

My (Short) Life in the Theater
from the January 2006 issue of Communication Arts

I didn't want to be an actor, I wanted to learn things.

“Youth is a country. I used to live there. Its inhabitants can't wait to migrate. Its exiles long to return.” Allan Seely, *The Brainfever Bird*.

Long ago, just as I entered that featureless desert called After College, I wandered up to the open door of an empty theater. Inside was chaos. I asked what was happening and someone told me that they were getting ready to open in three weeks. “Help us,” he said, so I did. And for the next two years I lived at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven.

I was enchanted at once, but my learning really began when the apprentices, of which I was one, were given an acting class (in lieu of pay). In this class we learned shape shifting and transformation. The teacher would tell us “Be a lion, a monster, a child, be a Fear. Speak to us with your back. Run yelling through a space and change it.”

This was so much better than college. I'd never run yelling through the classrooms there. In college I studied other's knowledge, not my own.

In theater I saw at once that college wasn't going to help me. But everything I needed for transforming myself was already in me, though I certainly didn't remember having learned it. If I needed to find an old crone, or a monster or a magician or a wind, a young boy or a troubled heart, I'd just think of them and there they'd be. If I needed to be someone who was lost and didn't know what to do, I knew just what to do.

Best of all, if I needed someone who was my complete opposite, there he'd be, with me in an instant. You can learn a lot from someone who is nothing like you, especially if they're you. I, who never seemed angry, could find fury and become it. Then I could take it off like a costume.

But growing up always seems to involve setting magic aside. After my first year the theater offered me the job of Production Stage Manager, and managing just seemed so adult that I took it. And I began scheduling rehearsals, running shows, attending production meetings. It was a capital-J job that went on for 6 days a week, 12 hours a day. It was still great, but although I was near creativity, I wasn't creating myself. I'd lost that magic...at 25.

So photography, when I found it, was a grace. I didn't need to organize anything to do it. Quite the opposite. And photography set me squarely into the real world while lifting my imagination into the air. It was the perfect form for me.

Until it wasn't. Until it stopped expanding me and began to be...a limitation. Through some mysterious devolution I found myself managing again instead of exploring; jobs, clients, employees, a studio. And when I went out to shoot on my own, it was as though I took an invisible client long. This client wanted his photo, just like all the others. The client was me, the Photographer, full of ambitions and plans.

I realized this one day when I walked into a tiny mountain church in southern Mexico. There were sounds—worshippers chanting the soft tones of Tzotzil—candle flames like spirits in the foggy light, the smell of the pine needles strewn on the floor. And I looked around and thought...‘Hey, where’s the photograph here?’ I was so lost in photography that I missed the magic.

Oh well, it happens.

How lucky for me, then, that I had discovered the antidote long before I needed it. I’d gotten it back in that theater, though I hadn’t known it at the time. Here’s how it evolved:

I had been asked to teach. And because I’d never studied photography, the only assignments I could come up with were adapted from my early theater days, exercises that took the class directly to that moment of awareness and seeing, but instead of making characters we made pictures. And then we talked about photography.

So when I realized I had become too much the photographer, I knew enough to take some of my own medicine. I began to focus on just seeing things, but without the camera. I returned to writing, poetry and fiction, and my writing got better... and so did my photography.

This approach of using other disciplines to provoke seeing worked so well that I incorporated it into subsequent classes at the New School, ICP, and the Maine and Santa Fe workshops. I brought in a poet, a tai chi teacher, a musician, a choreographer, and, very notably, an actor. The participants set photography aside and practicing awareness. Then they made photographs.

One of my guests was the actor and director Alan Arkin, who led us in a morning of improvisations. That morning blew me open. The work we did was concrete and immediate, and it led right up to that timeless, dimensionless moment of creation where the photographer disappears so the artist can work.

People say that art is “about ideas”, but making it is not. Ideas may manifest and clarify afterward, but making it is rooted in the concreteness of doing. (“No ideas but in things,” said William Carlos Williams.)

Each of Alan’s exercises began with a very simple thing to do and nothing else. Throw a ball, build a house, start a car. We didn’t do anything meaningful or thoughtful, and yet meaning and thought emerged in the work easily and naturally.

Still, a taste of something is not a practice. In my workshops we were opening ways into creativity, but I knew that unless the openings were marked and claimed by consistent practice they would heal itself shut.

So I began to wonder –what would happen if I took one of the creative disciplines I tasted and really dug into it over time. I wanted to get beyond Aha! and of course there was only one way.

By this time Alan was teaching a week-long workshop in improvisation several times a year around the country. I signed up, and in April of 2004 I went to Austin to see what I could discover in a whole week of work.

Austin was an earthquake.

Here’s what I wrote in my notebook just after the class:

I have just returned from an enchanted country. I am hanging around at the border—no other travelers—rummaging through my thoughts, then stopping and glancing over at where I’ve come from. I can’t see anything there. My sadness gives an odd comfort, proof that something happened, proof that I can feel.

Something had happened indeed.

At the beginning I was nervous. I assumed the other students would be actors, and thus “good,” while I would be an amateur and “bad”. I would have to stand up and do something outrageous in front of a room full of people who could yell or declaim or cry or foam at the mouth. I knew I would fail.

I didn’t fail. I learned.

For one thing, there were only a few actors in the class. There were therapists, a doctor, some writers, a construction guy, and an 80-year-old belle who was giving herself a birthday present, “something different.” And the few actors were there to learn, not to show off.

And, thank God, I never had to “be creative”. Each exercise began with something simple and concrete task—build a house, order a meal, throw an ever-changing ball around, start a stalled car—that gave us something to focus on and took us by specifics to the real work that lay behind it.

The real work was to really listen to my partners and myself, with ears and eyes and heart and body and imagination, hear completely what they were doing, and then join with them. If I did that I knew just what to do. Their work was the same. Each set-up that Alan gave us was a hint for a dance. We just had to find it and dance it.

Just be and do. Every time someone insisted on taking things in some oblique direction, the exercise ground to a halt. Alan called it “playwriting.” But if we all just committed to listening and doing, we knew exactly what to do. It was the difference between trying to look like something and just being something. Again and again Alan said, “Don’t do anything interesting.”

So, no acting.

Someone said most actors learn to act by watching other actors. That’s true of photographers too, and writers and painters and also of people who are not artists at all. We have all derived a set of cultural givens, of responses that we mime. Hurt (frown your face, slump), anger (stalk around, yell, scowl), vulnerability (soften the face, kind of like in Hurt, maybe a cowed smile), etc. etc. It’s there in soap opera acting, in bad poems, in country music...and in lots of advertising. (And in photographs that are chiefly about other photographs...my own included.) The trick is to get past those imitated responses, and if we do it even has a chance of being Art.

This was just what I’d come here to do, scrub the already-thought responses out of me and find a way to simply be present and aware. If I could do it on my feet, with no camera, perhaps I could bring it into photographic seeing. I was sure it would work.

It did. It does.

It’s a bit hard to prove that if you write a good poem your photography gets better. It wouldn’t hold up in a doctoral defense, but the opened eye just sees more, and whether you write it down, photograph it, sing it, or just walk down the street in this state of awareness, you know it.

So that’s where I was, learning to give up my control. Photography, when I first found it, was like a runaway horse that took me to places I had never imagined. Now I was trying to teach the horse to run away again. And I’d found a way to do it.

So now that I had the tool, was I done with acting? Not on your life. Having taken this class, and having digested the experience, I wanted more. Not more acting, but more of the awareness and aliveness it brought me.

So I was like a ripe peach and ready to fall when I read a flyer posted on a bookstore in New York announcing a class by Anthony Vincent Bova, the East Coast colleague of a West Coast acting teacher called Eric Morris. It sounded radical, exhilarating and scary. Good! I was up for radical.

I went to the class, and immediately noticed the difference. This was New York, and these were New York Actors. They looked serious...real serious. Lots of dark intensity. I was going to look like a monkey, I knew it.

And of course the first thing we had to do was lie on the floor and make primal sounds...like... Oh, God, my worst fear realized...monkeys! But I did it, and so did everyone else. And it worked! I mean, it was rather like clearing your throat, except that it cleared out the kind of self-canceling tensions that accumulate in the mind and body.

We went on to do a series of exercises, and even when we went solo in front of the group we were never out there alone. Time and again people made incredibly brave choices, bringing parts of their own lives out into the process and using them to make powerful small performances. There was never a sense of competition to be the best actor, to appear be the most open, or anything else. The people who'd intimidated me supported each other in everything we did. I don't have to tell you that this doesn't happen in many areas of life.

A few months later I got a chance to do a workshop with Eric Morris himself. By this time I could lie on the floor and groan no problemo, and lots more besides. After doing my scene, Morris looked at me for a long moment and said, "So do you want to do this?" And I thought—Do I want to try to get an agent? Do I want to go to cattle call auditions? Do I want to wait by the phone to hear if I got the part of a pair of singing underpants in a TV commercial?

And I said, "I don't want to be an actor, I just want to learn things. I want to stay awake."

And what about afterward? Were my photos better the next week?

In fact, I really didn't feel like taking any. I just walked around the streets feeling the whole force of person after person that I passed, an entire hit of their lives. It was almost too much, and I was afraid that if I tried to take this awareness right back to photography I'd murder it.

But a few months later I went to Cairo and did a series of portraits of refugees from Sudan. I wanted to see if I could capture something of these people's lives in a different way. I didn't want to show fleeing mobs or feeding lines, murdered cattle, or razed villages. Instead, I just gazed into their faces, and then made pictures of what I saw there. And I know they are some of the strongest work I've ever done. I have no doubt that their strength comes out of my theater work. Not the specifics of pretending to start a car or lying on the floor groaning, but out of waking up, setting photography aside to see what was there.

(I'm leaving out a description of my work with Viewpoints, another kind of training method for theater people, because it is indescribable. I could only demonstrate it, and to do that I'd have to do something like climbing on a chair and then tumbling off it. It is very kinetic, powerful, and not at all verbal. Sorry.)

For years I have been the apostle of trying different areas of art in order to wake up the artistic instincts. Now I've gone further into theater than usual, and the deeper I go, the more I find myself.

Further proof of the process comes to me when I teach. My workshops have always aimed to be more about creativity than photography. And last Spring I spent a full day playing theater games with some of the faculty at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Teachers there maintain active careers in the communication arts and fine arts. They know a lot and have done a lot. So I was knocked out at their willingness to dive into unfamiliar work. They did things I'm sure they'd never imagined doing, and they jumped into to the last exercise of the day vigorously as the first.

Of course, they were artists to begin with. But in classes this summer at the Santa Fe and Maine Workshops I worked with people who were mostly not working photographers. They were lawyers, physicians, auto workers, accountants, retired city administrators, students, a fishing guide, a leadership trainer—in other words, not people with much experience in making art. But they wanted to make it, and they dove in about as fully and fearlessly as any people I've ever worked with. By the end of the week one class was rolling around on the floor like a modern dance company...made up of 50 year olds. This was the real, fearless thing. And it absolutely confirmed that creativity is not taught but uncovered.

It also confirmed that working on theater was a Good Thing for me, and finding a way to pass it along to others in workshops was even better. In fact, it has turned my mind more toward teaching. At the end of each class I felt both expanded and placid. By contrast, at the end of a successful commercial project one of the main things I feel is relief.

Here's a question: if doing this kind of thing has an effect on my level of awareness and my photography, does it have an effect on commercial projects? It can certainly invigorate the work I do for clients—if they want creative work. But these days many of them don't seem to see the business advantage in creativity, though few would say so. They tend to want a version of what has been done before. I think that lots of people in business don't really understand that creative thinking can offer an advantage. Think IBM, and then think Apple.

I'm not just opining here. Creative thinking works in specific ways. I'm going to describe it very briefly.

Our brains notice and respond to what is new. Not what is interestingly new or significant, but new in any way at all. "We become conscious when the organism's representation devices exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge—the knowledge that the organism's own state has been changed by an object." (Neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*.)

This noticing takes place in the right hemisphere of the brain. “The right hemisphere detects and interprets anomalies of experience... (while) the left hemisphere is charged with creating a model or story that makes sense. If the anomalous information reaches a certain quantity and intensity, the right hemisphere forces the left to either revise its story or start over.” (John Ratey talking about the work of Vilayanur Ramachandran in A User’s Guide to the Brain.)

In other words, what is new gets our attention and then changes our minds.

Advertising has always used this phenomenon. But lately clients seem to be asking for work from us that refers to what they have already seen. Why are the terms swipe, stock, and go-by (as in “go by this example”) used so much in our business? Why is rounding up tearsheets considered creative work?

I think perhaps this creative stagnation began with the downturn in the business cycle that began in 1999. Two years later a nascent rebound was cut off by the events of 9/11/01. The uncertainty was compounded by questionable foreign policy choices and dubious management of those choices. And now the cause list has just been topped off by The Hurricanes and the further uncertainties they have revealed.

So right now we are all like seasick passengers on an ocean liner who just want the damned boat to stop rocking. There is too much that is new in our lives, and little of it is good.

Still, instinctively we know that only way out is forward. And this stasis will end thanks to something new that stands out against the field of the familiar. I don’t know what it will be, or where it will arise from, but I know that the way to move toward it is to be new ourselves, to free up our seeing and thinking so that we will not miss the turn on a new road forward.

So there’s your solution to the trouble of the world, if anybody wants one. And if it seems like a long stretch from an acting class to a balanced world... well, as some wise person once said, everything is Everything.

For now, I am more than happy to have a means to cleanse my awareness and happier still to be able to pass it on to others. I’m even readying a workshop for creative teachers that will teach the approach to them in a way they can use it in their classes.

And doing the theater work has absolutely enlivened my photography by taking me beyond the “where’s-the-picture” question and more deeply into what is there.

But what about theater for its own sake? I mean, if you keep studying something you might want to just do it eventually, right? Just to see.

Well, we’ll see.

Alright, your turn.

If you want to explore this work yourself, here are the places I found to do it.

- Alan Arkin's class runs a few times a year at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY (www.eomega.org)

- Eric Morris has a series of classes in Los Angeles (www.ericmorris.com), while Anthony Vincent Bova teaches Eric's approach in New York (www.bovaactorsworkshop.com.)

- For Viewpoints work, try the SITI Company in New York (www.siti.org).

- This all seems kind of New York-y, but in fact there are possibilities everywhere. The thing is to look for classes that teach exploration more than performance. Go for the learning.

This just in

It's a bit late for the article, but an interesting follow up thought.

I was doing some work on a scene recently, and when it came time to do it in front of a group my partner and I really broke through. The scene was alarming and powerful, and the director and people watching noticed it and commented.

But here's the thing: although I knew at the moment of doing that we were bursting through a wall into some new place that was frightening to be in and still very affirmative, what I really noticed was that it didn't feel good at all. I had no sense of something going well.

A few days later, after the experience had settled in, I began to wonder how much I judge how something is going by how good I feel doing it. And do I even work toward making things feel good?

With most of the real breakthrough work I've done, be it in theater or in photography or anything else, when it really takes off it really doesn't feel good at the time of doing. In fact it can even feel quite awful—exposed, uncontrolled, wild. Good feelings turn up later on. Maybe.

What is happening here? I think that by the time a piece of work starts to feel good, the growth, the newness, the very thing I am trying to do is past. My guess is that it functions the same way with one's first skydiving experience: it feels good as one is gathering up one's parachute and walking back to the car. But the real work is stepping out of the plane, and that must be terrifying

It is counterintuitive to welcome insecurity as a sign that something good is beginning. I have never greeted it as a friend. But I know that that is where the work is done, and that premature comfort is a pretty good sign that nothing much is happening.

Something to think about. Actually, best not to think too much, just be aware when it is happening. And hope it happens