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The Drama Review

Workshop Issue

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Abstract Spaces : A

Workshop Approach

by David Cole

I am going to describe a

workshop technique that makes the abstractions of

conceptual thought available as physical experiences, and in so doing, makes abstraction itself—usually thought of as a danger to theatre work—available to theatre, both as a subject matter and as an untapped source of performance energies.

There is a tendency, in most branches of contemporary thought, to use metaphors of space for all sorts of concepts and relationships that are not in themselves spatial. Literary critics locate the nuances of a word in “semantic space.” Psychiatrists refer to the “therapeutic space” in which they encounter their patients. Anthropologists imagine networks of kin-relationships spread out in “social space.” Musicologists speak of a “harmonic space” within which tones and timbres are distributed.

What if—as a way of putting abstract thought-processes back in touch with the life of the body—these metaphorical “spaces” were identified with stretches of *actual* space, and the resulting physical areas were then treated as *playing*-areas which an actor might seek to enter, move through and function in? This was the experiment which I and some fifteen others undertook in a special acting workshop at the Baltimore New Theatre Festival in June, 1978.

It is in the area of personal, emotional problems that the incentive to spatialize is strongest. What else accounts for the perennial popularity of quest and journey stories, from *Gilgamesh* to *The Hobbit*? The protagonists of such tales move across a menacing landscape of dark forests, narrow gorges, etc. But there is always at least a *possible* way of “getting through” a gorge or forest; the same cannot be said of the sorts of life-crises for which this terrain clearly stands. As in intellectual discourse, so in narrative: space is a promise of advance, progress, *movement*. We do not so much pity Dorothy for the terrors that lie along the Yellow Brick Road as envy the way she gets her path through suffering neatly marked out in yellow brick. Most of us are not handed our emotional dilemmas in the convenient form of a space to cross.

But suppose we were? This was the possibility explored in a preliminary exercise of the Baltimore workshop. The actors were asked to recall an interval in their lives when they felt they had “no next *move*,” “no clear sense of *direction*,” “nowhere to *turn*”; to imagine this period as a highly specific kind of space; and then to identify this imagined space with the stretch of rehearsal-room floor now lying at their feet. The objective was to find a way through, and on out of, the space: that is, to discover “moves,” “turns” and “directions” that had not been apparent at the time, but could be “glimpsed” with the difficult “interval” now there before one in the form of a space.

This exercise gives in essence the basic method of the workshop: to take some spatial metaphor for an intellectual or emotional situation literally, by laying it out as an actual space, a playing-area; and then to fulfill the secret wish reflected in the metaphor—that all our experience might have the character of bodily movement in space—by moving bodily into that playing-area.

If such an approach can be fruitful—and the Baltimore sessions suggest that it can—this is because, for all its surface novelty, it reposes on some very basic facts of experience:

—*There is an inherent human tendency to project nonspatial concepts and relationships onto space.*

—*This tendency is at work in—in fact provides the whole basis for—the theatrical process itself, and especially for the evolution of stage space in the twentieth-century theatre.*

An inclination to represent nonspatial concepts and relations by spatial arrangements can be observed wherever man has set his hand to space. The layout of the tribal village (or, for that matter, the modern city) provides a map of its social divisions.

Cathedrals and mosques diagram, in their groundplans, the cosmological principles proclaimed within. A sports field is a spatial model of a society's image of itself as competitive "arena." A battle front allows the "rift" between societies to take shape in space as an actual disputed "line." We lay out our vision of art history in the gallery-sequence of our museums, and our conception of intellectual order in the stack-arrangements of our libraries. And by the choice and disposition we make of our living space, each of us gives expression to his or her body-image, sexual nature and personality type.

Now my point is not that, through the method I am proposing, theatre might join the ranks of these spatializing activities. My point is that this is the class of activities to which theatre already and inevitably belongs. Theatrical production is, in its essence, a process of making mental constructs (scripts, improv premises, stories, etc.) happen as events in space; and each of the resources it employs to this end—gesture, blocking, setting, light, etc.—functions by translating imaginative relationships into spatial relations. Theatre work makes it possible for us to *enter physically* mental structures which otherwise would exist for us only on the level of thought and fantasy. In other words, theatre accomplishes *by its very nature* the transformation of abstract structure into spatial experience which—as the spatial vocabulary of one abstract discipline after another reveals—*those* fields are longing to accomplish. And every time we, as actors, get up off our chairs to "walk through" it, we are engaged in basically the same process I am recommending in this article.

"Yes, but surely an actor must find it easier to enter the human spaces of a dramatic fiction than the merely conceptual 'spaces' of chemistry, logic and so forth." Perhaps; but the tendency of theatre over the past century or so has been to set the stage equal to increasingly abstract kinds of spaces, which actors have then had to learn their way around in. Shakespeare's or Ibsen's places, whatever their symbolic overtones, are still *places*; but in Strindberg's *Dream Play* or Evreinov's *Theatre of the Soul* the stage is identified with—and the performer required to function in—a space that is purely interior. "Still, however, a *human* interior: the inside of somebody's mind." But in the productions of Richard Foreman or the Mabou Mines, or in a "happening," stage space is no longer even "somebody's mind"; it is a kind of abstract "field" within which images can be laid out and juxtaposed. And through this sort of space, too, actors have learned to move. The Strindberg mindscape identifies the stage with a kind of space one degree more abstract than the Ibsen room; the Foreman image-field identifies the stage with a kind of space one degree more abstract than the Strindberg mindscape. The technique I am proposing—which identifies the stage with a kind of space one degree more abstract still—is in reality a continuation of a familiar and productive line of experiment.

If the approach is in fact continuous with earlier theatre work, it ought to be possible to present it to a group of actors in ways that stress the continuities with *their* previous experience. And considering how alien much of the material to be taken up is bound to strike a performer, it would seem especially desirable, whenever possible, to restate the new challenges in terms of their affinities with familiar acting problems.

So, for example, in practice one does not simply *declare* a playing-area to be henceforth equivalent to semantic—or ideological or behavioral—"space," and turn people loose in it: the physicalizing imagination has not been given anything to work with. For a start, the actor needs to know *how* semantics—or ideology or behavior—is like a space; i.e., the basis and details of the analogy. (For instance: semantic relations resemble spatial relations in that definitions lay down "boundaries," synonyms are "close" or "distant," a word has "areas" of suggestion that may or may not "overlap"

with those of other words, etc.) This preparatory analysis is comparable to “a careful study of the script” in more traditional kinds of work: in either case, one is learning the ground rules of the fiction within which one is going to operate.

Once the spatial analogy has been understood, it becomes possible to break down the very general objective “to explore the space” into a series of specific and compassable acting tasks: to imagine the physical characteristics of the space (flat or sloping, broad or narrow, sharply lit or dim, etc.); to discover the constraints and opportunities of the space; to find ways of escaping or transforming the space; to see what sorts of encounters with other actors are like in the space; to think out the implications of a particular posture or movement in the space (if this floor is a “memory surface,” what am I doing when I flatten myself out on it, move evasively over it, etc.?).

In other words, one tries—as one always tries in introducing actors to new material—to build on skills and experiences they already possess. This principle dictated, among other things, the *order* of our work in the Baltimore sessions. For while all the uses of “space” we dealt with were metaphorical, some metaphorical “spaces” are more clearly rooted in actual spatiality than others: for example, the “harmonic space” of musical analysis—since harmonies *do* sound in the air—has closer ties with real space than have, say, the “infinite-dimensional vector spaces” of linear algebra. Now it seemed reasonable to suppose that the closer to actual a “space,” the more an actor would be able to draw upon previous improvisatory experience in his or her attempts to penetrate it. So it was in the closest-to-actual “spaces” that we began, moving only gradually toward more abstract kinds of “space,” in the following sequence: (I) *Shared interpersonal “spaces”*; (II) *Interior, mental “spaces”*; (III) *The impersonal but still profoundly human “spaces” of language and literature*; (IV) *The impersonal and dehumanized “spaces” of abstract thought*. Transitions from each of these phases to the next were accomplished by “bridge” exercises. For example, to get from Phase III to Phase IV, the actors were asked to invent physicalizations for “extracting the square root of a number.” Coming up with a solution here (and some very ingenious solutions were found) involved opening oneself to the spatial implications of *both* the words of the phrase “extract a square root” (thus looking back to Phase III, “Language”) *and* the mathematical operation described by those words (thus looking ahead to Phase IV, “Abstraction”).

PHASE I. Shared Interpersonal “spaces.” To speak of a “remote manner” or of “meeting an opponent halfway” is to speak figuratively. However, there *is* physical space out between people; and its shape or extent may well—what shows it more clearly than stage blocking?—give expression to the nature of relations between them. The “distant” person is likely to keep his distance; the friend who always “stands by” me is often to be found at my side. As a space-metaphor in such close touch with actual spatiality—and as an instance of spatialization familiar to every actor who has ever been blocked into a scene—interpersonal “space” made a secure starting point for our work.

In one of our earliest exercises we laid out the “gap” that divided two unacquainted members of the workshop as an actual stretch of rehearsal-room floor. The two actors could then physicalize their attempt to become better acquainted as a literal “moving toward” one another: they “made advances,” “narrowed the distance,” “stumbled into awkward areas,” “discovered common ground,” etc.

The “bridge” exercise leading into the more private “spaces” of Phase II was a variant on this one. Each actor was asked to imagine some difficult-to-know acquaintance of his or hers as a difficult-to-cross *space*, and then—having translated whatever “barriers,” “pitfalls,” etc. this person presented into *spatial* “barriers,” “pitfalls,” etc.—to “find a route” or “open the way” to greater intimacy.

PHASE II. Interior, mental “spaces.” We now sought to enter “spaces” whose links with real spatiality were more doubtful. Unlike an interpersonal “distance,” the “depth” of an individual’s remorse or the “extent” of his self-awareness does not spontaneously manifest itself as a region or relation in real space. On the other hand, the fact that our brains are inside our bodies encourages us in the belief that we possess some sort of psychic “interior”—and the Expressionist wing of modern theatre has, as pointed out above, accustomed us to regard this “inner space” as one of the kinds of place a stage can be.

The central exercise for this phase was an exploration of the “inner space” of memory. We worked with four different spatial images of memory, the first drawn from Proust, the other three from the writings of various psychologists: (1) memory as a network of points, each standing for a name, and joined one to another by connecting “lines” of association; (2) memory as a cluttered house; (3) memory as a many-faced solid (where to make an association means to cross an edge and come round onto another face); and (4) memory as a complexly contoured surface (whose craters and channels are initially created—then gradually deepened and joined—by the ceaseless barrage of incoming experiences). The actors were first told to work on clarifying some dim recollection they retained of an object, picture or toy from early childhood. Then, with this act of actual remembering as a reference experience, they were asked to physicalize the search they had just performed mentally as an actual, mimed “search for a lost object” through one after another of the four memory “spaces”—the Proustian point-and-line network, the cluttered house, the many-faced solid, and the contoured surface—with each of which in turn our workspace was temporarily identified. (Incidentally, when I asked which of these physicalizations had felt most like actual remembering, each of the four spatial metaphors had its partisans.)

PHASE III. The impersonal, but still profoundly human, “spaces” of language and literature. I spoke earlier of a tendency in modern literary criticism to conceive structures of words as “spaces.” Any such usage carries us yet one step further away from real spatiality. For verbal “space” can be thought of neither as actually “out between” people (like the interpersonal “spaces” of Phase I) nor as actually “inside” the individual (like the mental “spaces” of Phase II). And yet, insofar as both external communication and internal thought-processes “go on in” words, it is just possible to imagine language in the quasi-spatial character of an encompassing medium.

After some preliminary exploration of language itself as a “space” (based on the series of analogies between semantic and spatial relations which I noted earlier), our work for this phase focused on the conception that every individual text constitutes a unique “space”—and that to enter that “space” is to find oneself moving in accord with its peculiar structure and demands.

The text/space to which we sought entry was that of the following story by Kafka:

A Common Confusion

A common experience, resulting in a common confusion. A. has to transact important business with B. in H. He goes to H. for a preliminary interview, accomplishes the journey there in ten minutes, and the journey back in the same time, and on returning boasts to his family of his expedition. Next day he goes again to H., this time to settle his business finally. As that by all appearances will require several hours, A. leaves very early in the morning. But although all the surrounding circumstances, at least in A.'s estimation, are exactly the same as the day before, this time it takes him ten hours to reach H. When he arrives there quite exhausted in the evening he is informed that B., annoyed at his absence, had left half an hour before to go to A.'s village, and that they must have passed each other on the road. A. is advised to wait. But in his anxiety about his business he sets off at once and hurries home.

This time he covers the distance, without paying any particular attention to the fact, practically in an instant. At home he learns that B. had arrived quite early, immediately after A.'s departure, indeed that he had met A. on the threshold and reminded him of his business; but A. had replied that he had no time to spare, he must go at once.

In spite of this incomprehensible behavior of A., however, B. had stayed on to wait for A.'s return. It is true, he had asked several times whether A. was not back yet, but he was still sitting up in A.'s room. Overjoyed at the opportunity of seeing B. at once and explaining everything to him, A. rushes upstairs. He is almost at the top, when he stumbles, twists a sinew, and almost fainting with the pain, incapable even of uttering a cry, only able to moan faintly in the darkness, he hears B.—impossible to tell whether at a great distance or quite near him—stamping down the stairs in a violent rage and vanishing for good.

Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir (Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer)

Our way of “gaining entry” to this text was not to stage its incidents. Our first step was to ascertain the rules governing the space of the story. These may be stated more or less as follows:

1. *The more aware you are of moving through the space, the greater the distances in the space become.*
2. *The space has only two areas: where you are and where you need to be. Wherever you are, where you need to be is somewhere else.*
3. *Where you are could turn into where you need to be—if you could stay there. But you cannot.*
4. *To take a point as your destination insures either that you will never reach it or that at the moment you reach it, it will cease to be your destination.*

The rules once grasped, the problem we set ourselves was to perform actions *of our own* in a space where such rules—first each by itself, then all simultaneously—were in force. To accomplish the simplest physical objective under such conditions—say, to go and pick up a coin that has been placed in the middle of the floor—turns out to be excruciatingly difficult. “Kafka space,” we found, permits only a few, restless, self-defeating action-patterns to be enacted in it; and any independent act *you* initiate, it soon manages to transform back into one of these few, permitted routines.

PHASE IV. The impersonal and dehumanized “spaces” of abstract thought. In our final session we took up spatial usages at the farthest possible remove from actual space—and, what is more, drawn from fields (logic, statistics, computer science) generally regarded as beyond the pale of art. In fact, our plunges into these airless and stringent regions evoked emotional responses of such intensity as to cast doubt on the (largely unexamined) assumption that art and abstract thought-processes do not mix.

Our work in this phase centered on a concept from statistics called “sample space,” which means: “The collection of all the possible outcomes for a particular phenomenon.” For instance, the “sample space” of a two-way election is: candidate 1 wins, candidate 2 wins, election disputed, election a draw. As such an example illustrates, there is nothing very spatial about “sample space.” Yet the concept is not wholly without spatial overtones—a “collection” suggests some sort of deployment of objects in space (signatures on a petition, marbles in a bag, etc.)—and the very adoption of such a term by statisticians reveals the usual longing on the part of those engaged in a highly abstract pursuit that their activity should find its way out into space. The question is: what can theatre do to help?

We took as our starting point a sentence that can be read in several different ways: “I (shut out/reach out to) the world (angrily/fearfully).” This sentence has a sample space of four possible meanings:

OUTCOME 1: I shut out the world angrily.

OUTCOME 2: I shut out the world fearfully.

OUTCOME 3: I reach out to the world angrily.

OUTCOME 4: I reach out to the world fearfully.

These outcomes describe *actions*, and as a first step toward “putting the space back in sample space,” the actors were asked to invent simple physical action-patterns corresponding to each of the four possible sentence-variants.

Four placards, each with one of the four sentence-variants inscribed on it, were now laid out on the floor in a succession of different spatial arrangements: along a line [Figure 1], at the corners of a square [Figure 2], in an irregular pattern that gave spatial expression to the relation one or another member of the workshop thought should exist among the four life-stances in question [Figure 3]. The actors moved through each arrangement of placards in turn (up and down the line, in and out of the square, etc.)—that is: they moved through “sample space” physicalized in each of these different ways—transforming the gesture-pattern associated with each placard into that of the next as they passed from one placard to another.

Then the placards were set aside and the entire workspace was divided into four quadrants, each corresponding to one of the four sentence-variants [Figure 4]. There was now no escape from commitment to *one* of the four outcomes stated by the sentence-variants, since any point an actor could occupy had to fall within *one* of the four quadrants. But, on the other hand, there was considerable “room for maneuver” *within* each option—that is: considerable actual floorspace within which to develop, qualify or even undercut the gesture-pattern within whose “domain” one found oneself.

| | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| SHUT OUT | SHUT OUT | REACH OUT | REACH OUT |
| ANGRILY | FEARFULLY | FEARFULLY | ANGRILY |

Figure 1

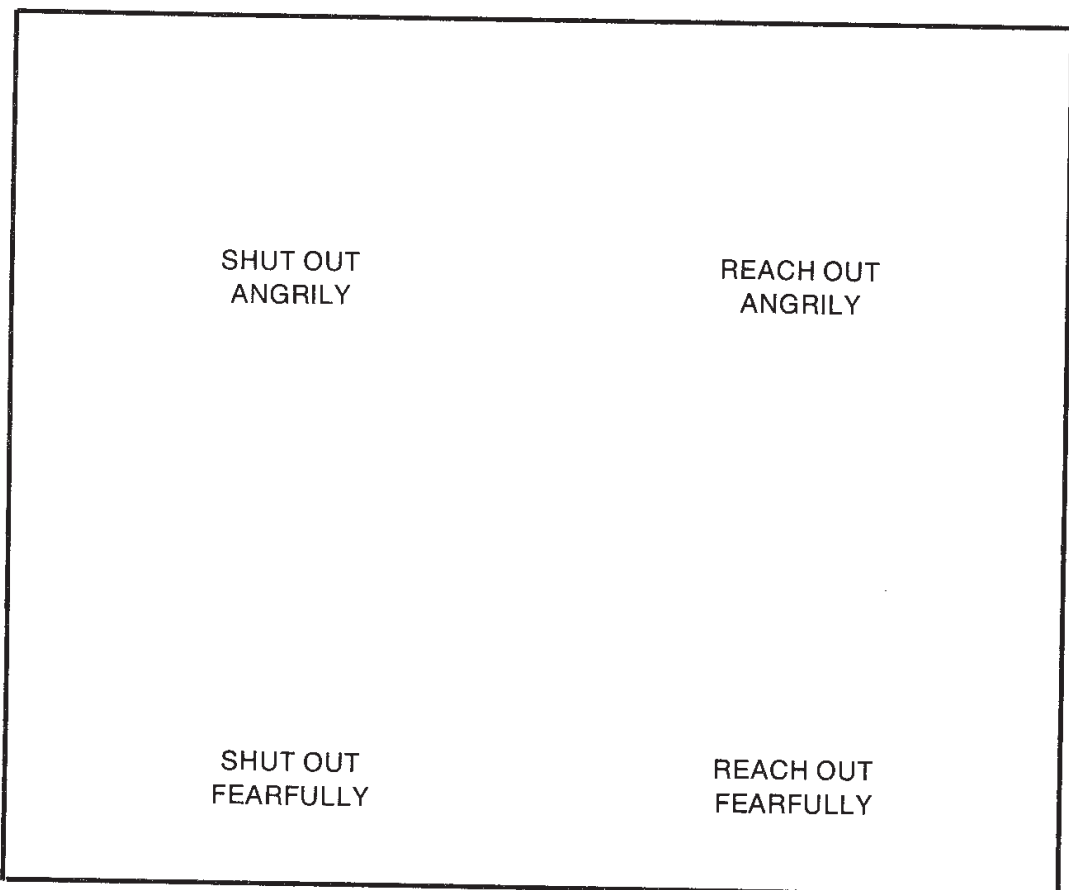


Figure 2

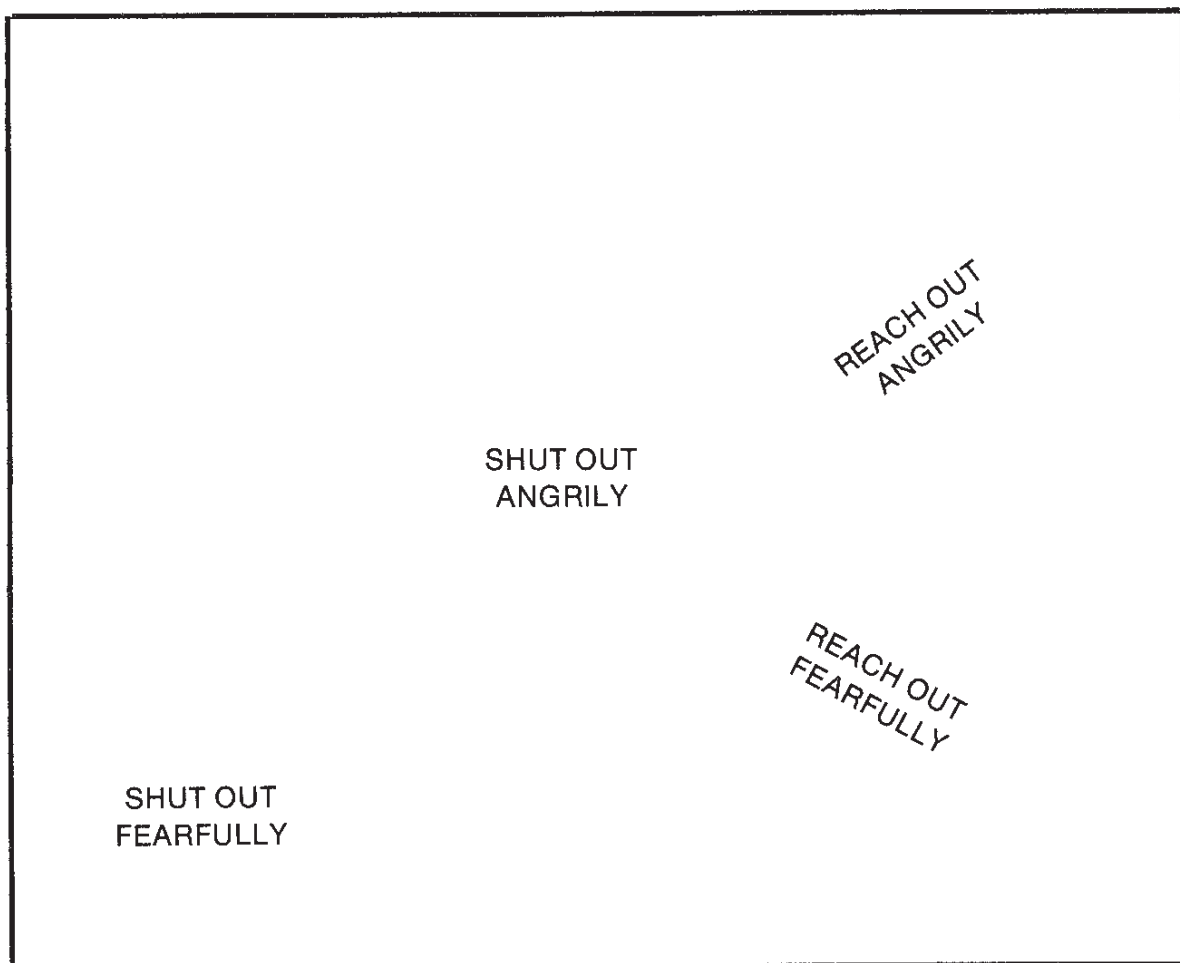


Figure 3



Figure 4

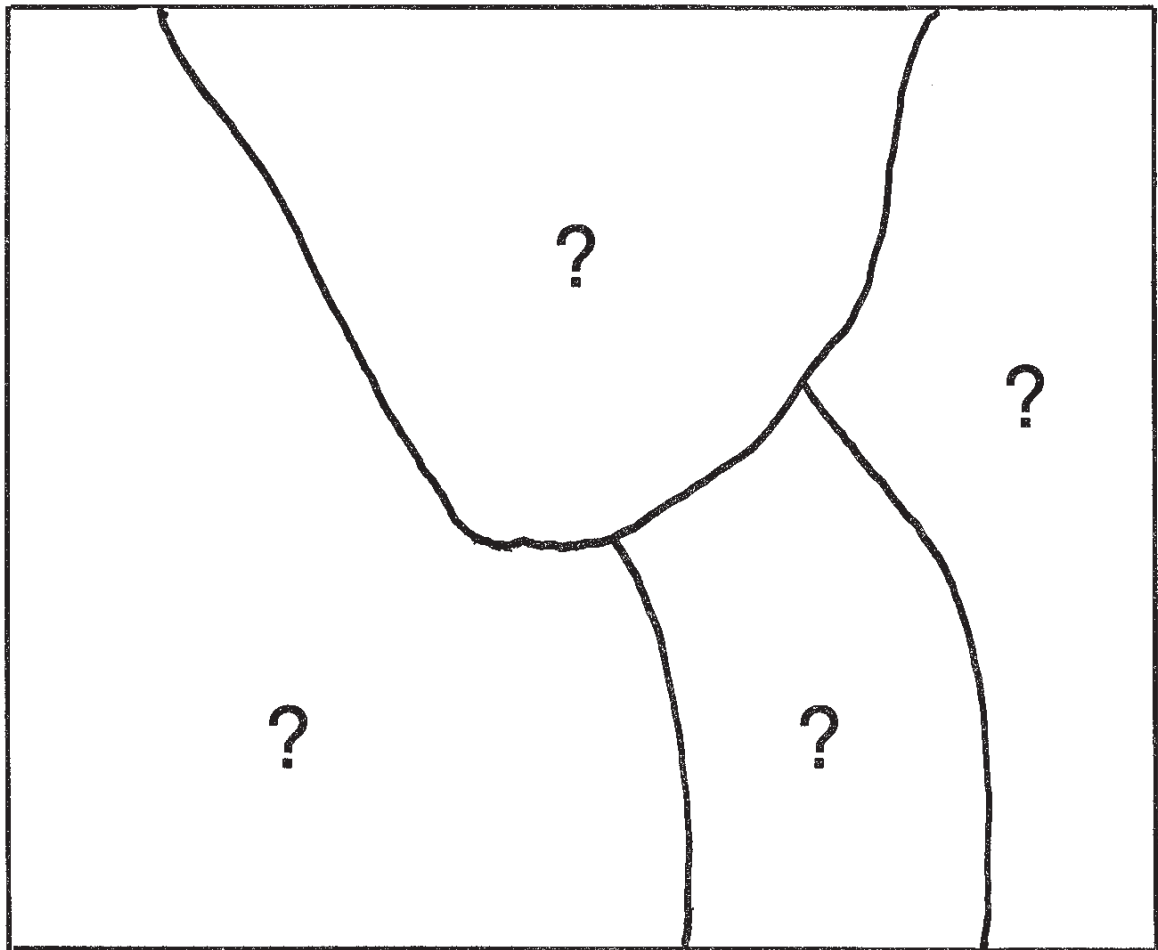


Figure 5

Finally [Figure 5], the entire room was taken as being divided into four irregularly shaped regions, each, again, corresponding to one of the four possible sentence-outcomes. But this time the actors were not informed which region was associated with which outcome—nor where the boundary lines fell. The only way to “keep one’s options open” in a “sample space” thus physicalized was to start moving over it at random. The actor could be certain of having crossed the border into a new option only when (on a signal from me) he suddenly found himself performing a different gesture-pattern from a moment earlier.

The remarkable thing about these forays into “sample space” was the *intensity of feeling* they aroused. Let me give an example. During the stage when the placards were positioned at the four corners of a square, with all the actors at once moving in, around and through them, each member of the workshop in turn was instructed to go in and occupy the center of the square. Since this was the point equally remote from all four options, one might expect it would be experienced as a place of repose, “neutral ground.” Instead, reaction ranged from “I expected it to feel great; it didn’t” to “Suddenly I felt responsible for the safety of the entire group” and even “I felt like Christ on the cross”!

This was quite a level of response to be reached in the course of what was, after all, an exercise in spatialized statistics. Nor was it an isolated example. Again and again over the course of the workshop, participants were astonished at the emotional depth of their response to an abstraction *when the abstraction came to them in the form of a space to cross*.

This, of course, runs counter to the conventional wisdom that abstraction is the great inhibitor of performance energies, the foe to all good theatre work. It may well be that the chief interest of the approach I have been describing is that it compels reexamination of this assumption. For it is an assumption that could *do* with some reexamining—if only on account of the near-universal assent it commands. We pride ourselves on being a theatrical culture that holds any and every received idea about theatre up to scrutiny: how is it this one sacred cow has been permitted to graze on, undisturbed?

To be fair, the assumption is prevalent largely because most everyone has had experiences that appear to confirm it. What student has not read critics in whom an overreliance on some form of abstract thinking—allegorizing, schematizing, politicizing, or just plain rationalizing—seems to have all but destroyed the capacity for immediate response? What actor has not been present at rehearsals where too much “sitting around and talking about it” stopped the juices flowing? But such experiences only go to show that allegorizing, sitting around and talking about it, etc. are none of them fruitful ways of bringing abstraction to bear upon theatre work; they do not prove that there can be no such way.

Before knocking ourselves out to find one, however, we are certainly entitled to ask: *What would be in it for theatre?* For one thing, a possible new source of performance energies. In my article “The Visual Script” (T72) I suggested techniques by which abstract graphic patterns might function as a stimulus to the work of the actor. Perhaps *conceptual* abstractions, too—if presented in the right way—also possess this potential. Certainly theatre cannot afford to turn its back on *any* material that gives promise of possessing it. But still more basically: the austere power (to say nothing of the social impact) which abstract thought has attained in the modern world makes it desirable that theatre should be on some sort of terms with it. Theatre has always been fierce in its claim to compass the full spectrum of human experience: the “mirror held up to nature,” and so forth. But a philosophical system or a differential equation is as much a product of man’s dwelling in the world as is a moral conflict or a personal relationship. Indeed, it might be argued that abstraction is the *most* characteristically human activity: what in nature but the human mind abstracts? Yet theatre cannot so far be said to have done much in the way of establishing relations with this particular branch of the human comedy.

Of course, one cannot just wish such relations into being; there would have to exist some basis for them. Does there?

An abstract thought-process is an internalization—a “taking in”—of what was, originally, action in space. This is clear from the root meanings of the words we use for these operations: to “de-fine” = to mark off a boundary; to “ex-plicate” = to un-fold what had been folded up (“im-plicit”); etc. It finds further confirmation in the discovery of Piaget that our earliest abstract notions come to us through the experience of moving in space. A child literally “arrives at” his or her concept of “outline” by following actual contours; of “order,” by setting real objects in rows; of “angle,” by performing sharp, rhythmical out-and-back motions; and so forth. (Incidentally, these findings of Piaget’s greatly enhance the plausibility of the work-method I have been putting forward. Crawling around some abstract “space” seems a far less peculiar enterprise if it was precisely by crawling around your playroom floor that you developed the capacity for abstraction in the first place.)

Abstraction is not the only adult mental function that owes its origins to such a process. In fact, psychologists have suggested that most of what goes on in an adult head is the internalized version of what was, for the child, some action in space. Thus adult consciousness is most likely a “taking in” of childhood babble, adult fantasy a “taking in” of childhood play, etc.

Now so far as these last-mentioned mental functions—consciousness and fantasy—are concerned, it is clear that theatre possesses the means to restore them to their lost status as events-in-space. In fact, as I pointed out earlier, theatrical production might almost be *defined* as just this very process of reexternalization. But what theatre has done for one sort of internalized action—for the “taken in” prattle which is consciousness, or the “taken in” play which is fantasy—why should it not do for another: the “taken in” spatial movement which is abstraction? Certainly it would be doing nothing contrary to its nature. If an abstraction is an erstwhile action-in-space that has temporarily forfeited its dimension of event—could not very much the same thing be said of the text of a play? And if improvisatory and other rehearsal procedures can restore event-status to the action “locked up inside” a text, why not to the action “locked up inside” an abstraction?

In drawing such a parallel, I do not for a moment mean to suggest that theatre can—or should want to—“be about” abstract thought-processes or conceptions. A theatre piece “about” Boyle’s Law or the theory of recursive functions seems as grotesque an idea to me as I imagine it does to the reader. What the method I have been setting forth in this article offers is precisely a way for theatre to concern itself with subjects it *cannot* be about.

Pondering the role of art in an age of abstraction, the poet Wordsworth speculated that henceforth artists might take as their own the work of “carrying sensation into the midst . . . of science itself.” The method I have outlined provides a way of realizing this aspiration by—literally—“carrying” the sensing body of the actor “into the” (actual, spatialized) “midst” of a conceptual structure or “area.” What theatre is unable to *be about*, it may yet *go amid*. If the abstract cannot “enter into” theatre work, perhaps it is for theatre to “enter”—by techniques such as those explored in the Baltimore workshop—the “spaces” of abstraction. Such a process would make abstraction available to the theatre, even while bestowing on abstract thought-processes—or rather, *restoring* to abstract thought-processes—some of theatre’s own quality of immediate, physically experienced activity in space.

David Cole is a playwright whose book, *The Theatrical Event* (Wesleyan University Press), has recently come out in paperback.