Trinity, she chose to stage a new adaptation of José Donoso's novel *Obscene Bird of Night*. During Molly's residency at Trinity I was struggling with the theater's board, company and community and the issues felt at times insurmountable. Molly, who grew up in Alaska and who is no stranger to the gigantic power of the natural world, advised me to *lean in*. Kayaking on a river and faced with an explosion of rough, dangerous water, one's natural inclination is to lean away from the turbulence and paddle for safety in the opposite direction. This, Molly said, is a big mistake. You must, on the contrary, lean into the apex of the turbulence, aim directly towards the problem. Only by joining the current's power can you eventually find your way to safety.

Of course Molly was not talking to me about kayaking, rather she was advising me about how I should negotiate the rough and dangerous currents that were swirling around me at the time at Trinity. In moments of great adversity, when one's body is screaming "run away!" retreat is not always the most effective action. The wisest move often feels counter-intuitive.

I took Molly's advice. I did lean in to the current. To this day I feel that the struggle was positive and that I stirred up issues that needed to

be faced by Trinity's board, company and community. The engagement was worth it even though my tenure there only lasted for one year.

The artistic process often requires one to act in opposition to what feels natural. For example, one's natural impulse is to run away from danger because for thousands of years humans have run away in order to survive in the primitive world. And yet the creative act asks for trust and engagement rather than fear and flight. Other examples of acting in opposition to what feels natural: to find balance it is necessary to welcome imbalance; to create an impression of rising one must be rooted deep into the ground; moving fast externally requires a concomitant internal stillness, rather than forcing things to happen; a theater director leans in to who is present and what they are already doing. These are all acts of opposition to what feels natural, even compelling.

The highly politicized Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei says that he does not provoke conflict, rather that all of his work is a reaction to what is happening to him at the moment. But, he adds, although he does not initiate action, he does push back a little at what is coming at him. "And when you push back," he declares, "something always happens." Both T'ai Chi Ch'uan and Aikido, martial arts from China and Japan respectively, teach practitioners to engage in conflict not by resisting but rather by joining the force of the oncoming adversary. In the joining, a transformation ensues. In order to be effective while holding the reins at Trinity, I acted in opposition to my impulse to flee and instead I leaned in, joining the natural power of the oncoming force. But leaning in to the current did not mean overpowering it.

### Impulse vs. intuition

In his Nobel acceptance speech in 2006, the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk claimed that he does not write to tell a story but rather he writes to *compose* a story. The difference, I believe, is instructive. Stories, like improvisations, can initially flow out easily, unrestrained, in a burst of communication. But to *compose* a story requires restraint, enforced distance, passionate intimacy and editing.

To compose either oneself or a work of art, it is necessary to transcend base and ancient human impulses and inclinations, bypass the ancient flight-or-fight impulses and act from the most advanced parts of the human brain. The latest evolutionary addition, the frontal cortex, modulates emotions, postpones gratification and makes executive decisions and long-term planning possible. To compose requires conscious restraint followed by the guidance of intuition. Impulse is different from intuition. Impulses tend to be automatic, instinctive and self-protective.

Intuition, on the other hand, is a process that allows you to know something directly without analytic reasoning, bridging the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind as well as joining instinct and reason.

Perhaps I became a theater director in an attempt to temper, control and re-compose the onslaught of chaos that I felt coming at me from the turbulent surrounding world and my own inner landscape. I sensed that in order to be successful, I had to harness my general unfocused fear, anger and panic and transform them into the fuel for creating. It was only by applying restraint and patience that I could begin to work steadily and intuitively.

### Compression vs. expression

When angry, irritated or confronted with a challenging obstacle, the natural human propensity is to vent one's feelings, to lose one's temper, to throw a tantrum or to turn in on oneself. The artist, on the other hand, hopefully learns to tame the energy of anger and aggravation, store it and then draw upon it when needed in the service of artistic expression. The rage that I accumulated in childhood and continuing on into adult life, triggered by frustrating circumstances, setbacks and myriad bad reviews in *The New York Times*, have also provided me the necessary fuel for productive action and artistic expressivity.

The key to expression is compression because expression is the *consequence* of compression. Actors, musicians, visual artists and writers learn to restrain, to gather together and to compress energy, before releasing it into articulate action. Expression is earned by compression. The gathering in, the compression, can fill the ensuing action with power and clarity, transforming inarticulate irritation and frustration into eloquent, communicative shape and form.

### Balance vs. imbalance

A play begins when something goes wrong, when the pendulum swings too wildly and an individual or a family or a society is thrown into a compromised state of imbalance. The world of a play is off-kilter. The story is generally the dramatization of an off-kilter world being brought back to some kind of stability.

As an artist and as a person I know that I must cultivate a taste for imbalance because I understand that expression happens in the heroic attempt to find balance from a state of imbalance. Dance training teaches performers to welcome the state of imbalance and to use it

creatively. Actors, in order to speak a monologue successfully, must jump off a figurative cliff and carve the event of speaking during the downward trajectory. Rather than stopping between words or in the midst of sentences, paragraphs or between the lines of a dialogue, actors must keep breathing and speaking and allow nuances and expression to arise in the act of speaking, in the midst of flight.

Biologically the body requires a balanced state and physical equilibrium to maintain life. For this reason it is natural for humans to gravitate towards stability and balance. And yet, despite this natural human tendency and in exact opposition to what feels natural, creation generally occurs from an imbalanced state.

An actor knows that a living room couch can be the enemy. A soft couch on stage predisposes the actor's body to sink, cutting off access to the abdomen, making speaking difficult and robbing breath and energy from the body. To solve this problem, the actor must consciously compromise his or her stability and sit in a way that demands intense effort and composure to maintain. And yet to the audience it should look natural and comfortable. The effort and difficulty of imbalance allows the actor to breathe properly and speak with a connection to their abdomen. The body fights to maintain verticality while what the audience sees is horizontality.

### **Public vs. private**

Perhaps a definition of acting for the theater is being private in public. How does an actor maintain intimacy in public? Constantin Stanislavsky articulated the actor's paradox and dilemma succinctly: you are in a living room and you are about to confess love for the first time to the only other person in the room. The situation is deeply personal, private and exposed. And there are a thousand people watching.

To flourish in the space between the two opposing forces of public and private requires imagination, patience and an ability to allow an audience to share in one's private experience. Rather than extending outwards, towards the audience, the actor creates a strong inner presence that draws the audience towards him or her.

### **Up vs. down**

In the morning I awaken loaded down with the weight of entropy and sleep. It is difficult to get out of bed and I would prefer to turn over, kiss my wife and go back to sleep. I long to delay the crisis of stepping out into the world. What gets me up? Perhaps the hope for a good day

or a promise made the night before helps me to swing my legs over the side of the bed. Acts of engagement, including meeting each day with a positive attitude, require effort, will, desire and an emotionally charged image of how things might be.

As we age, we lose energy; we begin to fall apart, to disorganize. Our lives lead inevitably to decay and death. As defined by thermodynamics, entropy is an increase of disorganization and it is a part of daily life. Without diligence and effort we can easily sink into lethargy and collapse. I admire an elderly person who grooms and dresses smartly because I know that this action is an achievement of resistance and opposition to diminishing energy and the force of entropy.

An artist also works in opposition to the weight of daily life in order to find lightness and buoyancy in artistic expression. The immense strain and cost of making art should not be visible to an audience. It is good to enjoy the airy flight of a ballerina but do not look at her torn and swollen feet. The lower to the ground an actor's body, the more opposite, upward, vertical energy is required. Horizontality requires an opposing verticality. The acquired lightness is what makes an artistic encounter with dark matter bearable.

Director/playwright Bertolt Brecht said that an actor, while walking downstage, should be thinking about *not* walking upstage. The actor can consciously create the space behind her or him as they move downstage. This too is opposition.

Actors grouped closely together onstage tend to collapse into one another, both energetically and physically. Once again, it is necessary to act against the natural inclination with oppositional force. Similarly, actors have a habit of looking directly at one another incessantly in a scene, perhaps in an attempt to sustain a connection. In order to act in opposition to this default inclination, it is necessary to consciously select moments of direct eye contact. In this way, the direct contact has more meaning for the audience.

### **Fast vs. slow**

Perhaps the artistic impulse is a struggle against death, an effort to affirm life in the face of the certainty of dying. In contrast to the entropic directionality of a life cycle, art works in opposition to a living organism's tendency towards slowing down, dissolution and finally death. The artist searches for quickness, lightness and exactitude in the face of rot and decay. Fueled by curiosity, energy and hope, the artist enters and accepts the darkness and in that acceptance sometimes discovers a thin vein of light.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the choreographer Merce Cunningham continued to dance late into his eighties. Towards the end of his life, he danced onstage sitting in a chair. And yet he danced. Despite the minimalism of his movement, the audience experienced only a transcendent lightness and quickness. And those who knew Cunningham's work from his early days recognized the irony. In his younger years, the choreographer was known for a piece in which he danced with great abandon with a chair strapped onto his back. Now, sitting in his chair in performance, Cunningham continued to accelerate his energy against the gradual expiration of entropy. The audience experienced his personal and political act of dignity, his act of defiance and his act of life.

During the process of a lifetime, the human body begins to slow down and gradually disintegrates. Similarly, every action, even every gesture, tends to disintegrate towards its conclusion. This deceleration and disintegration, confirmed by the rules of physics, is natural. In the theater each gesture, each physical action, each sentence, each dramatic encounter, each scene and each act, left to nature, will decelerate toward its ending. Actors, playwrights, directors and designers work together to oppose this tendency with an acceleration of energy so that the end of each gesture, action, sentence, dialogue, scene or act possesses more energy than the beginning.

Gustav Mahler's symphonies generally conclude in long sustained quietness. But the quietness, if played correctly, is the most demanding part for a musician and must be filled with great intensity and vigor. Similarly, an actor requires maximum energy in the quietest moments. A stage whisper demands far more energy than a loud moment. It would be natural to assume that quiet moments required the least energy to perform and yet the truth is that to sustain quiet drawn-out moments demands a tremendous amount of energy.

Audiences also naturally get tired and their perceptual abilities lose steam over time. Knowing this, the artist must compensate for the audience's growing fatigue, accelerating their own energy over time, counterbalancing the diminishing energy of the audience.

On the other hand, when encountering tough moments the natural inclination is to speed up. But the artist moves in opposition to this proclivity and, in the midst of complexity and difficulty, consciously slows down. The challenge is to savor the distress of challenging obstacles and to move *slowly* through them.

### Known vs. unknown

It is a natural human propensity to divide the world around us into narrow categories. From fear or terror of the unknown, we cement our

opinions and definitions of people, objects and places quickly, and these assumptions hold a mighty power over our lives.

My own natural proclivity is to categorize the world around me, to remove unfamiliar objects from their dangerous perches by defining, compartmentalizing and labeling them. I want to know what things are and I want to know where they are and I want to control them. I want to remove the danger of the unknown and replace it with the known. I want to feel safe. I want to feel out of danger.

And yet, as an artist, I know that I must welcome the strange and the unintelligible into my awareness and into my working process. Despite my propensity to own and control everything around me, my job is to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar," as Bertolt Brecht recommended: to un-define and un-tame what has been delineated by belief systems and conventions, and to welcome the discomfort of doubt and the unknown, aiming to make visible what has become invisible by habit.

Because life is filled with habit, because our natural desire is to make countless assumptions and treat our surroundings as familiar and unthreatening, we need art to wake us up. Art un-tames, reifies and wakes up the parts of our lives that have been put to sleep and calcified by habit. The artist, or indeed anyone who wants to turn daily life into an adventure, must allow people, objects and places to be dangerous and freed from the definitions that they have accumulated over time.

### Artifice vs. "the thing that cannot be faked"

No matter how tragic the role, actors strive for the impression of lightness, ease, naturalness and a sense of evanescent effortlessness. And yet, it is impossible to engender this lightness, this sensation of naturalness, by going directly for it. Imagine saying to someone standing onstage in front of an audience, "Act naturally! Speak naturally!" The lightness, the necessary quickness, spontaneity, agility and ability to leap from thought to thought, line to line, demands rigor and training transcending anything that happens easily or naturally.

The great vaudeville comedian W. C. Fields notoriously said, "Never work with animals or children." Animals and children, due to their lack of artifice and self-consciousness, are often cute, almost always interesting and draw the audience's attention without fail. They steal focus because their actions are not artificial or fake and their unpredictability makes them interesting to watch. And yet, successful theater balances two opposite conditions: the artificial and "the thing that cannot be faked."

Pablo Picasso said, "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child." An artist walks a tight rope between artifice and the untamed. Technique, which is part of the realm of artifice, is necessary in order to arrive at the desired state of naturalness. The artist must go through the back door in order to arrive at the front. To walk naturally upon the stage, the actor must rediscover the awkwardness of walking for the very first time. Similarly, the act of speaking requires reinvention.

Here are a few examples of "the thing that cannot be faked": an actor notices a beeper going off in the back of a theater; real water, earth, air or fire; real physical effort; tangible kinesthetic response between actors and between the audience and the actors; the physical effect of live voices on the bodies of the audience.

Examples of artifice: crafted visual metaphor; a red scarf that stands in for blood; the number of steps that the actor counts to back up to a wall; the angle of a hand in a shaft of light; the notated music of a song; memorized words.

In the theater, the balancing act between the artificial and "the thing that cannot be faked" is an ongoing challenge. A production with too much of "the thing that cannot be faked" and not enough artifice suffers by feeling chaotic, blurry and unclear to the audience. Too much artifice and too little of "the thing that cannot be faked," the experience will feel studied, synthetic and cold.

The glorious energy of the untamed and uncontrollable requires the counterpoint artifice of choice, craft and repetition. The audience's experience is made all the richer by the play between the controlled and the uncontrolled, the restrained and the unrestrained, the artifice and the real. But the balance must be right.

### Phenomenology vs. structuralism vs. semiotics

In 1976 and 1977 I was fortunate to attend the graduate program in Drama at NYU, now known as Performance Studies. The program encouraged students to study performance through the lenses of anthropology, sociology and non-theatrical critical systems. Learning to think this way had an enormous impact on the way I approach the theater to this day. I learned that there are no right or wrong methods of criticism, but rather radically different ways to look at the same event.

I learned to examine performance from three fundamentally different perspectives: phenomenology, structuralism and semiotics. Each of these modes of analysis allowed me to consider the same performance from

three completely different points of view, each offering contrasting ways to appreciate and analyze the experience.

Phenomenology focuses on the structural subjective experience of consciousness. Most mainstream theater criticism is phenomenological, emphasizing the visceral experience of a performance with primacy on how the body perceives it, how the experience *hits* the perceiver. "I loved it," "I hated it," "It sent shivers up my spine," "The actress has such a beautiful body." These statements and impressions are phenomenological. Phenomenology is not concerned with concepts, metaphors or abstract thinking; rather, it is the world of appearances and affect.

Structuralism, first articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1950s, proposes that a work of art can be understood objectively by means of its structure. The attention in structuralism is not given to ideas or human imagination. Structuralism is less interested in interpreting what a work means than in explaining how it can insinuate what it means by showing its implicit rules and conventions. The emphasis of structuralism is on the logic and mechanics of how a work is constructed.

Finally, semiotics concerns itself exclusively with the creation of meaning. Semiotics examines how signs, symbols, icons, analogies and metaphors combine to generate meaning. Semiotics draws attention to the layers of meaning that may be embodied in simple representations. Memory and imagination are joined in the creation of meaning.

Learning about phenomenology, structuralism and semiotic ways of perceiving taught me that there is no right or wrong way to receive information; rather, I can consciously choose the lens through which I want to experience the event.

### Onstage vs. offstage

An artist is like a notorious criminal in pursuit by a detective. The detective is the audience. If the artist/criminal leaves too many clues behind, the audience/detective will lose interest in the chase. If too few clues are left behind, the audience/detective will get distracted and also lose interest. A balance between the known and the unknown must be struck and renewed constantly. An artist makes conscious decisions about what to show and what to keep hidden in order to keep up the suspense of co-creation with an audience.

The ancient Greeks taught through example that it is best to leave the most violent actions offstage. Clytemnestra leads Agamemnon and Cassandra offstage to their bloody deaths. Agave rips her son to pieces offstage. There is no way to embody an equivalent of what the audience can so powerfully imagine. The audience reconstructs the full horror

of these events through a messenger's words and their own subjective imagery.

The etymology of the word "obscene" may ultimately be traced to the Greek *ob-skene*, literally "offstage." For an artist, the key is to figure out what to show and what to leave to the audience's imagination. Great horror movies leave the most potent imagery to the audience's imagination. The grade B movies that show all the gore end up simply looking silly. Alfred Hitchcock displayed his brilliance in the film *Psycho* by carefully choosing what *not* to show in the famous shower/murder scene.

Human beings are expectation machines, physiologically and neurologically designed to anticipate what will happen next. This human trait, which almost certainly originated in ancient survival tactics, makes time-based performance a potential minefield of fulfilled and broken expectations. In music a melody is the composer's way of setting up an expectation. What happens to that melody? Does it return? Does it return as the same or different? The artist is faced consistently with one choice: to fulfill or to break the expectation. Both options can be dramatic.

Alfred Hitchcock, in an interview with French director François Truffaut, explained that if a character appears from screen-left, the audience generally trusts and likes the person because most western cultures read from left to right and an entrance from the left creates a sense of familiarity and friendliness. If a character arrives from screen-right the audience generally suspects that he or she is sinister or dangerous. In Hitchcock's film *Rebecca*, the forbidding Mrs. Danvers always appears from screen-right, unexpectedly and then motionless. Subliminally, the audience expects something bad to happen.

Every moment of a play, as in every measure of a piece of music, sets up expectations about what will follow. The syncopations of expectations, consciously fulfilled and broken, can make for a compelling journey for the audience. A plot point that is too easily predicted is also too easily forgotten. An image, an action or an object not immediately recognizable arouses concern, curiosity and vigilance on the part of the viewer and therefore tends to become inexplicably vivid in her or his imagination.

### Old vs. new

Each time that I direct a classic play or opera, I fill myself up with as much information as I can find about its production history. I read theoretical writing about the play, and study the context in which the play originally occurred. I fill myself up with the old in order to find something new.

We make new things upon the skeletons of the old. The more we can incorporate the old bones into the work, the more tensile strength will hold it up. In making his film *Raging Bull*, director Martin Scorsese had trouble figuring out how to edit the final fight scene between the boxers Jake LaMotta and Sugar Ray Robinson. He ended up using Alfred Hitchcock's original shot list from the shower sequence in *Psycho* as his template. The jarring editing technique in both films portrays the protagonists' subjective experience of violence.

For me, one of the richest sources of inspiration for the theater can be found in Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein's theories about montage and editing. In the early part of the twentieth century he used his understanding of language to invent a system of composition by linking separate ideas together, juxtaposing them and creating new meanings through syntactical choices in arrangement.

### Survival vs. gift

The artistic impulse operates in opposition to the Darwinian drive towards the survival of the fittest; it originates in the impulse to give a gift to another person. Art is not innately a transaction nor is it competitive. It does not directly put food on the table or lead to sexual congress or abiding power. Making art is a liminal ambiguous activity and makes no logical sense. We are not making art for the money and when money becomes a dominating factor, the art loses its magnificence, its munificence and its inherent wonder.

The artistic process requires us to learn how to flourish in the paradoxical realm of opposition, in the space between conflicting ideas, in the opposing dynamics within our own bodies, in expectations fulfilled and broken, in the act of leaning in towards oncoming turbulence, in the necessity for restraint when all riled up, in the requirement to cultivate intimacy in public, to accelerate energy and speed in light of the human tendency towards entropy and decay, between what we know and what we can never know, between technique and what comes naturally, among the various ways to see the same event, between what is visible and what is invisible and between what is new and what came before.