

The Actor As Juggler Of Place And Space

BY KAREN DE MAURO



In daily life, the places people inhabit are real. In the theatre, place is an illusion. When theatre works well the places of plays feel more real than reality. A successful experience of place in a play occurs when the audience feels as if it is really there. Its belief deepens in the presence of a committed actor. Place-sensitive actors use a blend of skill, faith and attentive

listening to provide congruent sensory clues, to convince the audience that "they are there." Once a believable sense of place has been sparked in the audience, the actor still has to refuel and sustain it from time to time. But the actor is not alone in this. He is assisted by the potent power of place itself, by the refined decisions made by a good director and set designers, and by the audience's desire to be transported to another time and space.

Because the actor is usually the point of attention in performance, he is the primary juggler of the multiple variables that communicate place and space. Good actors can keep several awarenesses in the air simultaneously. Each of these awarenesses lands momentarily before it is released into the bigger pattern of color and motion swirling around him. It's an act requiring ease, grace, and skill in the presence of density, high expectations, and desire. In short, there's a lot going on.

In live theatre several simultaneous place dynamics are active in the bodies of both actor and audience. These concurrent dynamics interweave and influence one another. These dynamics include: The physical space of the actual theatre building that houses and contains the performance. This physical space has size, scale, and dimension, as well as a history that is felt as an existing atmosphere. It is also divided into several sections, such as the house, the stage, and the offstage preparation areas each of which has different attributes.

The atmosphere of the event is the feeling in the theatre space that is co-created by actors and audience. This atmosphere changes from night to night and is influenced both by the play and events in the outside world.

The individual actor's personal awareness of place comes from the combination of sensitivity and practical life experience that a particular performer brings to the theatre space as well as to the quality of his presence in it. This awareness is often, but not always, enhanced by a high degree of spatial awareness and interest in place as a character-shaping force on the part of the actor.

The actor's skill at evoking the imaginary place of the play relates to his level of craft and skill at creating a sense of the place of the play for the audience. It refers to his overall ability to conjure and sustain an imagined sense of place for the duration of the performance. He may or may not believe he is in the place himself. What matters is his ability to induce a sense of place in the audience.

The personal atmosphere of the actor as it pertains to

place has to do with the quality of natural radiant energy of the actor in terms of whether he is more powerful than place, is ruled by place, or engages in a give and take relationship with space.

The character's relationship with place refers to how aware or oblivious the character played by the actor is to place. Character and place are also heavily influenced by the actor's personal atmosphere and by his level of technical skill in playing both character and place. Both of these qualities influence the choices that he does or doesn't make.

The place of the play is determined by the playwright, built by the set designer, enhanced by the director, and embodied by the actor. In addition to its physical characteristics, each place in a play radiates its own atmosphere which contributes to the overall atmosphere of the play.

Given circumstances refer to those forces which are at play in places and on the people in them, as influenced by the time and events around which the play occurs. Any place, real or imagined, is radically determined by given circumstances, such as the period in history, societal influences, and the season of year and time of day.

The audience's sense of place refers to that particular group's ability or willingness to believe they are in the place. This capacity varies from night to night and is influenced by each group's intentions, beliefs, and expectations. The technical term for an audience's ability to believe they are in the imaginary place of the play is "Suspension of Disbelief." Each audience forms a living organic entity with specific characteristics. And because energy is contagious, members energetically affect one another in such a way that whole sections of the house are felt as "hot" or "cold." The sense of place that does or doesn't occur is influenced by the audience's capacity for belief in the imaginary place of the play.

Personal place sensitivity is influenced by the inner access to imagery, thoughts, and sensations as well as to outer place. But because psychic energy is contagious, individual audience members can influence the overall audience response to place, character, and events. The level of place sensitivity in single members in the audience is referred to as his "personal access."

Synergy is an interactive energetic atmosphere that includes all of the above places and people on a given night. This interaction can be radically altered by such

variables as a strong ensemble feeling in the acting company, an exceptionally acute rendering of place

by a set designer, a parallel situation in the real world concurrent with that of the imagined world, or by an extraordinary performance by a single performer. The synergistic atmosphere varies from night to night but also accrues residual effects in certain theatres, certain plays, certain ensembles, and certain performers. These residual atmospheres contribute to a field that sometimes exists in the theatre for the duration of the run. The quality and density of the field's atmosphere can range from that of a vacuum to holy ground. This combination of the list of the above elements is what actors sense as the synergy of place and space.

Each theatre experience deals with physical buildings on sites that house specific events by particular actors living in imaginary locations called plays in the presence of unique living and breathing audiences. When an actor or director feels that the necessary sense of place is missing from a production, it is useful to scan the elements above to highlight which particular aspect is missing.

For example, if the actor has not been specific and thorough with each of the "given circumstances," he can do sensory work and invent behaviors to flesh out those that most clearly communicate a clear sense of the particular place of the play. For example, any actor who does Williams', "A Streetcar Named Desire" benefits from sensory work on the heat of New Orleans and the close quarters of the Kowalski apartment.

While "place" centers around atmosphere and location, "space" centers around the affect places have on the physical body and how it responds to them. Effective performers know that the dynamics of place and space are indivisible.

Space is the environment we live in and on. It is so much a part of us that we do not see it as separate from us.

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Humans live in space as fish do in water. Space is both an atmospheric field and a perceptual construct. Spacetime is, as physicist Brian Green says, the very “fabric of the cosmos.”

Spatially adept actors understand the interchange of influences that are at play within the human body, the sensorial perceiving mind, and in the space around, within and beyond. Actors encounter space in different ways at different stages in the course of their careers. During training they tend to focus on the senses and on the movement of the body in space. During rehearsal and performance, they spiral into the inner reaches of space as they make choices about how to best communicate the events of the play through the imaginary realities of place, character and circumstance.

Along the way most actors also develop some form of mental and emotional clearing in order to access the states of readiness and availability that are contingent on an open and “spacious” mind. Finally, those performers who view acting as a lifelong path of spiritual, personal and artistic growth also search out practices that enable them to move back and forth between the visible and invisible spatial realities within and around them.

The practices they use crisscross back and forth between what they do in performance and how they work with space in daily life. Each informs the other. In live venues especially, for example, the effect of the actor who

has sustained a meditation practice is often energetically different than the one who does not meditate. The reason for this is that the meditating actor notices and filters in a different way than does the non-meditating one. The resulting interpersonal and environmental interchanges are not better or worse; they are simply different.

Actors tend to embody and exude what they study and practice. Wilem Defoe’s regular practice of the rigorous Jivamukti yoga naturally fosters both laser-like concentration and refined physical acuity. Ben Kingsley’s avid study of the sutras and his audio rendition of Yogananda’s lengthy *Autobiography of a Yogi* cannot help but influence both the way he thinks and how he perceives the world. Both of these actors turned to pre-existing spiritual systems as ways to refine their acting work. But any extant system comes with its own set of spiritual constructs. Not everyone can buy into the yogic belief systems to which some actors easily subscribe. For actors who do not have a traditional spiritual practice, I highly recommend Anne Bogart’s “Viewpoints” as trustworthy fluid templates.

The actor who cultivates practical ways to embody both outer and inner space, and dwells in and communicates a clear sense of outer and inner place enriches plays, characters, and the audiences’ experience of both. ♦2007

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