

CHAPTER 2

Shape

THE VIEWPOINTS BEGIN TO LOCATE THE MATERIAL OF SHAPE THROUGH detailed scrutiny of the physical/visual aspect of your own body. The interrogation is established through a simple observation of symmetry, asymmetry, curvilinear or angular forms. The observation of comparative placement of limbs, torso, head, feet, hands, etc., reveals a link between the performer to all man-made and natural structures. Breaking with traditional formal Shape training imparted to performers mainly through dance techniques, martial arts and to some extent Grotowski's *Plastiques*, Viewpoints Shape training creates a performative self-awareness free of repetition. Seemingly awkward, at first this physical examination/contemplation draws the performer past existing creative manipulations of Shape into the infinite realm of Shape's own imagination, releasing self-consciousness, egoism and narcissism.

Shape observation begins with a minimalistic "partalized" level of awareness. Evolving out of our rehearsals for that first *Natural History of the American Dancer* concert at the Whitney Museum, the language of Shape began to emerge as one of the primary materials of performance and an important cornerstone in the technical information I was seeking. As we rehearsed, if one of us assumed a Shape, it would resonate in the other performer's Shape awareness, eventually establishing a foundation for a physical structure of communication and design.

As any sculptor, potter, interior decorator or graphic designer will readily affirm, Shapes love to play with other Shapes. A vertical line will decide it likes another vertical line and then a twisted spiral resonates with the two and off we would go all the way into the most recent science of fractals. It is thrilling to participate in this primal dialogue.

As this dialogue evolves over time, the awareness of Shape transforms the performer, director or choreographer into an observer/participant in its languages. As this process takes place a performer often develops an unshakable confidence onstage no longer restricted by imagination, scripted or choreographed motivations and affirmed by the raw experienced Shape awareness. This transformation is brought about as performers realize that the very shape of their bodies is a medium of performance and is essentially art itself.

This realization for dancers can also inform more performative appreciation of the Shapes they are given in a choreography. For actors, the gestures—a much used aspect of Shape in acting—can take on greater variation and attention, becoming a significant part of performance rather than filler for the emotional or textual aspect of a play. Under this interrogation of the Shape of the physical self, a vast performative vocabulary, hiding in simple actions such as an arabesque, reaching for a glass of water, standing, or raising the arms, becomes recognizable and an important component of performative art.

In American theater, it is the work of playwright and director Richard Foreman that to me stands above all others as the most deeply evolved in the material of Shape. In his work, the carefully sculpted postures of the actors' bodies are what articulate their characters and also become their emotional subscripts. In his productions the objects, sets, costumes, and actors are all in one connective dialogue. Foreman's focus on Shape elevates props, set and costumes to equality with the actors. In his production *Rhoda in Potato Land*, 1975, the brilliant actress Kate Manheim was given oddly minimalist shapes that caused her to move with almost the same mobility as a potato. This lowly shape seemed to control everything that transpired, including emotions and narrative, in the awkward world she inhabited with stunning physical skill.

In the Natural History of the American Dancer, we found that Shape was a source for a type of abstract story/logic. A part of this discovery was a realization that Shape stories, approached through minimalistic physical scrutiny, did not confine us to a monotone agreement, as in the follow-the-leader practices sometimes found in other styles of improvisational training. Free as individuals, fully Shape-aware and connected like any two physical objects, performers can actively participate in Shape narrative, making the performance richer and vaster than passive copying could achieve. The physical and visual impact of repetition of form, if it should arise, is achieved from within the material itself rather than repeated as a practiced preordained form. Many years ago while thinking about these lessons I was struck by the similarity of this use of Shape to the invention of the corps de ballet by Russian choreographer Michel Fokine. We had been "inventing the wheel backwards" in the seventies, discovering connections that were made long ago in classic dance but with a twist of individual freedom.

This reading of Shape logic is something we naturally practice when hiking in the mountains or sailing on the ocean. We notice the patterns of the waves, the peaks, the snowflakes as a way of taking readings to know what is happening or what has happened long ago. Shape is a natural element in all sciences from geography to physics. Interrogating this material through a particle level of awareness, that is to say outside a preordained learned vocabulary, the performer is in a dialogue with Shape as an expansive form of communication.

A sense of calm and contemplation must be developed to apprehend this material. Objects, whether our bodies, a table, chair or bowl can only be deeply appreciated through a focus that has a meditative type of attention. Some years after I had become aware of Shape, the Origami Dance evolved: the folding and unfolding of the body, like a piece of paper, using my senses to appreciate the outcome, in what is like an endless flow of geometric possibilities suggested from one Shape becoming another, very much like the traditional practice of origami. Start with a simple fold in a piece of paper, or in this case the folding of a joint. Then with great patience study the fold and the Shape it has produced until you perceive the next. Shape creating Shape. This practice invokes what to me is one of the most fascinating parts

of being an artist: the aspect of surrender.

In order to comprehend the power that Shape contains, I think it is valuable to consider the work of sculptor Richard Serra. My exposure to his work, beginning in the early gallery scene in SoHo, influenced my comprehension of the languages of Shape. At the time, the *Natural History of the American Dancer* was fully engrossed in working with the languages of Shape in our performances, and one evening, at a Serra opening, I felt an instant connection to his work. His regard for Shape seemed to match or run concurrent to our own amplifying role of the material.

The radical, bold simplicity of Serra's work was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I saw that his work engaged the Space through Shape and needed no other reason to exist. The massive forms sweep the viewer into participatory dialogue with Shape and Space. Unlike traditional sculpture, in Serra's work Shape stands not as a discrete object, but instead is felt through physical presence. You feel Shape and feel how it dictates the way you encounter Space. His work is a valuable lesson for the performer.

The impact of this exposure came out a few years later in my first full evening work, *Painters Dream*. The dance was sponsored by the Kitchen Center for Music and Dance, then housed on Grand Street in SoHo. The room was loft-like and elegant with four white columns and floor-to-ceiling arched windows overlooking the street. I decided to construct an abstract narrative made of a study of the Space itself, like a painter might study a canvas of a particular size and dimensions. The Shapes took form from the dimensions of the room itself.

I want to encourage dancers and choreographers to spend time with these materials in a totally nonhierarchical interrogation. When seen as an exclusive material, it appears to me that even dancers, who have tremendous training in Shape through various traditional techniques, tend to use a very limited Shape vocabulary compared to the plethora of shapes that are possible. When Shape's languages are confronted and explored, endless possibilities are opened.

The Six Viewpoints Shape awareness is an activity one usually associates with visual artists. Their studios are filled with objects that fascinate them. Their daily warm-up

includes the perusal of these objects, their eye growing wise and more acute with each revisiting. They are not under the restraints and conditions of the temporal world of performance where we are under the impression that things must get done (and fast!). A visual artist will keep an object for years. And so, in the Viewpoints approach to this material, you can return to the practice of Shape awareness of your own body for years with ever increasing facility and awareness. Gennie DeWeese, my childhood art mentor, drew and painted the shapes from the same landscape outside her window on countless canvases, re-articulated the shapes of the Montana landscape in a non-ending, ever evolving discovery.

Now reach your hands out; look at them. Here is a Shape that is yours alone. Here is a material of performance existing in the form of your body. This material is both singular and universal. Begin by contemplating your own form. Simply take time—lots of time—to just look at your arms, your legs, and the position they are in, and their relationship to each other, as a painter would. Observe and wait for the moment when Shape begins to speak in Shape to you.

Standing in Space

The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice

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