

Editorial:

Transversal Acting

By Chris Marshall & Bryan Reynolds

Generated from the social, cognitive, and performance theories, aesthetics, and critical methodologies of transversal poetics,¹ transversal acting emerged during the Transversal Theater Company's rehearsals of its productions over the last four years,² and continues to develop through the ongoing Transversal Acting Workshop.³ Our approach begins from the premise that vulnerabilities, surrenders, and slippages can be more productive than control, domination, and regulation. Moreover, we posit that events, rather than narratives or histories, most profoundly define experience, however incomprehensible they may appear without ready contextualizations or explanations. It is also a premise of transversal poetics that vulnerabilities, surrenders, and slippages only ever occur in a universe of interconnectivity, where everything - all things, ideas, and forces - exist processually in dynamic interrelationality: to varying degrees of contact, intensity, and spacetime, everything is actively connected to everything else. This, we believe, describes the universe in which we live, experience, and perform. Hence, no thing, idea, person, character, narrative, or event ever fully individuates or separates, or becomes external, autonomous, or absolute, within or from the environments in which it exists, is situated, and through which it travels and metamorphoses. For transversal acting, it is moments of engagement with the environments that affect and mobilize the actor, and not just or predominately the other way around, although these processes are always already interconnected. Keenly aware and responsive, the actor manifests performance agency through the in-between, transversal spacetimes of actions, interfaces, articulations, and departures. The actor willfully frees herself of

control so that unpredictability can occur and she can learn to navigate the limits and thresholds of subjectivities. It is here that eventualizations are powerfully achieved.

From the transversal poetics of which it is a key constituent, transversal acting adapts and develops the investigative-expansive mode of analysis (“i.e. mode”). Yet, in the case of acting, the emphasis has less to do with meditation or research, per se, than with presence, becomings, comings-to-be, and eventualizations. Ultimately, transversal acting is a celebration of the transversality that makes possible momentous discoveries and emergent experiences, changes, and events, whether these occur on or off the stage. With focus on processual situatednesses, absent-present spacetimes, and future presences rather than the present, the pasts, or what can be restored or perfected, the transversal actor moves within and beyond the parameters of typical methods for executing and comprehending performance. In flowing, non-self-conscious collaboration with environments, she does this to foster events that crystallize and, ideally, eventualize as singularities within multiplicities of configurations, occurrences, and potentialities. The momentous discoveries that can happen through combined processual situatednesses, becomings-x, and givings-way to comings-to-be-x generate eventualizations that are irreducible to the conditions of their emergences. Transversal acting celebrates and capitalizes on the fact that discoveries cannot be reproduced, that is, re-performed, either exactly or with the same effects; identically repeated or restored behavior is never an objective. In other words, just as all subject matters cannot be accurately dissected, discretely analyzed, and totalized into an independent, hermetic, or coherent whole, transversal acting stresses the radicality of the relations among all things - audience and theater environments as well as actors and characters - that engender the events and, by extension, the wonders that can be created through performances. These relations are usually affective (multisensory, combining thoughts

and feelings, as well as proprioception) and they always have to do with material interactions, at the very least. Hence, transversal acting quests after emergent eventualizations that are brilliantly irreducible to the circumstances and apparent structures of their production.

To begin with, transversal acting locates performances in eventual presences by ways of a philosophy that has little to do with being, character formation or metaphysics, but instead with the situations, becomings, and comings-to-be through which all existence is negotiated; more obviously, of course, for humans in the construction, identification, to be sure the eventualizations of subjectivity and consciousness. When a subjective experience crystallizes, an eventualization transpires, but also quickly expires, although never completely: eventually ephemeral, its effects, remnants, and traces continue, however influentially, to radiate, inform, and produce. Transversal acting is especially focused on not only the preparation for such emergent eventualizations, but also on their impact, duration, and legacies; their interventions, infiltrations, and subversions. An event occurs, as one singularity in spacetime among infinite possibilities, and if this event is captured - embodied, cognized - it involves at least one, yet usually many, momentous discoveries within the respective spacetimes of the actor, character, and audience.

Transversal acting is all about revelations and the forging of unforgettable memories that such momentous discoveries precipitate. At the same time it capitalizes on the impossibility of consistent or rational memory, of memorial reconstruction, on the fact that restoration can only ever be a fantasy of a person or people who, like all people, necessarily operate under the physical and ideological, and thus the subjective constraints imposed on them by society. As a means out of the progressive quagmires that society can so easily impose on the subject, and therefore the performer, transversal acting embraces mediation as an inescapable yet

empowering reality; it is empowering precisely because of, and not in opposition to, the inevitability of mediation. Nothing comes to us without mediation of some kind, whether social, biological, or physical; and mediation is never pure, that is, unmediated, and consequently variation and change are always inherent. Becomings are material, emotional, and conceptual transformations that are willfully accomplished, and comings-to-be involve similar kinds of transformations that occur passively or unwittingly. Both processes necessitate mediation of stimuli, but the former signifies more willful and agential participation in the assimilations of the stimuli while the latter indicates less, if any at all. It is while engaged in these processes that slippage and transversality can most easily be achieved, and where the transversal actor seeks to exist.

Transversal theory maintains that people occupy subjective territories, their own as well as those of others through various kinds of sharing and overlappings. Subjective territories are multidimensional, combined conceptual, emotional, and physical ranges of experience; which is to say, they form the filters through which, whereby, and how people experience, whether personally, empathetically, or collectively. Although a person's individual subjective territory is defined by both the means of their socialization within a given society and their subjective positionality as a result of this conditioning that necessarily reflects the society, its boundaries continue to be permeable and fluid insofar as imagination is capable of exceeding social, biological, and physical constraints and mutability is possible for all things. Where there is overlap among subjective territories, such as a common interest in making theater, there is lamination. In effect, official territories organize in the interest of maintaining this common ground. This often involves the forming of clubs, institutionalizing a purpose, establishing rules, negotiating with competing interests, suppressing or eliminating opposition, working relationally

with the power structures within which making theater is situated. These power structures operate on micro and macro levels, from governmental organizations to families to gangs, and so on, all of which depend on certain sociopolitical conductors - people and institutions with authority - to support them. A typical goal or symptom of this state machinery, defined broadly as networked forces of coherence or state power, is to maintain the infrastructure and monitor the limits prescribed for subjective territories. Contrary to this process, and even though, historically, theater has not always done this, we believe that making theater is, most of all, about moving both with agency and transversality outside of the parameters of any state machinery, of the society in which a particular theater expresses as well as in relation to conventions on which any style of theater comes to depend and thereby ossifies. Consistent with transversal theory, then, transversal acting understands both characters and actors as occupying subjective territories, and, accordingly, it works to harness the subjunctive and transversal powers of mobility and change that make possible movement beyond an individual subjective territory into the subjective territories of others, whether of characters, actors, or audience members through becomings and comings-to-be.

Hence, we posit transversal acting technique as a dynamic mode by which to train actors and audiences, for we believe that transversal spacetime can be achieved within the interconnectedness among the subjectivities and consciousnesses of actors, characters, and audiences through interfaces and communication among their respective and coinciding subjective territories. From the processes of investigative-expansiveness and becomings/comings-to-be, we extrapolate that our work as actors is productively defined by events and momentous discoveries. Put differently, if we define character as individual (physical, emotional, spiritual) yet multi-dimensionally situated, only ever created through interrelatedness,

we can experience the definition of characters and relationships during the rehearsal process, as well as during performance, as a series of events and momentous discoveries that continuously create and transform the individual as she relates to the enviroing subjective spaces, her own subjectivity from moment to moment and the relationships that exist onstage as well as between stage action and audience. The moments must define the actor, and not the actor the moments. In transversal acting, we eschew traditional notions of self-consciously created character (often referred to as “becoming the character” as opposed to our preferred phrase, “becomings-character”); for who is the character other than an amalgamation of the reactionary and behavioral responses to the spacetimes - narrativized, fragmented, elusive, ineffable, etc. - in which the actor situates herself? Transversal acting strives to purposefully generate conditions for slippages and heightened sensory responses to each moment that occurs in the life of the character, whether that is in rehearsal or performance. Transversal acting incorporates and mobilizes the idea that we are never the same person, as individualized and also in relation to others, from moment to moment or even from microsecond to microsecond, and thus either are characters; therefore, we cannot ever “find the character” that many actors and directors seek.

The character is a product, a blend, a plurality, a relational force that is absolutely and consistently undergoing becomings and comings-to-be within the spacetimes of associations, grammar, and story. As in everyday social worlds outside of institutionalized theater making, actors must remain open to each moment and recognize the power of the potentially more dangerous, because uncontrolled, comings-to-be-x; this is, of course, in addition to the obvious advantages to being able to design, initiate, and develop becomings-x as events unfold, relationships begin and transform, laughter and tears are unleashed, hands are touched and held, and murders and joys happen. We believe that through the intentional resignation of

intellectualized, self-conscious performance and “character work” that defines much twentieth-century post-Stanislavski theories of acting, the actor will ascertain an ease in performance that is fashioned by others, events, and processual developments that are launched by expressive listening, nurtured through investigative-expansive modalities, and climaxed in momentous discoveries. Through transversal acting, all of this can occur not only during the various spacetimes of performance and theatrical environment, which include audience, actors, and design, but also, by extension, beyond the theater’s walls in the praxis of everyday life.

Excessive Means

To accomplish its goals, transversal acting pursues forays into, but never permanent occupation of, transversal territory through a series of exercises that cultivate heightened affective relations brought on by indulgence and exploration of fatigue and its relationships to sharpened reaction and release of self-conscious performance. According to transversal poetics, transversal territory is a multidimensional spacetime encompassing, among other known and unknown qualities, the nonsubjectified regions of individuals’ conceptual-emotional range; it exists outside of an individual’s subjective territory and is not demarcated by the subjective territories of others. Typically, transversal territory acts as a catalyzing and transitional state from which radically new experiences, momentous discoveries, subversive mobilizations, and eventualizations can forcefully occur.

Because we believe that transversal movements and the preferred comings-to-be are most effectively accomplished through both prepared slippages, when the conditions but not the slippages themselves are orchestrated, and correlated heightened awareness based on reactions

(such as fear and pleasure), we often begin our training workshops, from introductory to advanced levels, with the premise, indeed a prerequisite, that our actors should be fatigued. Sometimes we require actors to not sleep for twenty-four or even forty-eight hours prior to a workshop. For instance, think of the last time you were exhausted and did not allow yourself to sleep: you may have entered a state of euphoric reactivity, colloquially termed “punchiness.” When we are “punchy,” we emote almost reflexively; we are acutely aware of certain sights, sounds, imaginings, reflections, and situations to which we may be oblivious when adequately rested or simply a little less tired. We may laugh at a particular event that would not otherwise be funny, which is reactive and potentially a powerful slippage, especially in that laughter is already indicative of a weakened emotional state, typically signifying loss of control at times of high engagement with others, whether live or virtual, actual or imaginary. Moreover, we may also find a humorous situation even funnier when the initial laughter causes a friend to snort or spit up because of his weakened physical condition. Recall that in transversal acting such manifested weaknesses are never construed negatively. To be sure, it is our hypothesis that, although normally resisted, these manifestations often take us down new pathways, investigative-expansively, increasing our susceptibility to subsequent events that further define the moment (and the next, and the next, and so on), thereby changing relationships and defining associated people and environments in immediate and future spacetimes. Mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion become primary states insofar as we channel both body and mind down avenues of intense engagement, even defensive alertness; this disallows the “laziness” or “delirium” that sleep deprivation often precipitates without losing the reactive edginess that so provocatively characterizes exhaustion. Simply put, the actor should prepare for the work by resisting rest and allowing oneself to become as tired as safely possible.

The Work

Once this condition is achieved, the work can begin in earnest. We intend to describe here an introductory series of exercises which are foundational to transversal acting or “the mode,” and are thus by no means a comprehensive representation of it. Many of the exercises are adapted from other styles of actor training, and so they may be familiar, in some incarnation, to our readers. Our intention is not to present a workbook of “how-to” or a sequenced coaching analysis. Rather it is to simply describe the exercises - some recycled, some adapted, and others new - and how each informs and embodies transversal acting, both theory and mode (which are, like all things, the products of diverse influences, even if assembled and presented within the context of the theory outlined above).

We typically begin each session with some physically exhaustive game playing, involving a specific goal and an external object. This wants to be simple: soccer, keeping a ball in the air amongst all members of a group, relay races with an object passed amongst team members, etc. Game and sport that involve a specific physical goal rather than an intellectual one (such as counting games or name games, longtime favorites of the conventional acting class), seek to “externalize” the actor, causing her to focus both outside of herself and intensely on the task at hand, while in the process fatiguing the body even further, bonding her to the group, and increasing awareness and reactivity.

Exhausted, externalized, and prone to slippage, we turn our awareness to expanding the sensory. The body should be tired, alert, energized, and highly sensitive to the environment now as each member of the class finds space on the floor to lie on the back and simply breathe. Breath

is an essential part of our work as, borrowing from many religious exercises, sports training, and acting methods, we understand that it not only soothes but also focuses and reinvigorates the body and mind from moment to moment; this is indeed the basis for facilitating eventualization and subjunctive exploration: we visualize breath as the vehicle for momentous discovery and flow. We encourage actors to “breathe in”: environment, relationship, event, emotion. On the back, we are able to visualize breath entering and exiting through each point of contact with the floor, through each point of the body open to the space, even emanating from others in the room; actors should breathe in the entire spacetime of existence, the irreducible context of each moment that aligns itself with each breath. Breath is our way of encouraging the what-ifs of subjunctive space and the processual, eventual becomings and comings-to-be which delineate transversal power. It allows us to always redefine, to never retreat, to follow new pathways investigative-expansively as we seek to come-to-be in each new moment, with each new breath.

Actors are now open, armed with a defined and tangible metaphor for the beginnings of momentous discovery (their breath), to simply listen to the sounds in the room, and only those sounds. Successively, we then expand the auditory awareness to include the building, the halls, the immediate vicinity; the space immediately outside; the space across the city, across the country, across the world; and, finally, back to only the room. In the discussion following, it usually becomes apparent that actors combine actual auditory experience with imaginative exploration; for instance, they know that at a given moment there *might* be a car starting in front of a building across town and so they *listen* to it, but, illogically or subjunctively, this car might roar like a lion. This blending of reality and imagination is vital to our work as transversal theorists: we can expand beyond the given to the what-ifs of the subjunctive, and within that territory find powerful transformations and becomings.

The last exercise we intend to describe here is intentionally messy, open, and without objective form; as such, it proves somewhat difficult to define. It is precisely within this realm, however, of definition-less, investigative-expansive exploration as theorists and practitioners, rather than dissective-cohesive formulators, that we are most susceptible, and likely to follow the unknown pathways of the subjunctive, and come-to-be in ways that we had not planned or considered. At this point in the work, we look to take the alert/fatigued, sensitized, sensually aware, imaginative actor and thrust her into another's territory to take part in what Jerzy Grotowski termed "sharing." The exercise is simple to describe in physical terms: two actors occupy a space of no more than two feet apart (preferably closer) and focus on each other's eyes or face (in more advanced versions we use three, then four actors together). However, this is where the simplicity of the exercise gives way to the complex in order for changes to happen, for relationships through events to occur, for agential impulses to slip into the transversal. We stress in these moments the act of *seeing* rather than looking (like *listening* as opposed to simply hearing). In our lives, we look all the time, but we often do not see. Here, we define seeing as the active, investigative-expansive, sensually-heightened, emotionally open slippage that occurs when one chooses to engage with, process, and perhaps become or come-to-be, typically empathetically but also sympathetically or mimetically, "x." When we use our eyes (or simply *look*) on a daily basis, even onstage, we are not seeing. We are operating most often from the powerful, the impulsive, the self-serving, where a self-derived, planned, and controlled event is without spontaneous or uncontrolled follow-through and fugitive exploration. Seeing, on the other hand, or what we might call momentous seeing, necessitates constant and intentional release of impulse, in favor of reactive, processual, eventual discovery in order to pursue any open avenue of communication and search for new and externalized (as opposed to internally

deliberated) events by which to identify the next relatable moment. We follow-through, never disengage, and welcome momentous comings-to-be. Events define the actor; the actor does not define events.

Thus, the only rules for this exercise are that the actors must stay in active, engaged, eye-contact, and that they see rather than look. In this way, moments can distinguish relationships and characters, events can crystallize emotion, and impulses without follow-through give way to flows of discovery. In the beginning, we often work with the entire group engaged, to minimize self-consciousness and performative contrivances, and then re-explore the audience relationship as we all watch one group continue, and conclude with a discussion. We often find that actors will begin with a cadre of impulses (they have been copiously trained by others in the construction of the impulse), but have little or no follow-through or release of control into fugitive exploration. This requires much more seeing.

We should pause here to clarify a point that may be creeping into the minds of some for whom power and action or objective are large parts of acting theory. By suggesting intentional release of impulse and giving over to slippage and momentous discovery, we are by no means implying that actors become weak or muddled in their choices. First of all, we recognize that ours is an advanced mode of training that assumes that actors can make choices and are strong arbiters of active relationships onstage. We must also acknowledge that each human, and certainly each powerful actor, is a being who quite naturally possesses agency and is responsible for his or her actions in the world, and thereby his or her relationships. What we seek to train, and what we hope comes to exist within the transversal theatrical realm, is actors and audiences who will abandon the limits of such impulsive training tools - that have defined their subjective territories - and learn to expand, to become explorers for whom the powerful, “character-driven,”

well-reasoned active choice is never enough. We hope to inspire actors and audiences to choose to become open to new and unexplored pathways and changes and, by extension, comings-to-be that can only serve to release power over to the transversal, the unexpected, the subjectively reconfiguring from the planned and canned selfish constraints of the non-transversal and officially sanctioned.

While this brief essay is far from a complete catalogue of the work we are developing, it serves as a foundational prologue to transversal acting. We also utilize a number of other techniques, a few of which we would like to mention here in this introduction to our approach. Contact improvisation is especially helpful in our work, since it is a dance methodology that encourages combining physical territories and vocabularies to create relationships in spacetime, both naturalistic and conceptual, that seek flow and discovery without stoppage or agential control. In this work, we seek to expand down from the eyes to encourage kinaesthetic awareness and investigative-expansive, fugitive exploration in and between our alert/fatigued bodies. We also work with a given text to explore and expound on eventualizations and how they can lead to new trajectories for characters and relationships even within established storylines. We sometimes run a scene using only seeing and contact, leaving open the form to the extent that only the story of the scene remains, however loosely established, and then bring text in meaningfully and quite powerfully surrounding one major event in the scene: a kiss, slap, glance, etc. We find that remaining open, without text as a crutch, necessitates seeing, following, exploring, rather than recitation. This exercise works just as well with a first staging as it does with a stale scene that has become devoid of inter-relationality and momentous discovery.

Drawing from the investigative-expansive mode set forth in transversal poetics, we do not seek to absolutely define or codify a method by which individuals relate - or “act” - since this

would counter the premise we hope to exemplify. Transversal acting is processual, and the definitions come by way of events and explorations within the given contexts of the theatrical spacetimes we create.

Chris Marshall is a professional actor, director, and teacher. His recent directorial project, “with their eyes: september 11th, the view from a high school at ground zero” at the Chance Theater, was an *LA Times* Critic’s Choice. He has acted at numerous regional theatres throughout the US and abroad, including the Utah and Colorado Shakespeare Festivals, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, A Contemporary Theatre, Aurora Theatre Company, American Players Theatre, and the Disk Theater in Prague, in roles from Romeo to Caliban; he has also been seen on the television show “Frasier.” Marshall has taught at Middlebury College and Sage Hill School (Newport Beach), is a member of both Actors Equity Association and Screen Actors Guild, and holds an MFA in Acting from UC Irvine. He performed as a lead actor in Transversal Theater’s recent production of Bryan Reynolds’ play *Blue Shade*, which toured the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania. He will be directing the next Transversal Theater project, Reynolds’ play *Lumping in Fargo*, for the 2008 Gdansk Shakespeare Festival in Poland.

Bryan Reynolds is Professor, Chancellor’s Fellow, and Head of Doctoral Studies in Drama and Theatre at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of *Transversal Enterprises in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Fugitive Explorations* (2006), *Performing Transversally: Reimagining Shakespeare and the Critical Future* (2003) and *Becoming Criminal: Transversal Performance and Cultural Dissidence in Early Modern England* (2002); coeditor, with William N. West, of *Rematerializing Shakespeare: Authority and Representation on the Early Modern English Stage* (2005) and coeditor, with Donald Hedrick, of *Shakespeare Without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital* (2000). Reynolds is also a playwright and cofounder of the Transversal Theater Company. Recent plays of his include *It’s A Mystery*, *Gotta Like ‘Em*, *Unbuckled*, *Woof*, *Daddy*, *Railroad*, and *Blue Shade*, the last four of which were toured by Transversal Theater to Romania (June 2004), Poland (April 2005), Romania (May/June 2006), and Poland, Czech Republic, and Romania (May/June and November 2007), in addition to runs in California and New York. His new play, *Lumping in Fargo*, which collages several Shakespeare plays, will be performed at the 2008 Gdansk Shakespeare Festival. Reynolds is also co-General Editor, with Elaine Aston, of a book series in theatre and performance studies, *Performance Interventions*, from Palgrave Macmillan. Reynolds’s next book, *Transversal Subjects: From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida*, will be out from Palgrave Macmillan in 2009. Written with Chris Marshall, the current book project from which the present article is excerpt is tentatively titled, *Transversal Acting: A Mode for the Twenty-First Century*.

Notes

¹ Transversal poetics was developed by Bryan Reynolds, often in collaboration with others, in a number of publications since the mid 1990s. See: “The Devil’s House, ‘or worse’: Transversal Power and Antitheatrical Discourse in Early Modern England,” *Theatre Journal* 49:2 (May 1997); with Joseph Fitzpatrick, “The Transversality of Michel de Certeau: Foucault’s Panoptic Discourse and the Cartographic Impulse,” *Diacritics* 29:3 (Fall 1999); *Becoming Criminal: Transversal Performance and Cultural Dissidence in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); *Performing Transversally: Reimagining Shakespeare and the Critical Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and *Transversal Enterprises in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Fugitive Explorations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

² The Transversal Theater Company was co-founded by Bryan Reynolds, Douglas-Scott Goheen, and Lonnie Alcaraz in 2003, all Professors of Theater at the University of California, Irvine. Transversal Theater produces plays written by Reynolds. In addition to runs in California and New York, Transversal Theater regularly brings productions to Europe. In 2004, they brought their production of *Unbuckled* to Romania, where they performed at the Andrei Muresanu Theatre in Sfintu Gheorghe, the Ariel Theatre in Tirgu Mures, The National Theatre in Cluj, and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival. In 2005, they brought their production of *Woof, Daddy* to Poland’s Rampa-Teatr Na Targowku in Warsaw, Teatr Polski-Malarnia in Poznan, and Teatr Kana in Szczecin. In 2006, they brought *Railroad* to Romania’s National Theatre in Cluj and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival. In 2006, they brought *Blue Shade* to Divadlo DISK, Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) in Prague, and to Poland’s Teatr 77 in Łódź, Teatr

Modjeska in Legnica, and Teatr Lalek in Wrocław. And in 2008, they will be performing in the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival, with Reynolds' newest play *Lumping in Fargo*.

³ For information on the Transversal Acting Workshop, see:

<http://transversalacting.blogspot.com/>.