



PROJECT MUSE®

“The New Thing”: Three Axes for Devised Theatre

Tony Perucci

Theatre Topics, Volume 28, Number 3, November 2018, pp. 203-216 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2018.0044>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/709868>

“The New Thing”: Three Axes for Devised Theatre

Tony Perucci

Writing in *Theatre Topics* in 2009, Susanna Morrow, Gleason Bauer, and Joan Herrington note a critical absence in the teaching of devised theatre. While devised work had become an increasingly common part of college drama curricula, only a “few of these programs . . . include training in the skills that inform the devising process” (125). The authors lay out approaches to address this gap and help faculty prepare students not only to create devised work, but also to ensure that such work “form[s] fresh, original theatre.” However, despite this critical intervention, the attention paid to teaching devised theatre remains on the themes, texts, issues, and communities that individual devised works address, and not on training, process, or form.¹ When these aspects are mentioned, it is often to refer to the “foundations” or “preparatory” work that precedes the “real work” of devising. This absence is understandable, given institutional pressures to both identify and quantify learning outcomes, as well as to make scholarly claims for devised theatre projects’ community and/or curricular impact.

In this essay, I describe “The New Thing,” a pedagogy for devised theatre that I have developed over the past fifteen years.² This approach prioritizes the materiality of performance in order to enable student artists to create and shape aesthetic experiences particular to a theatrical event. The New Thing intentionally deemphasizes, but does not exclude, the most familiar elements of theatre—character, plot, spoken text—in order to broaden student-actors’ relationships to theatrical materials. It utilizes three units of study, which I call “three axes,” on which students learn to create with: 1) the concrete materials of performance; 2) image and spectacle; and 3) a critical engagement with a problem. While The New Thing draws on some theatrical concepts, it gives equal attention to the visual-art practices of minimalism, Dada, and surrealism as an integrative approach to performer training and devising practice.³

The New Thing encourages students to defamiliarize the familiar—to, as Ezra Pound famously put it, “Make it new!” It teaches student-performers to give primacy to the live, theatrical event, so much so that this newness is inextricable from their rehearsed, scored, and memorized performances. The fact that every passing moment of the performance is a “new” one is considered not only a formal component of the work, but also a central part of its content.

However, The New Thing is more than spontaneity, ephemerality, and the novelty of its newness. Influenced by Mary Overlie’s *The Six Viewpoints*, it is equally “thing-ly,” addressing the material of the distance and angles of Space; the geometry of a body’s Shape; the tempos and durations of Time; the dynamic relation with the audience that Overlie terms Emotion; the kinesthetic properties of Movement, and the construction of a performance’s logic or structure, which she calls Story.⁴ What matters in The New Thing is always a question of the *literal matter* in the theatrical event.

At its core, The New Thing is a practice defined by its processes: of defamiliariz-*ing*, new-*ing*, and thing-*ing*. Its three axes are taught sequentially, as accumulative lines of embodied inquiry into the creation and performance of original work.

Axis 1: The Drama of the Material

The Perception and Crafting of the Basic Materials of Performance to Discover Their Dramatic Potential, without the Representation of Characters or Narrative

Conflict, the setting up, fulfilling, and/or breaking of audience expectations, and the logic of progression are discovered through the assembly and inhabiting of the material phenomena of the performance event. Explored within the context of minimalism, we temporarily set aside considerations of meaning, representation, and signification to allow the form of the performance to also be its content, for the performance to be “about” the materials of performance being enacted.⁵

Axis 2: Dream Story and Poetic (Il)logic

The Creation of Performance Work Guided by Intuition, Imagery, Association, Chance, Nonsense, Rupture, the Marvelous, and the Impossible

Axis 2 allows for the materiality of the performance to achieve symbolic value through the act of *making*. Rather than exploring a prearranged theme or topic, actors assemble disparate materials—images, actions, spoken text, performance sites, and more—guided by surrealist practices of discovering the “marvelous” through a poetic or dream logic that structures the performance event.

Axis 3: Becoming a Problem

The Synthesis of the Drama of the Material and Dream Story to Explore a Specific “Problem” or “Question”

Axis 3 adopts an *interrogative mood* in order to address a thematic question that is legible for performer and audience. Rather than attempting to make a statement to answer that question, each added image, action, or spoken text is intended to problematize the question anew.

As a cumulative pedagogy, each axis of The New Thing is designed not only to expand the materials with which actors can create work beyond (but not exclusive of) text, but also to expand *how they relate to those materials*—as actual conditions, as extra-rational imagery and structures, and as questions to be problematized through the creation and enactment of performance. Nevertheless, each axis has its own integrity as a form: an actor trained in The New Thing can create works of minimalist materiality (Axis 1), impossible dreamscapes (Axis 2), or thematic questioning (Axis 3). In each case, The New Thing re-*news* the distinctive *things* of live theatre.

Axis 1: The Drama of the Material

Axis 1 introduces the material *things* of performance, training actors to confront those familiar things as new. It is guided by what I call the *Drama of the Material*, wherein drama can be found and constructed not through the production of fictive conflicts among characters and their spoken texts, but in the actuality of what Overlie calls performance’s “materials”—such as, the dynamics of space, physical objects and structures, patterns of repetition, and the unfolding of time in different durations and tempos (3). Conflict, for instance, may emerge from the juxtaposition of an action performed in two contrasting tempos. The building of audience anticipation can be constructed

through the accumulation of actors performing a gesture simultaneously. Audience expectations can be fulfilled or broken by unexpected and sudden shifts in spatial relationships. While these tactics may be familiar elements of a director's toolbox in service of a representational drama, in the Drama of the Material, drama emerges from the interplay of the materials themselves, as well as from the theatre artist's corporeal and perceptual relationship to them.

The Drama of the Material draws on minimalist sculpture to discover the theatrical potential of the materials. The work that came to be known as minimalism and minimal art in the 1960s focuses on the material encounter of the viewer with the concrete and literal form of an art object, rather than on representations of the human form or the subjective experience of the artist found in abstract expressionism. Epitomized by Donald Judd's assemblies of metal boxes and Sol Lewitt's geometric constructions, minimal art challenges the viewer because it does not refer to anything beyond its own "thingliness." While it does not foreclose a viewer's interpretive acts, the minimalist artist engages in the process of what phenomenologists call "bracketing"—the temporary setting aside of considerations of meaning beyond the perception and experience of the thing itself, what critic Rosalind Krauss calls "the work's brute physical presence" (211). Axis 1 locates the drama produced by this brutality both in the actor's physical presence and in their exclusion of representing ideas, emotions, and meaning. Dramatic value inheres in the *act* of bracketing meaning for an audience, as the actor "compels and gratifies immediate sensuous confrontation" (*ibid.*) with what Barbara Rose calls the minimal object's "presence or concrete thereness" (216). It is, in fact, this dramatic, confrontational quality of minimal art that critic Michael Fried famously decried as "theatrical." In their literalness and rejection of representational depth, "the work refuses, obstinately, to let [the spectator] alone—which is to say it refuses to stop confronting him" (140).

By bracketing all but what Judd might call the "specific objects" of performance, Axis 1 positions the materials, event, and conditions of performance as the primary elements of the devising actor's work. The Drama of the Material's drama is best described by what composer John Cage conceives as the dynamic tension between *clarity* and *grace* in modern dance (130–33). For him, *clarity* denotes the rigid specificity of "mathematical, inhuman" object-hood, while *grace* signifies the "heat" of a human subject meeting the coldness of clarity (132). This clash of subject as object with object as subject is the Drama of the Material.

The New Thing's emphasis on activating theatrical materials emerged from my study of The Six Viewpoints with its originator, Overlie. While her radical vision of a horizontal approach to theatrical materials (Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, Story) has found a broader audience in recent years, her viewpoints of Emotion and Story are less frequently addressed in Viewpoints training. Overlie's definition of *Emotion* is idiosyncratic to say the least: it is not the actor's expression of "unique emotional content" (32), but rather the "dog-sniff-dog world" wherein the audience and performer apprehend each other in their material co-presence (Perucci 2015, 109; 2017, 120). This dynamic can be understood within the context of The Six Viewpoints' emergence from the innovations of the postmodern dance of Yvonne Rainer and Judson Dance Theater (1965, 178; 1968, 267). What is often overlooked in Rainer's work is that she saw her relation to the audience—*being watched*—as fundamental to her practice. As she stated in 1969, "My God! Can theater finally come down to the irreducible fact that one group of people is looking at another group!?" (*qtd.* in Lambert-Beatty 4). In the Drama of the Material, this essential condition of performance—the relation of the actor to the audience—is not external to the artistic work, but is a primary material for the actor to sculpt and compose. In addressing the audience with materials and about those materials, actors enact a "literal and emphatic assertion of their existence" (Rose 216).

Similarly, the Drama of the Material approaches Story as a material logic, rather than a narrative contrived to justify action. For instance, confronting the audience with material "thereness" is necessarily a story *about* that very encounter. As with Emotion, Overlie defines Story differently from our conventional understanding of the term. Rather than naming a dramatic arc of rising and

falling action, story is simply and expansively the “specific logic that functions as an organization of sequences of information” (43; Perucci 2017, 121). The performance’s “structural integrity” accounts for the sequencing of materials, as well as the sense made by juxtaposing multiple disparate actions derived intentionally or through chance operations (Overlie 48). The Drama of the Material’s stories are “abstract narratives” that are about the actual materials that make up those narratives, in which even “the enormous effort to have no Story is itself the Logic” (46) (fig. 1).

In the Drama of the Material, Story’s dramatic potential can become even more electric than that of a fiction. The dramatic charge erupts, for instance, from the actor’s confrontation of the audience with duration and repetition—heightening anticipation with an action or image that lasts too long or happens too many times, or breaking expectations with the surprise of a sudden and radical tempo change. What actuality will happen next? This drama foregrounds the condition of the unfolding performance event—one group of people watching another group of people—as *the* propulsive component of devised theatre.

Interruption: Doing the Unnecessary

The precision and regimentation of minimalism is “interrupted” by approaching the bracketing of meaning from the opposite direction. With minimalism, we bracketed meaning through reduction; with Dada we do so with excess, with “maximalism.” Here, we not only bracket meaning, but also refuse it through absurd acts, chaos, confrontation, ridiculous action, and creative negation to remove life “from parentheses” (Codrescu 9). Dada is explored through what Overlie calls “Doing the Unnecessary,” an exercise in letting the unconscious mind drive the performer to actions that veer into the nonsensical; it is a practice of defamiliarizing the familiar by “interfering with ordinary, automatic actions such as walking, speaking, reaching, exiting, entering, taking off our coat, or sitting down” (119). I teach “doing the unnecessary” by having one actor at a time go onstage and perform an unnecessary action, first singly and then in spontaneously determined pairs and groups. This practice is followed by a group improvisation with minimalist materials, which I randomly interrupt by calling “unnecessary time” during which students explode into a rush of the nonsensical action before I return them to minimal specificity. Doing the Unnecessary enlivens the performative moment and prepares the audience for the possibility that anything could happen, drawing on a central principle of Dada: “To future humans in the grip of inevitable crisis, Dada answers every time by agitation, humor, self-humor and revelation of absurdity” (Codrescu 53).

Composition 1: Haiku and the Distillation of Experience

Students’ first extensively rehearsed compositions utilize these aesthetic materials to construct performances in relation to a haiku poem of their own choosing, drawing on the poem’s imagery and economy of language.⁶ Rather than constructing a fictional scene to justify the text, students produce a *Distillation of Experience* that the poem specifically and singularly attempts to capture.

For instance, in “No One Is Ahead of His Time,” a performance created by undergraduate students in my Collaborative Performance course, students Bellamy Harden and Caroline Robinson selected a haiku by Jack Kerouac as their anchor text: “I went in the woods / to meditate — / it was too cold” (72). In a traditional staging, an actor might adopt a character for the speaker and then act out the action of the poem. However, in their performance, Bellamy and Caroline did neither of those things, never even speaking the poem’s text. Rather, accompanied by a soundtrack of canned nature sounds, they engaged in what amounted to a meditation competition, each of them finding new and unlikely positions in which to try to meditate. While many of their positions were ridiculous as they alternated between a glacial tempo and breakneck speed, the work never devolved into a shtick *about* meditating. In fact, their contortions were distinct enough from our idea of meditation, that



FIG. 1 Rachel Lewallen enacting the Drama of the Material in the Performance Collective's *Keinen Grund* (No Reason) at 2nd Floor Studios, Berlin, Germany, June 2011. (Photo: Yvonne Hübner.)

it only gradually emerged for the audience that meditation was even the act they were attempting to perform. In the culmination of the piece, Caroline carefully placed a chair upside down on top of another chair, which was itself standing on a wooden cube just large enough for the chair's legs to fit on. She then methodically ascended the structure and simply stood on the upside-down chair and breathed, looking at the audience for the remaining minute of the performance (fig. 2).

What these actors created was a nuanced and skillful Distillation of Experience. Absent a narrative frame or scene, they created the experience they had found in the poem: the difficulty of being at rest, at peace, and the ease with which we can give up on attempts to achieve that state. Brilliantly, the final moment found that the experience of equanimity, chased after for most of the performance, emerged only in the most unstable condition: standing on a precariously balanced, upside-down chair. This quality was not simply signified, but rather was produced, as actor and audience were finally able to be together in peace for a minute's duration.

The haiku performance draws on the multiple capacities developed in Axis 1: the materialist drama of formal elements, the interruptive and chaotic absurdity of Dada, and the Distillation of Experience that is produced through, rather than represented by, performance. In assessing these works, I look for performers' abilities to construct drama through each of these grammars, as well as to find the Story that emerges through their juxtaposition, simultaneity, progression, accumulation, and disruption. Can the performers trust the materials to adhere through their direct engagement with them? Can they confront the audience with their emphatic investment in them?



FIG. 2 Caroline Robinson attempts to meditate in “No One Is Ahead of His Time,” at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, May 2018. (Photo: Author.)

Axis 2: Dream Stories and Poetic (Il)logic

Axis 2 removes the brackets that contain meaning, so that the Drama of the Material may accrue symbolic value. This approach to meaning emphasizes the power of the autonomous image and the unconscious, guided by a study of the visual art and manifestos of surrealism. Fundamental to Axis 2 is that the Drama of the Material continues to guide the work. Specificity and investment in material form allow for the construction of images that are clear and strong enough that both actors and audience can discern in and project upon them unconscious and associational meaning.

The sea change with Axis 2 occurs with the construction of fictive narratives and characters, the incorporation of prose fiction, and the performative act of storytelling. These materials are assembled to work through a “Dream Story” or “Poetic (Il)Logic,” which emphasizes metaphor, image, association, the sonic constitution of language, and the emergence of a theme through the repetition and play of symbolic elements. While in the Drama of the Material, story was limited to the *logic* of material structure, these projects add the *(il)logic* of the dream. Like Salvador Dali’s melting clocks, shapes melt, durations extend and compress, distances expand and contract, and actions accelerate and decelerate—all in ways that exceed the bounds of realistic behavior.

The governing aesthetic for Axis 2 comes from surrealist artists' attempts to produce something more real than everyday life. With the allowance for fictions and representation to emerge in the work, we embrace that which is unrealistic to the nth degree: what could *not* happen in this particular way in everyday life. Thus Axis 2 requires working from intuition and creating from a place of "not knowing": not knowing why this image must be juxtaposed with that spoken text, why this song must follow that action. We enact the dream on its own terms, allowing the audience to serve as the performance's psychoanalyst, who might ask, "What is the performance's unconscious?"

Dream Logic fosters what the surrealist André Breton calls "the marvelous" (14)—a form of "convulsive beauty" that can be located "in things, it appears as soon as we manage to penetrate any object at all" (Mabille 248). Coaxed out of the everyday object, experience, or psyche, the marvelous affects both artist and spectator, as it "exercises an exalting effect only upon that part of the mind which aspires to leave the earth" (ibid.). In *Dream Stories*, the Drama of the Material's embrace of the brute force of worldly materiality meets the unworldly experiences of convulsive beauty, because "the marvelous" guides us to the sublime: "Let us not mince words: the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful" (Breton 14) (fig. 3).

Axis 2 focuses on the production of embodied images (both static and moving) through their Dream Logic structuring. The work of the American theatre director Robert Wilson serves as its primary case study, focusing particularly on his production of striking images and minutely scored choreography. Defining himself as primarily a "visual artist" who "think[s] spatially," Wilson explains that his productions' meaningfulness does not precede these visual choices, but instead emerges from them: "I do not have a message, what I do is architectural arrangement" (qtd. in Shevtsova 52). In Axis 2, student-performers learn to "architecturally arrange" the materials of Axis 1 in order to construct an imagistic encounter with the marvelous (and a marvelous encounter with the image). Following Wilson, actors not only inhabit the actuality of those materials, but frame them by embracing the artificiality of theatrical presentation. As Wilson explains, "[t]heatre for me is something totally artificial. If you don't accept it as something totally artificial, then it's a lie" (58). By leaning into the artificiality of theatricality, "the more artificial it becomes, the closer it can get to a truth" (ibid.). In the poetic (il)logic of the Dream Story, theatre's transformative power places its brute materiality in productive tension with its potential to signify.

Dream Story evolved from my training with Goat Island Performance Group, first in a 1999 summer course at New York University, and then ten years later as part of a residency I organized at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). The interaction of the marvelous, the material, and chance became apparent to me through doing their exercise "the impossible dance," originally developed to construct a "dance" from a series of "unperformable individual movements" for their 1998 performance piece *The Sea & the Poison* (Goulish 152). In the exercise, performers write a prompt of an unperformable movement, pass it to another performer, and then construct a movement sequence in which they perform the impossible task that they have received. This dance becomes fixed as choreography, with four individual impossible dances performed simultaneously in adjacent squares. The combination of structure and chance with the imagined impossible act often yields images of greater beauty than those that are intentionally created; they also enable the discovery of performance material with more complex and unexpected meaning than that which emerges from the intentional assembling of materials that we often associate with devised theatre.

Composition 2: Dream Story

Dream Story performances incorporate short pieces of prose fiction as sources for spoken text and imagery. Adding to the Drama of the Material, students construct their own stories from the play of associations discovered in the irresistible image and the encounter with the marvelous. They assemble snippets of text, gestures, and objects into a structure through constructions of



FIG. 3 Cameron Ayres, Tony Perucci, Rachel Lewallen, Peter Pendergrass, Lori Baldwin, Nic Anthony, and Chloe Keenan (l-r) in the Performance Collective's dream story, *Sterilize*, at Nightlight Bar and Club, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, November 2010. (Photo: Doreen Jakob.)

“threads”—connective materials to hold the piece together through their repetition or disappearance and reappearance. Propelled by the autonomous image, memorized texts serve as additional layers in and on the fabric of our image-based dream logic, and for the performance to operate in multiple, equivalent “languages” of text and image, each with its own integrity. The story text may be told in its entirety at a particular moment, interrupt the performance of the marvelous image, or appear at regular intervals to structure the piece.

Dream Story performances discover their “about-ness” through the process of their composition. Associational resonances of text are materialized as dynamic images of the marvelous, because the architecture of the performance site is, as Breton says, “perturbed” (qtd. in Caws 23). In one dream story performance, students incorporated the Dave Eggers story “The Battle Between,” which is nominally about a military battle that was “very good, just the best” (30). A student actor began the piece by running out from behind a campus building, ascending the fire escape. He then climbed out to shuffle along the building’s molding, clutching the wall with outstretched arms as he spoke the first lines of the story. As he reached the corner, our eyes were drawn upward by something in motion; it was a single watermelon, flying in an arc up and then down five stories to the pavement, where it crashed and split open in front of us. Then two more watermelons were launched and splattered on the ground in front of us. More and more watermelons arced upward and then down from the roof in quick succession, creating scattered mounds of red watermelon flesh on the brick pathway.

While the watermelons signified the bombs of Eggers’s fictional “very intense, hard-fought” battle (ibid.), they did not simply illustrate the story that had preceded their flight. Instead, they represented a new rhizome splitting off from the text of “The Battle Between,” borrowing from its narrative form. In the story, the narrator dispenses with that tale after only seven lines, informing the reader that they will “spend this next half page together” discussing “the outdoor shower, and the advantages thereof.” For the remainder of the story, the narrator walks the reader through a series of

instructions for experiencing an outdoor shower that can “make a broken woman whole,” culminating in the final lines, “Look up again at the water, still coming to you, all of the droplets giggling like babies. Let them fall. Now you understand why water falls, why children fall, why everything falls. Water falls so we can stand under, awaiting and undestroyed” (31). As audience members of this performance, we too looked up again at the water(melons) as they fell—falling for us to stand under them as a theatre audience does, awaiting and (un)destroyed.

In assessing Dream Story performances, I specifically attend to students’ ability to create this kind of synthesis, wherein the materiality of performance materials is also used as a means of representation. As is the case with the above performance, the strongest Axis 2 performances enable symbolic value by emphasizing the materiality of the materials, even more so than they had in Axis 1.

Axis 3: Becoming a Problem

Axis 3 introduces devising as an encounter with a pressing problem or question, drawing on the work of experimental theatre artists from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The approach notably shifts from the first two axes by adopting a more conscious and intentional confrontation with a thematic question. That question is not for the performance to answer, but to pose as a problem for the audience. As I ask of my students in response to these performances, “What does the performance want to know?”

Axis 3 draws on the works of theatre ensembles and collectives that are variously designated as “experimental theatre,” “performance theatre,” and “postdramatic theatre.” I employ a range of case studies from contemporary theatre artists who have addressed a problem or question in this open-ended way, such as the Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad, and Elevator Repair Service. Guided by the work of those ensembles, Axis 3 focuses on the relationship of the theatre artist to the theme, problem, question, or text, in which it is addressed in an “interrogative mood,” rather than in the didactic mode frequently associated with course-based devised performance.

For instance, at the conclusion of their 2009 residency at UNC, Goat Island staged the last two performances of its final work, an investigation into “last-ness,” *The Lastmaker*. Each sequence and simultaneous layer of material reckoned with the question of last-ness; for example, comedian Lenny Bruce’s last routine, the “last” of a shoe, the final minute of Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*. The question of last-ness itself lasted beyond the performance’s conclusion, because it did not offer the security of an answer to its question, but instead presented it as an open problem confronting the audience.

Similarly, in 600 HIGHWAYMEN’s recent work of participatory theatre, *The Fever*, co-directors Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone investigate the question of “community”: how one constructs a community, as well as what kind of ethics and responsibilities that entails. Audience members are asked to perform simple tasks alongside actors, in which their participation constructs the actuality of the question of community within a distinctly theatrical frame. When I recently attended a 2018 performance of *The Fever* at Carolina Performing Arts in Chapel Hill, actor Bryan Saner (formerly of Goat Island) entered the red-floored performance space and asked for an audience member to stand to the right of him and then for another to his left.⁷ Speaking to the audience, he asked simply, “Will you catch me as I fall?” then languidly dropped to the floor before the participants were able to catch him. He repeated this action a few more times with different participants, who each tried to catch him as he descended to the floor. This moment of the Drama of the Material works in relation to the key questions driving the performance: What does it mean to be responsible for another person? How do we meet or fail to meet this challenge in any specific instance?

Composition 3: *Becoming a Problem*

Working with a common text or set of texts to provide resonances and a dream story, the ensemble works in relation to a problem that emerges for it, which may be sociopolitical, existential, or the operations of the material world. However, the goal of the performance is not to resolve the problem, but to invite the audience into a dialogue about the question in order to ask it with greater profundity.

Text may be handled in myriad ways, although we continue to be propelled by a dream logic. As an accumulation upon the two preceding axes, the Axis 3 composition retains the emphatic materiality of Axis 1 and the imagistic play of the marvelous of Axis 2. However, now those aesthetic relations are put into service of a problem, which the performer allows to be seen and that they may even demand the audience to reckon with. My students have created works addressing such socially and politically charged themes as consumerism, surveillance, animal rights, and racial microaggressions. In each of these occasions, they resist the desire to communicate a clear and fixed message to the audience, instead asking such questions as: What does it mean to be defined as a consumer? What is the experience of being continuously watched? How do we reconcile eating meat, given what we know about the cruel treatment of animals bred for food? How is race (re)made in the everyday exchange? These problems may double-back on themselves, thematizing the material conditions of performance; for example, an actor being watched by their audience in the moment of reckoning with the condition of perpetual visibility in surveillance society.

For instance, in a collaboration with a group of doctoral students and local artists that I directed, the problem emerged first from the aesthetic challenge we had set for ourselves: How to “adapt” *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?*—a “novel” written entirely in questions by Padgett Powell. How does one genuinely ask a question in the contrived circumstance of a rehearsed and scripted work? As our devising process began to fail to cohere around a performable work, these problems were unexpectedly put into dialogue with other questions: What does it mean to fail? Can one fail well? Are we failing in the performance of failure? Are we failing to ask these questions of failure as we ask them in performance?

Assessing Axis 3 compositions is thus not to evaluate the clarity of their “messages,” but instead how they present their problem *as a problem* to and for the audience. How are students able to mobilize the Drama of the Material, Distillation of Experience, Dream Story, and marvelous image not to answer, but to revise their questions so that the *thing* of their problem is in each and every moment encountered in a manner that is unavoidably new (fig. 4).

Why The New Thing (Again)?

The three axes of The New Thing are designed as a progression, with Axis 1 creating a foundation for the actor to create drama from the actual materials of the performance situation, and Axis 2 stretching and twisting those materials to create surreal dreamscapes constructed with a poetic logic. And thus when the devising actor approaches the question-centered devising of Axis 3, they are equipped with both the material drama of the body in time and space as well as expansive imagery that is rooted in that materiality. Even so, the first two axes are not intended solely as preparatory exercises for the “real” work of devised theatre in Axis 3, but rather, by maintaining the integrity of each Axis, The New Thing teaches students how to engage every abstract idea, impossible vision, and thematic problem through the discovery of their materiality as *things*, problems to be defamiliarized as *new*. The New Thing aims to prepare actors to create in an interrogative mood, in which the materials of Axis 1, the marvelous imagery of Axis 2, and the problem-making of Axis 3 brings the actors and audience together in the shared experience of asking questions. Hopefully, this work can even help to sustain the vitality of theatre by keeping alive the questions, What is theatre made of? and What can theatre do?



FIG. 4 In the Performance Collective's *In an Interrogative Mood*, directed by Tony Perucci, Emma Nadeau confronts the audience with the problem of asking a question; in the background are Liam O'Neill, Susan Ryan, Elizabeth Melton, and Emily Anderson (l-r). Studio 6 Theater, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 2016. (Photo: Alex Maness.)

Tony Perucci is an associate professor of performance studies in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where his academic and artistic work examines interventionist performance, postmodern dance, experimental theatre, and performance art. He is a founding member of the Performance Collective, which creates original performance works for theatres, galleries, and alternative spaces. He has directed and co-created numerous original performance works, including *In an Interrogative Mood*; *Keinen Grund*; *The Activist*; *Eating Animals*; and *The Wooster Group's The Diary of Anne Frank*. He is the author of *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex* (2012) and *On the Horizontal: Mary Overlie and the Viewpoints* (forthcoming), both from the University of Michigan Press. His current book project, *Reality Frictions: Ruptural Performance, Impossible Theatre, and Plausible Indecidability*, investigates contemporary artistic works and other performative practices that willfully undermine the artistic frame of fact and fiction.

Notes

1. This emphasis is notable in the two issues of *Theatre Topics* dedicated to devised theatre from 2005 and 2016. While some writers do engage with the role of training, it is still generally considered as "introductory exercises in physical-theatre techniques" rather than an integrated training (Watkins 170).
2. I frequently teach *The New Thing* as a semester-long undergraduate course, variously called "Poetry in Performance," "Performance Composition," and "Collaborative Performance," offered in the performance studies concentrations of communication studies departments at California State University, Northridge and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I have also taught *The New Thing* in workshops for graduate students and professional actors in the United States and Europe.
3. See my "The New Thing (Third Manifesto), A Minor Gesture" for a more freewheeling version of these ideas.

4. For more on The Six Viewpoints as an aesthetic and political practice, see my “On Stealing Viewpoints” (2017) and “Dog Sniff Dog: Materialist Poetics and the Politics of ‘the Viewpoints’” (2015).
5. I originally called Axis 1 “The Drama of the Actual,” but was unsatisfied with the label, given the claims that *actual* makes on *the real*. At the suggestion of Kate Elswit, I have adopted the term *material*, which I appreciate because of the way *the material* references both a set of things and a characteristic of them (the materiality of the materials). Inspired by Daniel Sack’s description of the “anthropomorphism at work in the literal object” (111) in minimal art, I also use the phrase “the drama of the literal.” All three terms, however, are trying to get at the same condition.
6. Performance compositions are usually four-to-six or up to ten-to-fifteen minutes long; they can be assigned as site-specific or studio performances.
7. The role was originated by Tommer Peterson.

Works Cited

- Breton, André. “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924). Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969. 1–47. Print.
- Cage, John. “Four Statements on the Dance.” *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. Ed. Teresa Brayshaw and Noel Witts. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2014 [1939]. 128–38. Print.
- Caws, Mary Ann, ed. “Survey.” *Surrealism*. London: Phaidon, 2004. 11–47. Print.
- Codrescu, Andrei. *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2009. Print.
- Eggers, Dave. “The Battle Between.” *One Hundred and Forty Five Stories in a Small Box*. San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2007. 30–31. Print.
- Fried, Michael. “Art and Objecthood.” *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battcock. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968. 116–47. Print.
- Goulish, Matthew. “The Impossible (a Dance).” *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology, and Goat Island*. Ed. Stephen J. Bottoms and Matthew Goulish. New York: Routledge, 2007. 152–56. Print.
- Kerouac, Jack. *Book of Haikus*. New York: Penguin Poets, 2003. Print.
- Krauss, Rosalind. “Illusion and Allusion in Donald Judd.” *Minimalism*. Ed. James Meyer. New York: Phaidon, 2000 [1966]. 211–14. Print.
- Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2008. Print.
- Mabille, Pierre. “The Mirror of the Marvellous.” *Surrealism*. 248–49. Print.
- Morrow, Susanna, et al. “Preparing to Devise.” *Theatre Topics* 19.2 (2009): 125–38. Print.
- Overlie, Mary. *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory and Practice*. Billings, MT: Fallon P, 2016. Print.

- Perucci, Tony. "Dog Sniff Dog: Materialist Poetics and the Politics of 'the Viewpoints.'" *Performance Research* 20.1 (2015): 105–12. Print.
- . "The New Thing (Third Manifesto), A Minor Gesture." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Blog*, 31 Oct. 2016, <http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/2016/10/the-new-thing-third-manifesto-a-minor-gesture/>.
- . "On Stealing Viewpoints." *Performance Research* 22.5 (2017): 113–24. Print.
- Rainer, Yvonne. "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called 'Parts of Some Sextets,' Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965." *Tulane Drama Review* 10.2 (1965): 168–78. Print.
- . "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A." *Minimal Art*. 263–73. Print.
- Rose, Barbara. "Abc Art." *Minimalism*. 214–17. Print.
- Sack, Daniel. *After Live: Possibility, Potentiality, and the Future of Performance*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2015. Print.
- Shevtsova, Maria. *Robert Wilson*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Watkins, Beth. "Working from Scratch: The Pedagogic Value of Undergraduate Devising." *Theatre Topics* 26.2 (2014): 169–80. Print.

