

this exercise because it physically manifests the idea of actions coming to a complete stop and having to move to “something entirely new [beginning] a sharp attack” (53). Akalaitis is not interested in what she calls the “aesthetics of curves,” which I interpret as languid movement, and she stresses the power of Stopping-and-Starting in the following exchange: “I’m in a scene, the scene is over, a door slams, a new door opens” (53). Stopping-and-Starting creates a powerful response to text for the actor, one in which we can discuss the work with physical language. I find in working with undergraduate actors that concepts of action, beats, and conflict become challenging for them to understand—to play within the scene. The more we work with the exercise, the more I see *light bulbs illuminate* and the work become stronger.

Over the years, I have practiced some of Akalaitis’s exercises discreetly and others I have adapted to achieve different ends. Composition and Slow Motion is an exercise I have used in its unaffected form. The exercise is a variation on Stopping-and-Starting and Internalizing the Structure of Montage. Here the actors move in slow motion through space, “working with the idea that they are moving within a group composition, or *painting*” (58). Composition changes with the number of actors morphing to become “more and more *perfect*” (59). Working with actors on the spatial rather than psychological relationship is one goal of the exercise and a definite focus for my work with undergraduate performers. In 1999, I started using the cartoon *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005) to describe the disconnect I saw with young actors and the world of the play. The cartoon is a perfect metaphor for actor disconnect because it is drawn in two differing sections, the girls and a separate setting. Like *The Powerpuff Girls*, my students appeared as if they were hovering slightly out of sync with the space. Akalaitis’s exercises on composition and slow motion are practiced in my coursework with both actors and directors, and I also use it in the rehearsal hall. As Saivetz describes, Akalaitis “suggests that actors cannot help psychologizing everything they do and thus need to be reminded to work physically” (59). Actors psychologizing everything leads to a disconnected performance and the exercise forces actors out of their heads and into their bodies, eliminating the “hover” effect.

Akalaitis developed Composition and Slow Motion to include breath—originating the breath within their bodies—to know where the breath is headed once it leaves the body (59). Total control of the actor within the space, a further concept mined from the exercise, explores the idea that the actors “must see both themselves and the entire group from ‘the outside’ at the same time that they are working from the inside” (59-60). “Seeing” is further defined as seeing it both visually and with

the body. The actor is aware of composition within the space and in relationship to the architecture and the people with whom they share the scene. The exercise is particularly successful for teaching directors to understand composition. The concept of breath in body and the idea of total control (59) connects the actor to the world of the play, creating honesty of being.

Akalaitis’s work is rich with the genealogy of Grotowski to Mabou Mines. Saivetz’ text has been a powerful look into her work, both from a historical and a practical perspective.

TEACHING YOUNG DIRECTORS TO SIGNIFY

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I teach Beginning Directing to undergraduate students. Most of my students are actors, and this previous experience serves them well when coaching other actors. But it often stands in their way when trying to conceptualize a personal vision or construct a signified space. Learning to read a play as a director (big picture, conceptual ideas, primary themes, rhythm, flow) as opposed to as an actor (Who am I? Where do I fit into this story? How does this story affect me?) can be challenging for someone new to directing, but it is ultimately achievable within a short period of time. One of the most vexing skills for a young director to learn is how to apply aesthetic abstraction or metaphor to her storytelling.

As a young director, I recognized such a problem in my own work. I knew how to read a play, how to direct actors, how to talk to designers, but I recognized a lack of depth in my conceptualization. So I headed to graduate school to see if I could fix it. My quest was met during my studies at Northwestern when I began to study with **Mary Zimmerman**. Zimmerman’s work, as is commonly known, lives in great measure through symbolism and signification. Her texts are often large, epic, and poetic by nature and thereby lend themselves to this treatment. But even when directing Shakespeare (*Henry VIII*) her work contains what one reviewer called “symbolic visuals” (Komisar). Following one of my project presentations in her class on Proust, Zimmerman tossed me a casual note. “You should consider working with music that is in opposition to the tone of the story.” This simple idea knocked something loose in my approach to storytelling. I suddenly saw the value in opposition, in representation, in several ideas living on stage at once. I began to watch Zimmerman’s work carefully, and to see the ways in which she structured and engaged with poetic space.

Zimmerman is a master of metaphor on the stage. Some have accused her of just creating “pretty pictures,” but she argues that her focus on image is all about connecting with an audience:

You teach a vocabulary, and the audience becomes fluent in it. When that’s being accomplished without words, it creates an enormous sense of intimacy between audience members and the people on stage, because—like lovers or members of the family—they have gained an unspoken understanding and agreement, and they know how to read the metaphor in exactly the same way. (Loewith 424)

Like Mary, I feel strongly about the value of poetic space in storytelling. In my classroom, we begin our lessons on the use of signification by initially working without text. Through a series of exercises involving found objects, the repurposing of familiar objects, and the reframing of traditional compositions, I tempt my young actors-becoming-directors to consider how metaphor will enrich their work. I teach them to name what they see, then to change the signification and identify the ways in which the landscape has been transformed. Once they have begun to delight in the power of representation, I return them to their texts and invite them to consider how they might use these new skills to shape the visual, aural, and kinesthetic landscape of their story.

Little has been written on Zimmerman’s work with imagistic space. Jason Loewith’s article on her provides the richest source of interview-based information. Additionally, I recommend two recordings: one twenty-minute talk she gave to Chicago Ideas on “poetry in the theatrical image” (**Mary Zimmerman**) and an interview/overview of her adaptation of *The Odyssey* in “Backstage at the Goodman” (Goodman). Perhaps soon someone will take up this mantle and fill this significant gap in pedagogical scholarship. We could all benefit from more writing on the work of **Mary Zimmerman**. **sc**

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