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ENSEMBLE REHEARSAL PRACTICES: THE EVOLUTION AND APPLICATION OF  
REHEARSAL TECHNIQUE AS EXPLORED IN HAROLD PINTER'S *BETRAYAL*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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And finally, thanks once again to Bonnie. You continually push the boundaries of art, and for that I owe you everything.

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## ABSTRACT

### ENSEMBLE REHEARSAL PRACTICES: THE EVOLUTION AND APPLICATION OF REHEARSAL TECHNIQUE AS EXPLORED IN HAROLD PINTER'S *BETRAYAL*

By Kerry McGee Wilson, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Major Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

Three years ago, Bonnie Gabel and I started an ensemble theatre company called Night Light Collective (NLC). Our company was inspired by the work of Anne Bogart and the Dah Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia. We used many of their techniques and exercises to develop a rehearsal process that would help our ensemble connect to each other as well as contribute to the artistic direction of our productions. In the fall of 2010, I directed Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*. I used the rehearsal practices that we developed with NLC and created a few of my own. This thesis documents the evolution of various rehearsal techniques over the course of three Night Light Collective shows, and the application of those techniques to the *Betrayal* rehearsal process.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENSEMBLE

“Ensemble” is an overused word these days. In my short acting career I have had the opportunity to be a part of two ensemble theatres, numerous ensemble casts, and train in various “ensemble-building” techniques. Almost every experience has been different. In fact, the word can mean so many different things that ensemble members can get quite confused as to their role and responsibilities. My goal is to set forth cohesive rehearsal techniques that help build an ensemble dynamic that serves the show being rehearsed. However, I think it might be important for me to identify the kind of ensemble I’m talking about.

For the past four years I have had the wonderful opportunity to build a company called Night Light Collective with my friend and fellow artist, Bonnie Gabel. Bonnie is an accomplished actor, director and artist who has trained with the Moscow Art Theatre, The Dah Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia, and at Virginia Commonwealth University. I met her while we were both working on a production with a local theatre company. After working on several productions together, Bonnie and I started talking about putting together a production ourselves. With the help of Suzanne Ankrum, Andrew Bonniwell, and Alison Haracznak we created Night Light Collective (NLC) so that we’d have a name to go by while we worked on Wendy MacLeod’s *The House Of Yes*. We rehearsed *The House Of Yes* using movement and composition work that I had never encountered before. Because NLC was a very small and very new company, we all contributed to multiple aspects of the show: sets, props, costumes, and PR in addition to acting. The show was a success, and we decided to continue working together.

To us, an ensemble was a group of artists who worked together, trained together, and developed material together. While Bonnie, Alison, Andrew and I were part of the official NLC “ensemble” because we worked on all of the shows, as well as participated in pre and post show planning, it was necessary to work on our projects with other artists, actors, designers, and directors. Therefore, for each show, a new ensemble existed, and each artist was considered a part of our collective while they worked with us. Some of the artists worked with us on multiple shows, and the connections that we formed with them helped to strengthen the ensemble for each new cast.

In order for each show to be a success, it was important that the actors, all of whom had various levels of experience with our collective, be able to act together cohesively. Under Bonnie’s direction we continued to use and refine the movement practices with which we experimented in *The House Of Yes*. I came to learn that many of these techniques came from Anne Bogart’s *The Viewpoints Book*, which details the method of training that she uses with her ensemble, the SITI Company, and from Bonnie’s (and later Alison’s and my) training with the Dah Theatre. These practices became the base of our ensemble training. The main objectives were to get the ensemble to listen and respond on impulse to each other, as well as explore the relationships and background of their characters. The exercises not only trained the actors, but also provided insight into the show itself. Since each production boasted a mostly new cast, there wasn’t time to train an ensemble of actors outside of rehearsals. By necessity, the rehearsal exercises had to apply to both the training of actors and the development of the show.

Over the years, we found some techniques that worked well for us, and adapted them as it best fit our purposes. Because we always had a few new artists with each show, new material and exercises were introduced along the way as well. Due to the limited time restraints of a



rehearsal process, it was important to identify and streamline what worked best for each show and for the company as a whole.

When I decided to direct *Betrayal* as my thesis project, I knew that I wanted to continue the work of identifying and perfecting ensemble rehearsal techniques. While this was a school project for Virginia Commonwealth University, and not affiliated with NLC, I had the liberty to use both some of our exercises and introduce some of my own. This would be my first experience directing a show using the techniques that we'd cultivated over the years, and I wanted to experiment with a few show-specific techniques as well. Since my concept for *Betrayal* involved multiple actors playing the same character, I knew that this concept would require the development of some new rehearsal materials.

While this evaluation will focus mainly on the effectiveness of exercises used while rehearsing *Betrayal*, my larger objective is to catalogue and evaluate practices that NLC has used and can use in the future. Because of this, I will document the *Betrayal* exercises as well as the evolution of the exercises over the three Night Light Collective shows, *The House Of Yes*, *Aloha Say The Pretty Girls*, and *Alice In Wonderland*.

While NLC has very specific demands from an ensemble of actors, that is not always the case for other companies or shows. Sometimes all that is desired is that the members of the cast become close to one another, which creates a sense of comfort with each other on stage. While the exercises that I will explore do help create this level of comradery in a cast, they are also focused on building acting techniques and creating a show together. For ensemble casts that are primarily interested in creating a close-knit family of actors, there are many different ways to go about achieving this goal. I recently co-directed a student production of *Henry V* where we used very different techniques than those covered in this paper. We sent our actors on a military boot

camp, a weekend intensive text workshop, and to a local VA hospital for group volunteer hours.

Through the help of these activities, a very tight-knit and responsive ensemble cast was created.

I use this example to admit that what follows is not the only way to create ensemble theatre.

However, for the particular objectives of my company, it has proven to be the most useful.

## ***BETRAYAL AT A GLANCE***

So that the following pages make sense, I thought it would be best to sketch out the main directorial ideas I had for this project. With an original cast of seven actors, I directed Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* in one of the studio spaces on campus. For the cast I used a combination of students and members of the Richmond theatre community, some whom I'd worked with before, and others who were new to both me and my rehearsal process.

My concept was to use the play *Betrayal* to examine the universality of relationships. As I state in my director's notes:

In our love lives (as well as our regular lives) we frequently listen to other people's anxieties, triumphs and woes and say "I've been there" or "I went through something similar". I wanted to use Pinter's story of one specific relationship to highlight this universal theme. The actors in tonight's show will each be playing several characters involved in a variety of different relationships. Looking at the play through these multiple filters helped us hone in on the universal truths that kept cropping up despite the differing circumstances. It is these truths that we present for you tonight. (Wilson)

*Betrayal* is a story of three characters, Emma, Jerry, and Robert and the secrets and affairs that exist between them. I treated each scene as an individual story; so that when a new scene started it would be a different actor playing Emma, Jerry, and Robert than in the previous scene. To help tell the story of universal truths in any kind of relationship, I disregarded the gender and

sexuality of Pinter's original characters. Male actors played Emma and females played Jerry and Robert, and the relationships vacillated between varying degrees of straight and gay. Pinter's characters are not specified as being of a particular age or race, so we experimented with those variables as well.

These seven different scenes with seven different relationships would all inevitably tell the same story in the end. Despite the fact that we were breaking the play up into individual scenes, we still wanted to maintain a cohesive whole. To make sure that the author's original story was still visible under my concept, the ensemble created through-lines for Pinter's characters using Universal Gestures and signature colors. I will go into further detail about this process in a later chapter.

While we were still in rehearsals for the show, we lost one of our original actors and three additional actors stepped in during tech week to fill in. Needless to say, it made the week leading up to the show a bit nerve-racking, but everything came together in the end. The exercises that I will be detailing are ones that we used with the original ensemble, not the new actors. Due to time constraints I did not have the opportunity to catch the new actors up on the ensemble work, and the technique was set aside to ensure the success of the show. I will discuss how losing part of the original ensemble affected the rehearsal process later in this paper, but I would like to mention that the three new actors were extremely talented. With their help, the six original ensemble members put on a very engaging and successful production.

## DEVELOPING ENSEMBLE WARM-UPS

One of the more difficult parts of a rehearsal process is warming-up an actor so that her body and reflexes are ready to perform at a higher level. I've worked in many productions where a director has requested actors to come to rehearsal fifteen to thirty minutes early to stretch and warm-up on their own. While this is one solution, I don't feel that it's the best one. First, many actors are coming from classes or jobs and cannot physically arrive earlier. Even when actors have the free time, this requirement is one that isn't enforced with a specific start time, and can be the first thing sacrificed if an actor is having a bad day, is running a little bit late, etc. Far too many excuses make this ill-defined pre-rehearsal time an optional event, rather than a very important part of rehearsal. I have also found that while stretching and warming-up individually (which is usually how this time is used) is useful, but not as useful as a group warm-up. Warming up as a group serves two purposes: to warm-up the actor's mind, body, and voice, but to also warm-up the ensemble, so that when the director turns to scene work, the actors have already established that basic connection or energy that is absolutely necessary when rehearsing the show.

Over the past several shows I've worked on, my company and I have been trying to build a repertoire of warm-up exercises. Some have been discarded over the years, while others have been refined and revamped so that they work best for our company. The following examples are exercises that I've found to be very effective and have utilized over the years with NLC, and specifically with the rehearsal process for *Betrayal*. I will provide details if I'm not aware of the

origins of the activity, or if it's been altered to better facilitate my work. Exercises that come straight from other sources won't be explained in painstaking detail since that has been done better in its original text. Further information on these exercises can be found in the footnotes.

I'd like to add that the following activities are not the only warm-ups that I've used; these are merely the ones that I've come back to repeatedly for both *Betrayal* and NLC productions. I think it's important to have a couple of warm-ups that are not a part of the routine to inject some life and spontaneity into the rehearsal process. Since these types of activities are thought up or decided on in the spur of the moment, I have not included the ones that I have used. Based on the director, actor, show, time of day, type of rehearsal, and multiple other factors, these warm-ups would (I hope) change. The following exercises are those that I've found to directly serve both ensemble building and a rehearsal environment.

Also, all of these warm-ups are not used for every rehearsal. No more than one or two are used during a single rehearsal, otherwise there would be no time left to rehearse. I suggest trying to read what the actors or the planned rehearsal needs, and choosing the warm-ups to facilitate that. Most of the warm-up exercises compliment the rehearsal techniques. I have found some specific exercises that pair up well together, and will discuss how I have used them effectively (ie. The Lane Work exercise to warm-up to the Viewpoints technique). However the following exercises can be used in any combination.

## **SUN SALUTATIONS**

Sun Salutations are a cycle of body and breath exercises utilized in Yoga. Anne Bogart recommends this activity as a good way for an ensemble to warm-up.<sup>1</sup> She emphasizes the

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of Bogart and Landau's Sun Salutations can be found in *The Viewpoints Book*, page 23. For a breakdown of the Sun Salutations positions, I suggest checking any major book on Yoga techniques.

importance of performing each movement in unison with the ensemble as well taking a group breath between each cycle. Night Light Collective first introduced Sun Salutations in our *Alice In Wonderland* rehearsals. While Bogart suggested doing twelve cycles and increasing the speed of the cycles, we instead only performed three, and maintained an even speed (23). I believe that by limiting the number of cycles it makes the activity more conducive to the time confines of a rehearsal schedule. During *Alice*, instead of the director leading the exercise, one of the members of the acting ensemble led the Sun Salutations, and this gave the ensemble more ownership over the warm-up, making it “our thing”. After the show was in performance we frequently chose to use this exercise in our pre-show warm-ups. In *Betrayal* rehearsals I asked one of the actors (who had also performed in *Alice In Wonderland* and was familiar with the exercise) to lead the Sun Salutations, hoping that it would inspire the same ensemble building, but due to time restraints, we were unable to implement the exercise as often as I would have liked. Regardless, it still served as an effective body, breath, and ensemble warm-up.

## COUNTING

I have run into Bogart’s counting exercise in numerous rehearsal processes and classrooms. She describes using it as a focus technique while additionally combining movement, tempo, and group stops and starts.<sup>2</sup> In its most basic form, an ensemble counts up to a specific number, numbers are spoken spontaneously, with no two actors saying a number at the same time. I instructed my cast to stand in a circle and count first to ten, and then fifteen. As they completed these tasks very easily, I spread them around the rehearsal space, with their backs to each other and had them count to twenty. After we had used this warm-up multiple times in the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Viewpoints Book* has a full description of this activity on pages 65-66.

rehearsal period, I asked them to move around the space while counting. The added movement forced them to step up their levels of focus and listening.

I've found that the first couple of times that Counting is used, actors look for the "tricks" that make it easier. A common one is saying a number very quickly after the last person speaks so that no one else has a chance to say it first. Having done this myself when first introduced to the exercise in *The House Of Yes* rehearsals, I respected it as a part of the process. With continued practice in ensemble work, I've come to realize that the goal of Counting is not to reach ten as quickly as possible, but to really listen to my fellow actors. However, this is not a realization that comes early in the process. I decided not to bring my actors' awareness to these tricks but to let them work past them naturally, even if that would be a lesson that extended well beyond my rehearsal process for *Betrayal*. At this point, I figured that their illusions of success made the exercise more attainable, and the confidence that came from succeeding as an ensemble was an important part of their group work.

Since the aim of this reflection was to define ensemble-based rehearsals for Night Light Collective, a company that frequently works with some of the same actors over and over again, it's important to distinguish between what is good for the *Betrayal* ensemble, and what would work better for a company. If I were to work with these actors again, I would increase my expectations for each additional show, perhaps even working up to the advanced movement work that Bogart uses with her Counting exercise. I believe that the difficulty level of a warm-up needs to be adapted relative to the experience of a company. Advanced exercises with no chance of success would only discourage a new company, and would impede the rehearsal process instead of serving it.



## YES

I do not know the origin of Yes, but I was introduced to it while rehearsing our first NLC show. However, it wasn't until *Alice In Wonderland* rehearsals that it really became a crucial warm-up for our company. I've since seen it used in acting classrooms and workshops, and I can't recommend its benefits enough. Yes requires focus, awareness, and group connection, all very important elements of ensemble work.

The ensemble stands in a circle. One actor is elected to start the exercise (in more advanced versions, no one is designated to start and the actors merely start on impulse) by choosing to look at or "cue" another actor in the circle. The receiver of the action will acknowledge receipt by saying "yes". Only after they have been acknowledged, the first actor (the sender) will cross to the receiver and take their place. While this is happening the second actor will simultaneously send a cue to a new receiver. The game continues this way for some time, until the group decides that they are ready to move to the next level. At this level, instead of saying "yes" a receiver will acknowledge the sender with only a nod of the head. This requires the rest of the group to follow the actions more closely, because the verbal element has been eliminated. Yes can be made more difficult by adding a second or third strain of senders and receivers, or by encouraging the ensemble to move past the silent head nod, to merely acknowledging the sender with a look. If the exercise is used frequently in rehearsals, the ensemble should be proficient enough to progress to the more advanced techniques, but they should always start with the basic exercise and add in the more difficult elements as they go.

Yes was a warm-up that we came back to over and over again both in *Alice* and *Betrayal*. It's simple, doesn't take up too much valuable rehearsal time, encourages the actors to listen and connect to each other, and gets them acting on impulse and reaction. The ensemble must remain

aware of where the cue is being sent, while also reorienting themselves every time they switch places. It keeps the actors in a constant state of readiness, and doesn't allow time to think ahead or plan an action out. Since it doesn't require complex movement or unfamiliar vocabulary, I found that Yes could be introduced early in the rehearsal process and used throughout.

## **BODY CENTERING**

Night Light Collective has utilized body centering in our rehearsal process since our first show, *The House Of Yes*. However, it wasn't until my study abroad trip to Serbia that I realized that it was a part of the Qigong exercises. Bonnie Gabel studied with the Dah before we founded the company and when Alison Haracznak and I traveled to Serbia in the summer of 2010 to train with the Dah, we were delighted to discover that we had already been using some of their techniques.

The daily Qigong exercises at the Dah Theatre were led by Maja Mitić, and included an initial centering of body followed by a routine of postures that flowed from one to another. We would perform this routine slowly and in unison with the group while Maja supervised and corrected our postures. The entire routine was amazing; it required focus to maintain the group unison, and strength and flexibility to hold and move between the postures. However, learning the entire routine correctly takes a great deal of time, as well as access to an experienced instructor, neither of which have been available in NLC rehearsal processes.

Instead, we have introduced the initial posture, which I refer to as Body Centering, as a warm-up. Usually this will be the first of several warm-ups allowing the actors a chance to check in with their bodies and breath. In *Betrayal* rehearsals I had the ensemble stand in a circle while I talked through the steps: Feet should be shoulder width apart and pointing forward and

parallel to each other, knees slightly bent, pelvis tucked in, chest up, shoulders up, back and relaxed, and neck long. I asked my actors to think about their feet as having roots that extended deep into the earth. Then, I asked them to imagine a single thread coming out of the top of their head that connected them to the heavens. I asked them to pull gently on the thread to ensure that they were standing tall.

Once the actors have achieved this, I asked them to find a focal point across the room, and then let the focus soften so that they are aware of both their focal point and everything else in the room simultaneously. Soft focus is best described by Anne Bogart:

*Soft focus* is a physical state in which the eyes are relaxed so that, rather than looking *at* a specific object or person, the individual allows visual information to *come to* her/him. With focus softened in the eyes, the individual concepts of awareness, especially peripherally. (23)

At this point I would remind the actors to check in with their breath and make sure that they were taking full breaths into their diaphragm. The actors would maintain this state of physical awareness for a minute or two before we moved onto the next exercise. I believe that centering provides the ensemble with a starting point; they can feel where they are in their training, which body parts are tight or loose, become aware of their breath, and start to connect to each other. These are things that are valuable to any kind of actor training whether it's ensemble oriented or not.

## **MEISNER YES**

The next activity is not actually a Meisner exercise, but it is based on the techniques of repetition and response that Meisner advocates. I like to use it directly before doing scene work.

It is a partner exercise that is designed to increase awareness between actors while introducing a very basic text: “yes”. I’ve found it to be a nice transition from movement work to scene work. Ideally, it helps actors take the connective energy that they’ve been building and transfer it to their scenes. I’ve found that too often the discoveries made during Viewpoints or other “experimental” rehearsal processes are left behind as soon as “real scene work” starts. The actor does not always associate what they’ve been doing with what needs to occur on stage. This exercise is designed to transition between the two.

To begin Meisner Yes, two actors stand facing each other and repeat the word “yes” over and over again. The actors are told to really listen to their partner and let their response be influenced by what their partner gives them. They are encouraged to let their “yes” story go as far as they can take it. When it reaches an end, they return to their starting positions and begin again. In *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, Meisner continually reminds his students to stop acting and just repeat (20-37). I prefer to highlight reaction. The actors are allowed to act only if it is an instinctual response to something their partner has provided. In this way I am not teaching Meisner’s work. I have never studied with Meisner or any of his students, so I am not familiar enough with his specific techniques to incorporate them into my rehearsals. Even if I was, I don’t have the weeks and months of training time necessary to really teach repetition. I am very clear about this in my rehearsals, so that my ensemble can identify the sources of their training. I have developed this exercise, which is similar to some of his work, because it is a quick, easy, warm-up that focuses on skills that I think are vital to an actor: reaction, listening, and developing a tangible connection between actors. Meisner works within these principles, and I find that the work complements the Viewpoint of Kinesthetic Response that Bogart created; only Meisner calls it something else, “There is a time when the verbal contract between you changes,

and it is based on instinct. *Instinct*” (27). This instinctual change is exactly what I want my actors to accomplish.

## **DANCING**

Dancing became an important pre-show ritual for the *Betrayal* cast. We’d gather together in the space five minutes before the house opened and all dance to a popular song. Many of the cast members mentioned that this was one of their favorite parts of the process. Some actually told me that this was the time they felt most connected as an ensemble. My goal was mostly to get the cast moving and their energy up so that they would be excited and ready to perform a good show. However, as many of the actors danced around crazily and jumped on furniture and danced with each other I think it really emphasized the openness and connection that they’d developed over the rehearsal period.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, we would use dancing to warm-up for rehearsals. The director would play a popular song and encourage us one at a time to dance as outlandishly as we liked. Once everyone had a turn being the center of attention, we could all dance together. It was a fun way to start rehearsals, and while I never used it for *Betrayal* rehearsals, I was glad that we had time to work it in before the performances. With dancing the actors don’t have to worry about form or breath or expanding awareness; they can just relax and let loose. I think it’s important to have some warm-ups that are just pure fun.

## **LANE WORK**

I wasn’t sure whether to categorize Lane Work as a warm-up or a rehearsal technique. Since in *Betrayal* I used the exercise primarily to introduce and warm-up to Viewpoints, I have

decided to include it in this section. However, Lane Work, like Viewpoints, can be used frequently throughout the rehearsal process, and not just as a warm-up. Viewpoints, which I will describe in further detail in the next section, helps actors recognize and experiment with various movement patterns and impulse.

Lane Work is another Bogart activity, and from conversations I've had with my actors, with participants in workshops I've taught, and from my own personal experience, it's one of the most helpful exercises in ensemble training. Used as a warm-up, it helps actors to isolate and practice several of the individual Viewpoints, with special focus on Kinesthetic Response.

Actors line up against a wall and are each allotted a lane to move in. Their movement is restricted to walking, running, dropping, jumping, and stillness. Actors are encouraged to perform these movements without imposing any kind of acting on their actions. In this activity the ensemble is asked to listen to one another and to respond honestly and instinctively to each other with their movements.<sup>3</sup>

I've found that Lane Work is a great introduction to Viewpoints, providing a way to explore the concepts without having to introduce the vocabulary right away. By the time the individual Viewpoints are introduced and explored, the actors can recognize that they has already been working with the technique. I've found that by slowly incorporating some of Bogart's ideas before identifying them as Viewpoints work alleviates some of the fear that an actor can have about learning a new and "experimental" training style. In *Betrayal* rehearsals, I chose not to identify Lane Work as one of Anne Bogart's exercises until later in the process. Of course, those actors that had worked with NLC before recognized the exercise, but I already knew that they enjoyed this type of movement training. These actors, since they were already familiar with the individual Viewpoints, could use the exercise to sharpen their awareness.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Viewpoints Book* provides a full description of the Lane Work activity on pages 68-70.

By limiting the type and direction of movement, actors are forced to pay attention to the basics of Kinesthetic Response. Sometimes in the course of open Viewpoints sessions, actors can get caught up in trying to create a story instead of listening and responding and trusting that what is happening is compelling. A quick return to Lane Work helps remind an ensemble to focus on tempo, duration, and kinesthetic response. The impulse and response is very important because it translates directly to the relationship that actors have on stage with their scene partners. It can seem counterintuitive to actors who have been trained to identify beat changes and objectives before they've even started to rehearse. The Viewpoint of Kinesthetic Response utilized in this exercise is a way to train actors to remain open and in the moment with their fellow actors.

One of the challenges I encountered with this exercise in *Betrayal* rehearsals, as well as in various workshops I've taught, is that some of the younger actors who were in the process of learning "how to act" had a hard time setting aside their acting. They would add funny walks and create characters that moved a certain way. The only way I found to combat this was to remind them while they were exploring the exercise to simply react to one another without acting. While these reminders worked for some of them, I still had one actor holding on to the idea of "acting". Finally, I let go of trying to change the way she performed the exercise, and hoped that despite cluttering her palate with funny walks, she was able to still retain the principles of Kinesthetic Response. In the initial feed-back session, she claimed to really be able to feel what her fellow ensemble was doing and react to it, and I decided that as long as she was able to experience the results of the technique, then I wouldn't concern myself too much with whether she was performing the exercise correctly. Bogart writes that sometimes it's more

valuable to let an exercise progress naturally than to make sure it's done "correctly". There is no right way, there is only what is happening.

These exercises are only a few of the warm-ups that we used in *Betrayal*. I've chosen these because they are the ones we came back to repeatedly. Through their development over the course of the three Night Light Collective shows they have had a positive effect on my own acting, and prepared me for the rest of rehearsal. From talking with my actors during and after the rehearsal process for *Betrayal*, they found many of these warm-ups beneficial as well.



## DEVELOPING A REHEARSAL TECHNIQUE

The rehearsal process for *Betrayal* was made up of many different techniques cultivated by Night Light Collective. Having spent four years as part of NLC's acting ensemble, I have found all of the rehearsal techniques useful from an actor's perspective. *Betrayal* was my first chance to experience how well they worked for me as a director.

The type of rehearsals that I am outlining put a larger burden on the actor than a traditional rehearsal schedule would. Instead of showing up to rehearsal expecting to be told what to do by the director, this process allows the actors to contribute more to the artistic vision of the show. They must be completely warmed-up and open for the work to be accomplished because they are contributing in a major way to the blocking, the arc of the scene, character relationships, set design, and costuming. It is an incredibly rewarding process that lets an actor become more invested in the production because they are responsible for more than just acting. However, when actors are not prepared for rehearsal, very little gets accomplished. I find that it's important to let actors know as early as in auditions what is expected of them, so that those who just like to show up and be told what to do by a director can reevaluate whether this is a show that they want to do. Actors who are committed to exploration, hard work, providing creative input, and keeping an open heart and mind are absolutely necessary for the creation of a successful ensemble. I had the opportunity and misfortune to experience this first hand in *Betrayal*, which I will go into in greater detail in a later section.

I will describe the following rehearsal techniques as best as I can, with emphasis on their history with NLC, the role they played in *Betrayal*, and the response from the ensemble. As with the warm-up exercises, I won't go into too much detail with those techniques that are inspired directly from another published source. If you want more information about the details of a particular exercise, I recommend reading the activity as it's written by the original author; the specific source and page number are footnoted.

## **VIEWPOINTS**

In the preface to *The Viewpoints Book*, Anne Bogart and Tina Landau issue a challenge to their readers on how to use their work:

Although we are laying the work out in a very linear and structured fashion, it's deadly for any artist to mechanically try to follow the steps without wrestling with the questions, adjusting the process, and earning their own discoveries. We hope you read these pages and question. We hope you read them and try. We hope you use them, then write on them, then *rewrite* them, then read them again. (x)

This is exactly what I am hoping to do with this section. Viewpoints has been the biggest component of NLC's rehearsal process. We're most associated with this work, and it's the technique that our ensemble enjoys experimenting with the most. We have used it to develop characters, relationships, transitions, blocking, and exposition from our very first show onward.

Mary Overlie, a choreographer at New York University originally developed the "Six Viewpoints" as a dance improvisation exercise. Bogart and Landau expanded the number of Viewpoints to nine and applied the work to theatre with Bogart's ensemble, the SITI Company. They define Viewpoints in the following ways:

Viewpoints is a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage. Viewpoints is a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens on stage. Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working. (Bogart and Landau 7-8)

Viewpoints is a technique where actors move around the rehearsal space recognizing and exploring Tempo, Duration, Kinesthetic Response, Repetition, Spatial Relationship, Shape, Gesture, Architecture, and Topography.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, NLC does not introduce topography along with the others as an official Viewpoint, but instead prefers to use it as a means to explore the other eight Viewpoints.

In the first Viewpoints session of our rehearsal process each Viewpoint was introduced one at a time, and the ensemble was asked to explore every aspect of it as fully as possible while remaining aware of the previous Viewpoints. I found it useful to periodically remind the ensemble of which Viewpoints had been introduced by listing each one by name. After all eight of our Viewpoints had been explored, the actors were encouraged to play for a period of time in what is called an “Open Viewpoints session”. The next few times that we returned to Viewpoints, I continued to remind the ensemble of the eight Viewpoints they were utilizing, since it was a very new technique for most of them. After a couple of rehearsals, I figured that the actors could manage without my interruption.

Once the ensemble had started a session, I would often introduce a seed word. A seed word is an idea or thought that the actors can use to drive their experience. Some examples of

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<sup>4</sup> The individual Viewpoints are described in full detail on pages 8-11 of *The Viewpoints Book*. Chapter 5 of the book is devoted entirely to introducing the Viewpoints in rehearsals, including activities Bogart and Landau use to further explore the Viewpoints (35-63).

seed words I used during *Betrayal* are: relationships, betrayal, trust and love. The actors are asked to acknowledge the seed word and let it inform their movement. After they have been Viewpointing for ten minutes or so, I would say the phrase “let your character drop in”. This wording is specific because I don’t want the actors to abandon whatever stories they are currently creating by assuming a character. Instead, I want the character to seep into the stories that are already unfolding. In *Alice* rehearsals, this was the wording that our director used, and after experimenting with a few other choices, I’ve found that it works the best.

For our first two shows, we would initiate a Viewpointing session with every actor finding an interesting space in the room, and taking up a position of active stillness. We would then identify the group impulse to start moving and the session would proceed. For *Alice In Wonderland* rehearsals we used a different starting point. The ensemble was given instructions to only move along the lines of an imaginary grid (the Viewpoint of Topography). We could only move along the grid in extreme tempos: as fast or as slow as possible, or we could remain still (Tempo), we were encouraged to see how long or how short a time we could continue in a particular tempo (Duration). After doing this for several minutes, we were instructed to become aware of everything around us so that everything we did was a response to something else (Kinesthetic Response). After a few more minutes we were told to dissolve the grid and we could move where and however we wanted, and we were in an open Viewpoints session.

I experimented with both ways to start a session. When the ensemble started from stillness I found that it took them longer to interact with each other. The actors seemed content to remain in their own space, experimenting mostly with Shape and Architecture. They were slower to recognize each other’s presence and respond to their impulses. The approach we used for *Alice* started with the actors moving, which gave them more initial energy. By introducing

limited Topography and Duration first, the actors were forced to push the boundaries of those limitations. I found that because the movement was so stripped down, the actors were able to practice the Viewpoint of Kinesthetic Response before the rules were dropped and the open Viewpoints session began. In these sessions, the ensemble was much quicker to interact, because they were already on their feet and moving around the space. By eliminating a starting point in the room, the actors didn't have a comfort zone to retreat to. For me, this was a more useful way to start the session; since most of the Viewpointing sessions were only about fifteen to twenty minutes long, it was a more efficient use of our time. If I had had a longer rehearsal process and could devote more time to Viewpoints training, I may have alternated between the two introductions more frequently.

After a session concluded, I asked the actors to get a drink of water and write in their journals. After a few minutes, we all gathered in a circle to share our insights and discoveries. I find this to be a way for more analytical actors to make sense of what they just discovered. Several of the actors told me that both listening to the other experiences during the session and having to put their own thoughts into words was very useful to them. Frequently, the actors would find out that they had made similar discoveries and a discussion would develop about how to incorporate those discoveries into their character work. As an observer, I would point out moments during the session where something interesting occurred. The ensemble would then recreate the moment to the best of their ability, so I could decide if there was a place for it in *Betrayal*. For example, during one of our Viewpoints sessions, all the actors were moving and dancing with a partner at the same time. They repeated the movement, and we discussed what was behind that moment for everybody. Most of the actors felt a sense of love or tenderness, so we worked it into a transition following one of the happier scenes between Jerry and Emma.

Once we had created a set out of matching chairs and acting blocks, we moved the Viewpoints from an empty space to our setting. The actors were encouraged to use the furniture however they wanted, whether it subverted its original intention or not. Desks and chairs were climbed on, flipped over, moved around, and tossed out of the space. My goal was to make the actors feel comfortable with the space, so that it was broken in for performance. By allowing the actors to play on stage, they familiarized themselves with the elements that made up their world. Kevin Kuhlke, a former student of Overlie's and a drama professor at Tisch School of the Arts has also found value in letting his actors experiment with the Viewpoint of Architecture:

When actors begin under the hypnotic spell of given circumstances, they can literally not see things. You wipe all the circumstances away and say, 'here's the architecture, play around with it,' and they'll end up finding things out about the set that you hadn't dreamed of. (Herrington 165)

Too often, actors look uncomfortable in what is supposed to be their characters' own house; they sit formally in their own chairs and don't acknowledge the set dressing unless they are forced to by the blocking. I wanted the ensemble to be aware of every part of their home so that they could live comfortably in it while they were performing.

Viewpointing is a very time-consuming rehearsal process. However, I think that the positives outweigh the negatives. From my experience, actors who have used Viewpoints are more prepared for the rest of scene work. They listen and respond to their fellow actors, aren't afraid of movement, and push the boundaries on their character choices. Taking the time to let the ensemble experiment and play in rehearsals helps keep the show more alive and the actors more engaged.

## CHARACTER SHOW & TELL

At the first read-through for *Betrayal*, I asked the actors to bring in songs, pictures, videos, or objects that helped them create their character. They had a few weeks to get everything together and then during rehearsal each actor presented their source material. This is a technique that we've used in both *Alice In Wonderland* and *Aloha Say The Pretty Girls*. For *The House Of Yes*, the actors were asked to compile source material, but we never shared it. As an actor, I enjoy seeing or hearing everyone else's contributions; it helps me to better understand the characters with whom I'm going to be acting. As a director, the music and images helped me shape my artistic vision of the show.

For *Betrayal*, most of the material we used for our transitions between scenes came from the Character Show and Tell source material. Since *Betrayal* is set in multiple locations, the basic set pieces had to be moved in between each scene, and I wanted it to be an interesting part of the show. The actors sang, danced, and acted while rearranging the set. Some of the music choices from Character Show and Tell went directly into these transitions. I also mined the ensemble's special skills section of their applications. After everyone shared their source material, I asked the actors to share their special skills. One of the actors demonstrated a step routine, another had a beautiful singing voice, someone knew how to ballroom dance and another could play acoustic guitar. I was delighted, and worked hard to find a way to incorporate as much of it as we could fit into the show. One of the reasons that I enjoy working with an ensemble cast is that the actors bring so much more to the table than I could ever imagine. I wanted to use the transitions to showcase some of the individual talents of the ensemble. Each of their special skills were incorporated into the transitions, and helped to keep the show moving forward during what could have been very boring scene changes.

## PHYSICAL SCORING

Physical scoring is a method of both blocking and composition used by the Dah Theatre. Bonnie Gabel introduced me to it during *The House Of Yes* rehearsals and it became the primary way to build movement for all of our Night Light Collective shows. Last summer, I traveled to Belgrade, Serbia to train with the Dah Theatre, and was lucky enough to explore physical scoring at its source.

A physical score is a movement pattern. It can be as simple as crossing to stage left or as complicated as a specific dance routine. The term goes back at least as far as Stanislavski, who uses the phrase “physical score” to refer to the sequence of physical actions in a play. To him, the most useful physical scores were those that could reduce the major physical and psychophysical actions of a scene down to a silent score (Carnicke 17). For the Dah Theatre, physical scoring is a way to incorporate outside elements and research into a performance. Sanja Krsmanović Tasić, one of the Dah actors, offered examples of possible resources for a physical score in her solo show, *Singing Body, Dancing Voice*. Her show is a performance/lecture that revisits the many characters Sanja has acted with the Dah Theatre, and explores some of the ways these characters were created. She suggests using music, stories, objects, and memories from which to draw inspiration. When she undertook the role of Helen Keller, Sanja used memories of herself as a child hiding under a table to build a set of movements. For another show, the Leonard Cohen song *Famous Blue Raincoat* became a character inspiration. These memories and source materials are not just static ideas, but instead are used to develop movement and tableaux. For example, a postcard of the woman riding a camel inspired Sanja to



physicalize a movement for riding on a camel. By adding more realistic elements into the movement pattern, the physicality of Mr. Plotnik, a bitter Russian actor, was born.

While I was participating in building the piece *Soldiers And Sacrifice* with the Dah Theatre, we brought in pictures of ancient Greek art as source materials. Sanja, Dijana Milošević, and Maja Mitić, the three women who make up the Dah Theatre, helped us to recreate the positions of the statues, and we each created several positions, adding transitions between the different poses. This series of tableaux and transitions became our physical score. Our text was layered over the score, and it was remarkable how often the two complemented each other and added layers of meaning. We developed scores from other sources as well. With the help of Maja, I built a score based on some of the movements from a dance that one of the other actors had created for her source material. I matched the physical score with the text from a song that was part of my source material.

In Sanja's performance, she said that a physical score could be created out of pure technique as well. For one role, she started by using the Suzuki technique to walk up a staircase. By adding the movement quality of an old woman to the Suzuki, a physical score for another character was born. Sanja went on to explain that sometimes inserting empty actions from rehearsal into a show could infuse it with a new alternate meaning. This proved to be the case with *Alice In Wonderland*, when we added something from our warm-ups into the show. When I entered my first scene as the Queen of Hearts, The King kneeled and I stood on his back while he slowly rose up to all fours. This was a warm-up exercise called Woman Riding On Elephant that helped build focus and strength. While this was only a rehearsal technique, in the show it became a way to physicalize the relationship between the royal family, as well as a very dramatic way to enter a scene.

While physical scoring was an incredibly useful aspect of the devised work we did with the Dah, NLC found it useful with more traditional scripts as well. While occasionally we would build physical scores on the source materials we brought in for Character Show and Tell, more frequently we would use a seed word or relationship. To develop one of the physical scores we used in *Betrayal* I had the ensemble break up into pairs, and I asked them to create five tableaux with their partner based on a seed word. The words were “love”, “betrayal” and “jealousy”. When each group had created their tableaux and transitions between the pictures, they taught the sequences to each other so they could each perform all fifteen tableaux. I asked the ensemble to then run a scene with their partner using the fifteen tableaux and see how the lines and the physical score matched up. One of the scenes fit so well with the score, that we kept it (with the addition of a few small modifications) as the blocking for that scene. The parts of the score that used nonrealistic or exaggerated movement were reduced until it seemed quite natural for the character to perform. To reduce a movement, the size and shape are diminished or made more realistic looking, while maintaining the original intention. For example, if the original movement was an actor extending her whole body into a reach, she could reduce it to just using her arm to reach, but that arm would have to express the same intention as the original, larger movement.

Other scores were created individually. For the first scene of the show, the action takes place in a restaurant, and the two characters remain seated almost the entire time. While this made the blocking very easy, I was afraid it would be hard to hold the audience’s interest at the top of the show with so little movement. Previously, I had the actors break all of their scenes into beats and assign each beat a name. For this scene the actors were each asked to create one tableau per beat, using the name of each beat as the seed. The tableaux were adapted and

reduced so that they could be performed while seated at a table. When the score was applied to the scene the movements looked like the small adjustments that a person makes when a conversation becomes too uncomfortable, intimate or heated. Several very nice moments were born out of the physical score. At one point, one of the actors reached for the other's hand just as she was pulling away from him. Another time, they both leaned into each other right at a particularly intimate line in the text. I thought that the subtle physical score generated just enough movement to keep the audience engaged in the scene.

For scene eight, which takes place early in Emma and Jerry's relationship when the characters are still happy, I had one of the actors create five tableaux based on the seed word "passion". Instead of linking the tableaux and creating transitions, she was instructed to find a way to use each tableau one time during the scene, in any particular order. During the breakup scene, I asked one of the actors to write a short paragraph about one of her own breakups, circle the key words, create a tableau for each word, and then reduce the score and use it in the scene. I tried to vary the inspiration for and use of physical scoring as much as possible in *Betrayal*, partly to see what I thought worked best, and partly to keep the exploration of each scene fresh.

Physical scoring is more than just a blocking tool. With an ensemble, it allows the actor to contribute to multiple aspects of creating a show. The scores are all created by the actors, not by the director. It is the director's job to recognize how best the scores fit in the world of the play, and to edit the movement, tableaux, or duration as she sees fit.

## **DESIGNING THE SET**

I believe that it's important for an ensemble to develop a relationship with not only their other actors, but with the set as well. As I discussed in the section on Viewpoints, Bogart's

Viewpoint of Architecture can help actors explore the elements of their set, but I like to continue to facilitate the exploration by also letting the ensemble create their environment.

In all of my past NLC shows, I have always been responsible for designing and preparing my on-stage environment. To me as an actor, it has become an absolutely necessary part of the show. I will come in early and place my set pieces precisely where they need to be. Then when I act, I don't have to manufacture an ownership of the space, because it already exists. Conversely, the actors that have scenes in my "living room", "courtroom", or "apartment" have not contributed to its creation and therefore have a different relationship with it. My goal was to create the theatrical equivalent of home field advantage. For example in *Alice In Wonderland*, Alice should feel like she's in a foreign environment when she arrives in the Queen's court, and the Queen should be right at home. In *Betrayal*, it was just as important for Jerry to feel uncomfortable in Robert and Emma's home. An added benefit is that by allowing actors to provide input into other aspects of the show, like sets and props, they become more involved in the project, which is crucial to an ensemble piece.

*Betrayal* had multiple settings, and I wanted each of them to have a different feel. The public, or impersonal locations were designed by me; I created the restaurant for scenes one and seven and Emma and Robert's hotel room in Venice. For Emma and Robert's living room, I let the actors playing the characters in that particular scene design the layout, with the instructions that I would have final approval. Since there were three different scenes in Emma and Jerry's flat and six different actors playing Emma and Jerry, I had all six of them design the flat together. The sets created by the actors had a different energy to them; specifically the flat scenes, and the actors were more sensitive to it. All three pairs of actors found themselves on the bed for happy moments and having their fights over the kitchen table. I loved that the actors

could sense these energies, because for the characters, this was one of the only places that either Emma or Jerry seemed happy or comfortable, and I think that really came through because of the set design exercise.

## **TALKING THE LINES**

One of the important aspects of generating open and honest responses from actors is to forbid them to “act”. When actors are taught to act in school they are introduced to Stanislavski’s beats, objectives, and tactics. While I think that this is a necessary part of actor development, frequently actors can get bogged down in their pre-planned tactics, and forget to listen to one another. Nothing is worse than watching two actors on stage act at each other instead of with each other. Many times, an actor can do lots of in-depth text work only to come to rehearsal and realize that the other actor isn’t giving him the necessary response to make those pre-determined choices work. What I would like an actor to do in that circumstance is to be alive in the moment and adjust accordingly. This is why I value the Viewpoint of Kinesthetic Response over all the others.

For this exercise, two actors sit directly in front of one another, knees touching, and look directly at each other. They then say their lines to each other, as if they are just having a conversation. I ask them to throw out ideas about scene objectives and character, and to stop acting and just talk to one another. The actors are reminded to really listen to what their scene partner is saying and try to react honestly to it. If time permits, the actors will run through a scene two to three times before I put them on their feet. This exercise works best when the actors are off-book, but as long as they can maintain eye contact and a connection with their scene partner, it can be done with scripts as well.

Much like with the Meisner Yes warm-up, this is an exercise designed to transition the movement work into scene work. Continuing to stress the importance of listening and impulse, but now with text, my goal is to train the actor to apply kinesthetic response to their scene. The basic principles of Talking The Lines come from Meisner's work, but instead of emphasizing the mechanical repetition, I just want a natural conversation. Since this exercise is a great way to put the Kinesthetic Response into text, I treat it as a building block for or transition into the scene work. *The Viewpoints Book* co-author Tina Landau notes the effectiveness of combining elements of Viewpoints and Meisner as well. During her summer training at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Viewpoints training was followed by a Meisner session. She commented that "While the means are different, we have discovered that the ends of both techniques are very much the same: to be in the moment, to listen, to respond to what your partner gives you" (Bogart 133). Sometimes, to further emphasize the transition, I will put the ensemble on their feet in the acting space and have the actors talk the lines while moving around, which usually stimulates a response vocally and physically. As an added bonus, the actors become much more familiar with their lines through this exercise.

## **STAGING**

In her book, Bogart talks about Staging as a way to use Viewpoints in blocking a show. Essentially, it is where scene partners are asked to create movement that expresses some aspect of the scene. Very similar to physical scoring, the text is then layered over the movement and applied to the scene. Bogart suggests several different goals for the movement, but I particularly like movement that expresses the relationship between the characters, or movement that operates from one character's point of view.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bogart offers various suggestions for staging on pages 133-134 in *The Viewpoints Book*.

For this, I would ask the actors in the scene to move around the rehearsal space. Then when they were ready, to create a series of movements that expresses their relationship in that beat. Actors were instructed not to discuss how they wanted to move, but to just try the movement out on their feet. After they had created and repeated the movement, the text for the scene was added. The actors would run through this several times, experimenting with how best the movement and words synched up. Sometimes the movements were expressive or larger than life, and would need to be scaled down to fit the world of the play. Just like with physical scoring, the movements were reduced in size, but not in intensity.

What I like about Staging is that it typically encourages actors to use more of the space than they would previously. Frequently, actors have a hard time adding movement to a scene at all, and would instead prefer to enter, sit, and remain sitting until the scene ends or its time to exit. By forcing them to express various aspects of the scene through movement, the actors abandon their stationary comfort zone. Since the ensemble already has a vocabulary of the Viewpoints, they can adjust the Duration or Tempo of a movement so that it incorporates stillness, if that is needed.

I find that Staging frequently cuts to the heart of the scene, and reminds the actors of what exactly is at stake any given moment. Since we were working on Pinter, and Pinter is famously known for having multiple layers of subtext in his plays, I liked the idea of having the actors speak and move on two different layers of the play. Plus the text and movement would intersect in interesting moments, and this helped connect the two layers of meaning. While watching multiple levels sounds as if it might be confusing for the audience to follow, I found that it actually revealed more of the story.

As it sometimes turns out when you study different acting practitioners, they talk about the same things, but give those things different names. I believe that Bogart's Staging is another way to look at or incorporate the Dah's Physical Scoring. Both are ways of using a pattern or quality of movements to tell the story physically. While they have different ways of approaching the story, I find that the end results are the same. This is probably the biggest reason why I've found these two different techniques so compatible and why we've been able to pull from both sources and still have a cohesive show.

All of the rehearsal techniques mentioned in the former section require a lot of responsibility from the ensemble. If an actor is unprepared for rehearsal because he or she is not off-book, hasn't done research, is not physically warmed-up, etc. then very little is accomplished during rehearsal. It's important to let an actor know that the process is a lot of work, and that if one actor doesn't come prepared to do this type of work, then the rest of the ensemble can't move forward with their work either. This can be a scary thought for young actors, but I like to stress that the end result is worth the work. An actor involved in this type of ensemble work can claim to have done more than just acted in a show. The ensemble helped make decisions, block the scenes, contribute to the artistic direction, and develop character relationships. I find that the actors who thrive in this kind of environment become more than just actors, but artists, and when an ensemble of artists work together time and again, that's when really amazing work can happen.



## DEVELOPING A UNIVERSAL CHARACTER

One of the more interesting elements about rehearsing this show was developing a specific rehearsal routine for multiple actors playing the same character. I had not previously worked on a show with this concept, so we were starting from scratch with this idea. *Betrayal* is traditionally a play with three characters: Emma, Jerry, and Robert. I cast seven actors to play the three roles so that each scene portrayed a different relationship telling the same story. However, this created a challenge in that multiple actors would be playing the same character. This meant that there had to be a through line for each character, while at the same time, it was necessary for the individual Emma, Jerry, and Roberts to be unique. I was a little nervous that this was going to be a difficult notion to communicate to my cast, so it was imperative that we have a very specific rehearsal structure in which to explore this concept.

I decided that the term I would use to introduce the concept I was trying to create was “Universal Character”. I wanted the ensemble to answer the question “Who is this character?” collectively. The answers that the actors came up with together would create the Universal Character. Since they were all playing the same character in different scenes, each actor could contribute a particular fractured view of this character, and when they all put their pieces together a whole character would emerge. In the talkback after our Emma Viewpointing session one of the actors commented that each of the actors were playing a different facet of Emma’s personality. I think that is a good way to sum up what the individual actor brings to a Universal Character.

I wanted to ease into the idea of developing a Universal Character. On our second day of rehearsal I broke the six actors into three groups so that each person was working with someone with whom they shared a scene. They then completed the physical scoring exercise with the seed words love, betrayal, and jealousy that I described in the last chapter. This was a very useful exercise for me as a director because I could watch three different scenes that all had more or less the same blocking and gestures, and see what worked. Several of the more distinctive tableaux worked in multiple scenes and it created a very nice through-line. Two of the scenes were Jerry-Emma scenes (scene 3 and 6), and by both sets of actors creating the same movements, I was able to see a distinct pattern in the way Jerry and Emma interacted physically. If these moments were used sparingly, I thought that they might tie the different scenes and “facets of personality” together. Since the actors were all observing each other’s work, we were able to talk about these through-line moments, which I hoped would help to gently introduce the character work that we’d be starting soon. I gave each actor a homework assignment to find a line from the show that best summed up each of their characters, and to think about a color that they associated with each character.

The next several rehearsals were each devoted to a character. We started with the Robert rehearsal, where only the actors playing Robert were called. After group warm-ups, I opened up the rehearsal with a Viewpoints session. Once the actors were comfortable in the session, I announced that they should “let an awareness of character drop in”. In our post-Viewpoints discussion, I asked the ensemble to identify words that they associated with Robert. Agreements and alternate opinions spurred productive conversation about the character. We kept a list and ended the Viewpoints discussion by reading aloud all the Robert words.

I decided to use Anne Bogart's Hot Seat exercise next.<sup>6</sup> I read aloud a list of character questions, and gave the actors a few moments to write down the first answer that came to their heads. For the second part of the exercise I got them on their feet to explore the character's Tempo, Duration, and Gesture. As we worked through the rehearsals for all three characters, we refined the questions and movement assignments, eliminating ones that weren't as useful, and introducing some of my own. I developed some character-specific questions that varied depending on the character on which we were working. One at a time the actors shared their answers, movement pieces, character colors, and the line they had selected from the show.

Picking a color for each character was relatively easy. To help the through-line, I wanted each character to always wear the same color, and I wanted the ensemble to choose the colors. Robert and Emma were quickly established as blue and purple. While most of the Jerry actors suggested green as an appropriate color, I wanted to open up the color palette with something warmer. After a brief discussion, the actors decided on orange. Since we were building each of these characters collectively, it was very important to me that the ensemble determine their color. I wanted each actor to have as much ownership over the Universal Character as possible.

The most time consuming and ultimately useful character work came from the gesture explorations. Bogart describes the difference between two different types of gesture, Behavioral and Expressive, when she introduces gesture as an individual viewpoint:

Behavioral Gestures are those that belong to everyday life, that are part of human behavior as we know and observe it. These are things that people actually do in real life: ways of moving, walking, communicating. Expressive Gestures are those that belong to the interior rather than exterior world (of behavior); they

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<sup>6</sup> *The Viewpoints Book* (128-130) describes this activity and provides a list of possible questions and movement explorations for the actor. I used her examples as a guide, modifying the instructions to better fit my purpose.

express feeling or meaning which is not otherwise directly manifest. One could say that Behavioral Gestures are *prosaic*, and Expressive Gestures are *poetic*.

(Bogart and Landau 49)

Each actor created three Behavioral and two Expressive Gestures in the Hot Seat exercise. Frequently, we found that many of the actors developed similar Behavioral Gestures for each character. For example, four of the five Emma actors created a gesture where they doing something with their hands: biting nails, looking at, picking nail polish, playing with a ring. The four actors then demonstrated their Behavioral Gestures in unison, and after observing, the fifth actor was invited to join them, and develop and refine her own similar gesture. Then the actors stood in a circle and experimented with each other's Behavioral Gestures so that they could feel comfortable using them if they wanted to. I wanted the gestures to be similar, but not the same. To use the Emma example, I wanted everyone to do something with their hands, but each actor didn't necessarily have to do the same thing, or they could do several of the hand-specific gestures. Two or three Behavioral Gestures were created for each character, and once they were practiced and agreed on, I suggested that we call these collective character gestures "Universal Gestures". What I liked about this development was that while these Universal Gestures provided a through-line for the Universal Character; they were each individualistic to the specific actor, and therefore to their personal facet of Emma, Robert, or Jerry.

The Universal Gesture has its roots in Brecht's idea of Gestus. Gestus is "both gist and gesture; an attitude or a single attitude of an aspect, expressible in words or actions" (Brecht 42). Gestus is more than just a gesture; it's a way to convey a character's attitude. For example, if an actor were playing Mother Courage, she could choose to jingle her coin purse whenever she needed to make an important decision. Since Mother Courage is a war-profiteer, her relationship

with her money is an important part of who she is and the business with the coin purse would be a repeatable gesture that also conveyed the attitude of the character, or Gestus. If she jingled it the same way when she was selling her cart as when she was bargaining for her son's life, the circumstances in which she used her Gestus would reveal even more about the character (Theatre Of War). For *Betrayal*, I wanted to find a repeatable gesture that expressed something about each character. This would help tie the individual portrayals of each character into a larger story arc. By having the ensemble agree on a Universal Gesture together, I could be sure that the idea for the gesture came out of their group exploration of the character.

I asked the ensemble to look through their scenes and find places where they could use their Universal Gestures. During scene work, I would try to remain aware of when and how frequently the Universal Gestures were being used, and provide feedback to the actors about it. While it may not have been a noticeable part of the show, I firmly believe that it helped connect the multiple versions of the characters, whether the audience was conscious of it or not.

A photographer friend of mine likened the Universal Character to the way a camera identifies color. To a camera, color is merely a specific frequency. It will recognize many different frequencies coming through its lens, however the more often one specific frequency, let's say the frequency for the color red, comes through, then the stronger the color red is perceived and the rest of the frequencies are considered noise. In this same way, the more often a Universal Gesture for Jerry is used, the easier it will be to identify Jerry. And while the actors will inevitably be using many of their own movements and gestures as well, those won't be important parts of the Universal Character, and will be filtered out as noise by the audience.

Many of the Expressive Gestures the ensemble created were also alike. All of the actors playing Robert developed an Expressive Gesture that appeared to control the action around them.

These varied from conducting an orchestra to the ever tightening of a vise. Of the two Expressive Gestures that each actor developed, I chose the one that fit best with the other actors' choices. While some of them were very different physically, many of the Expressive Gestures expressed similar character struggles. The actors practiced and refined their gesture, and I suggested that since we were switching between characters so often, the Expressive Gesture might be something the actors could do before starting scene work, to help them get into character.

I would have liked to spend more time finding specific moments for the Universal Gestures during the final week of rehearsals was waylaid by unforeseen circumstances, when one of the actors dropped out of the show. Some of the Universal Character work was forced to take a back seat to rehearsing new actors. While I didn't have time for the new actors to develop an Expressive Gesture, I had the ensemble demonstrate the Universal Gestures for each of the new actors, and they then developed their own versions. I was delighted that they were able to insert a little of the gesture work into their scenes, but I didn't have the time to do any further work or give many notes to the new actors about their Universal Gestures.

## THE INEVITABLE DISASTER

While rehearsing *Betrayal* I had plenty of lofty goals for streamlining my ensemble rehearsal technique, and I have to say that a lot of good work was done. However, it wouldn't be theatre if there weren't a couple of mini-disasters along the way. I think that the show was able to survive its own mini-disaster because of the ensemble building that we'd done early on in the process. In the final week of rehearsals, much of the time I'd set aside to refine Universal Character, further explore relationships through Viewpoints, and other ensemble activities were replaced with last minute crisis rehearsing. One of the original actors stopped attending rehearsals during tech week. It was up to us to find replacements, divide up his scenes, rehearse three new actors, and still put a show up on time. As it frequently happens, this last minute disaster may have brought the cast together better than any ensemble rehearsals could have.

One of my actors had just taken a restaurant job around the time that rehearsals started. He was very concerned about keeping his job, and when the restaurant chose to schedule him during a rehearsal time (which it did many times), the job was the higher priority. It was difficult rehearsing an ensemble show while one actor had to miss multiple rehearsals, but he was a quick learner and very talented, so I wasn't too worried. Two weeks out from the show, he got incredibly sick and missed several more rehearsals. We were now at a point where I couldn't afford anymore lost time with his scenes, and told him that I needed him there every day until the show opened. That was the last time I heard from that actor.

After he missed two rehearsals without contacting me or returning any of my calls or e-mails, we devoted one rehearsal period to solving this problem. We decided as an ensemble that we had to replace him. However, we now had a week until the show opened and he was in four very large scenes, and one of those scenes was chock full of monologues. The ensemble decided that trying to find one actor to take on this Herculean task would be near impossible, so we decided to embrace the concept of the show and find four actors, one for each scene. One of our original actors offered to take on one of the scenes, and the rest of us went to our phones, and called and text-messaged everyone we knew. I couldn't have cast all three scenes without the help of my actors. By the end of rehearsal, we had cast two friends and one fiancée to take over the missing roles.

The rest of the week was spent rehearsing with our new actors. The original ensemble graciously came in to teach and explain the Universal Gestures to the new actors. They helped find blue, purple, and orange clothes for them, coached the new actors through their responsibilities during the transitions, and taught dance steps to them. In short, the ensemble put their own rehearsal time on hold for the advancement of the show. The first time we ran the full show with everyone was the day of the dress rehearsal. None of us had any clue as to whether we could pull it off or not, and it was that nervous adrenaline that held everyone together and made the show what it was.

While I would have loved to have spent the last week building ensemble techniques and working on Kinesthetic Response and Universal Gestures, instead the ensemble got a crash course in, well, being an ensemble. Through the adversity, they learned to not only listen to each other and respond during the course of a scene, but to apply it to the workings of the show as well. At any point, one of the actors could have decided that what was happening was too



stressful, not fair, or not worth their time, but that never happened. They recognized what was needed of them and did it. The new actors, stepping into an ensemble rehearsal process at the last possible moment, responded to the positive energy the ensemble put out and did everything they could to keep the show on its feet. I look back at *Betrayal* and am amazed that everything came together as it did.

One of the lessons that I learned with this show is that an ensemble is only as strong as its weakest actor. While he was just as committed as the rest of the actors while he was at rehearsal, it was apparent from very early on that our errant actor had other outside factors distracting him. However, there hadn't been enough actors at my initial auditions for *Betrayal* and I had needed to seek outside of the university community to help me fill all the roles. He had done me a favor by agreeing to do the show, and I wanted to be accommodating of his time. I also didn't think I'd be able to find a replacement actor, since I had had such difficulty finding an original cast. These thoughts might have been what kept me from identifying and preventing the problem early on. Regardless, it's difficult negotiating between what is best for the show and what's best for each individual involved in it. Since *Betrayal* was an ensemble piece, I think I needed to let go of the individual for the good of the ensemble, and I just wasn't ready to do that until he left me with no choice. If a situation like this were to arise with a future show, I like to think that I am now prepared to deal with it better. I would have addressed his commitment issues earlier, and not allowed him to miss scheduled rehearsals because of his job. He wanted to be able to do both, but in hindsight, it was very clear that he could not. Hopefully the signs of lack of commitment will be clearer to me in the future, thanks to this experience.

I have to give credit to my cast for not assigning blame when we lost our actor, but instead, really stepping up and doing everything within their ability to put the show first. I think

they proved that they were capable of working together and making decisions that served everyone as opposed to just the individual. Once we lost the weak link, the other actors were finally able to become a true ensemble, in every sense of the word.

## CONCLUSION

*Betrayal* was an incredible experience for me. It was my first time directing a full-length play, and I must have been crazy to add the additional stress of creating an ensemble and incorporating an artistic concept with the project. I remember when we had the first read-through of *Betrayal*. I explained my ideas for the show and then told the company that we might have bitten off more than we could chew. They laughed nervously, and I told them that the only way that we could pull everything off was if we could all commit one hundred percent to the project. It was their commitment that made *Betrayal* a success.

I couldn't have done this show without the experience of the three Night Light Collective shows behind me. After the years of acting training with my company, I knew that the rehearsal techniques that we'd cultivated worked for me as an actor. I loved how connected I felt with my fellow actors, how much clearer our character relationships were, and how invested I became in the shows. Working with other companies just wasn't as satisfying any more, because all they wanted was an actor, not an artist.

The trip to Serbia was another eye-opening experience for me. Not only had I discovered the source of many of the techniques I had been using, but I discovered that there were other companies that valued the same principles of ensemble that we did. The Dah Theatre had been working together since the 1980s. Their sustainability in a politically volatile country was inspiring. I returned from Europe eager to get started on my work.

Stepping from the role of an actor to that of a director offered me a different perspective on the rehearsal techniques. It became apparent that it was not only a necessary part of actor training, but I could see parts of the show materialize as well. I was a little nervous starting my first rehearsal with a grand concept but with very little else planned for the show. I wanted to keep my own impulses open to what the actors and the show were giving me, but it was still terrifying to be so “unprepared”. I just kept repeating Declan Donnellan’s directing advice over and over to myself. Donnellan, the co-founder and artistic director of Cheek By Jowl, believes that it’s important to throw out any preconceived ideas about a show. If concepts and relationships are important enough, they will appear during the rehearsal process, and as the actors get deeper into rehearsals, the concept of what the show is and what it’s really about will change (Holland 163-166). It was comforting, but I kept having the nagging thought that Donnellan was a seasoned professional, and perhaps I should work my way up to that confidence level, instead of beginning there.

It turned out that I had no need to worry about that part of the show. The ideas and relationships emerged from the Viewpoints sessions and solidified during scene work. The Universal Character work gave the actors a place to ground their characters and something to return to if they needed. A clear path through the show was indeed present, just as it had been during previous NLC shows, and during our piece with the Dah: Declan Donnellan proved to be correct. I was glad to see that if I trusted in the process, than I could believe in the product as well.

By collecting and evaluating the rehearsal exercises in this paper, I am glad that I now have one place I can go to plan rehearsals. Just compiling the notes has provided me with a second look at what worked and didn’t work with *Betrayal* and how to better utilize some of the

rehearsal techniques. I look forward to continuing streamlining and compiling an ensemble rehearsal technique. As Bonnie and I continue to train and work with different companies, we will hopefully have more and more to bring back to our own practices. Much like Bogart encourages other artists to continue to change and adapt and the Viewpoints to suit their own needs, I am sure our rehearsal process is not done evolving either.

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## WORKS CITED

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## APPENDIX

### Supplemental *Betrayal* Documents

#### **BETRAYAL SCENE AND CHARACTER BREAK DOWN**

SCENE	PLACE	JERRY	EMMA	ROBERT
1	Restaurant	Greg	Rebecca	-----
2	Jerry's Study	Justin	-----	Bryan
3	Flat	Caroline	Sara	-----
4	Living Room	Justin	Kendra	Greg
5	Venice Hotel	-----	Caroline	Adam
6	Flat	Greg	Justin	-----
7	Restaurant	Kendra	-----	Rebecca
8	Flat	Sara	Rebecca	-----
9	Bedroom	Phil	Sara	Justin



**BETRAYAL PROGRAM**

Harold Pinter' s  
**BETRAYAL**

Directed by  
Kerry McGee

Assistant Director  
Justin Delaney

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Featuring

Justin Ahdoot	Greg Joubert
Bryan Leach	Adam Mincks
Kendra Mosley	Phil Vollmer
Sara L. Schmatz	Caroline Sumner
Rebecca Anne Muhleman	

As

Robert (blue)  
Jerry (orange)  
Emma (purple)

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# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

For me, the universality of relationships becomes clearer every year that I am alive. In our love lives (as well as our regular lives) we frequently listen to other people's anxieties, triumphs and woes and say "I've been there" or "I went through something similar". I wanted to use Pinter's story of one specific relationship to highlight this universal theme. The actors in tonight's show will each be playing several characters involved in a variety of different relationships. Looking at the play through these multiple filters helped us hone in on the universal truths that kept cropping up despite the differing circumstances. It is these truths that we present for you tonight.

# THANK YOU

PHIL VOLLMER, ADAM MINCKS & BRYAN LEACH - this show could not have happened without you! SALT, Stacey Mills, Kevin McGranahan, Night Light Collective, Moshi Moshi, Barry Bell, Mara Smith, Glenn Brannan, Josh Chenard, Janet Rodgers, Noreen Barnes, and Mac Millan

**EXAMPLES OF UNIVERSAL GESTURE (EMMA)**



**VIEWPOINTS REHEARSAL PICTURES**



## VITA

Kerry McGee Wilson was born on June 26, 1981 in Chandler, Arizona. She graduated from Mattawan High School in 1999. Kerry received her Bachelor of Applied Arts from Central Michigan University, where she studied Theatre and Broadcasting and Cinematic Arts in 2003. After moving to Virginia, she worked at Henley Street Theatre Company as a member of their resident ensemble from 2007-2009. In 2008, Kerry, along with Bonnie Gabel, created Night Light Collective, a Richmond-based ensemble theatre company. She continued to work as a professional actor, winning the Richmond Theatre Critics Circle Award for Best Ensemble Acting in 2009 for her work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Richmond Shakespeare. In the summer of 2010, Kerry had the opportunity to travel to Belgrade, Serbia with Janet Rodgers and study with the Dah Theatre. She started work on her Masters of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University in the fall of 2009. While earning her degree, Kerry has directed *Betrayal* and *Henry V* in the university's student season.