Exercises and Notes from Paul Zimet, playwright and original director

I. CHARACTER STUDIES FROM PHOTOS
1. The participants look at photos of individual people.

In the Virginia Tech workshop we looked at photographs by Alex Soth, which Talking Band had used while developing the characters for “Marcellus Shale”. Each participant chooses an image she or he finds compelling.

2. They then are given time to create a character composition that includes:

a still image of the person;
a characteristic gesture;
a walking pattern across the space;
a change of focus;
a smile;
a dance;
and a mode of speaking.

This composition exercise was originally devised by Meredith Monk. Talking Band has varied the elements included in the composition according to the particular exploration of the piece we are working on.

3. The individual participants present their compositions to the group.

Options:

a. Several people can perform the same composition synchronously.
b. Several compositions can be juxtaposed against each other.
c. Music can be layered against the composition
d. Audience members can write short monologues for the characters based on the movement compositions.

II. SHIFTING PERCEPTION (referred to in video as “Cup” exercise)
1. Two people (let’s call them A & B) sit on either side of a small table. There are two cups on the table. They create a physical score of seven shifts. The shifts are simple physical actions, e.g:

A picks up a cup. B turns head to look at A.

That would be one shift.

Then B stands and takes a step away from the table. A looks at B.

That is the second shift.

B sits down. A turns head away from B.

Third shift. And so on.
The performers find seven such shifts that they can repeat in sequence. They should discover the shifts kinesthetically (i.e. by responding to each other rather than by discussing). There is no need to “act” by demonstrating emotions through their facial expressions or other means. Trust that the physical movements and gestures are conveying something about an interaction.

2. Once the performers have settled on the physical score, they are asked to do it repeatedly while different selections of recorded music are played. Their task is to resist letting the music influence their actions, so for the audience (the other workshop participants), the only factor that has changed is the music. The audience is then asked to describe how the music changed the “story” of what they were witnessing. The performers are asked to do the sequence again with sharply contrasting music. It is best when the musical selections are from different genres, in different moods, tempos. Also, it’s best if the music is instrumental, without words, so that only music, not text is influencing the audiences’ perception.

*Some of the musical selections we used in the Virginia Tech workshop were: Edgar Varese “Arcana”, Duke Ellington “Star Struck Lovers”, and “Thomas Newman’s “Dead Already”.*

The audience is again asked how each musical selection changed their perception of what was happening between the two performers.

3. This time the performers are asked to “go with” the music. That is they keep the exact same physical score, but now can shift the timing, tempo, and emphasis according to the dictates of the music. Next, the music is turned off but the performers continue their score as if the music is playing. In other words, the music is internalized and still influences the tempo, mood etc.

Finally, the performers are asked to continue as if the original music is playing, but a different musical selection is played, so there is a tension between the music that is informing the physical movement and the music we are hearing. The audience is again asked to say how they experience this tension and how it affected their understanding.

4. While watching the performers enact their score (with or without music) the audience writes some lines of dialogue for the “characters”. Then, individually, audience member/writers get up and stand in proximity to the performers and speak their lines for them. It is up to writers to decide when in the score they speak the lines.

**III. INTERVIEW**

1. The participants break-up into smaller groups of 3 to 5. Each group should have a recording device (e.g. a smartphone). Everyone should have paper and something to write with.

2. A question is posed to one member of the group who volunteers to be the interviewee.
The question used in the Virginia Tech workshop was “What do you consider a good life?”

The person should only be given a few minutes to answer, and their answer is recorded. The others in the group write down any phrase or sentence in the answer that particularly strikes them. It may stand out, in part, because of content, but usually, it is striking because of the way the person says it.

3. The group decides which phrase or sentence they wish to try to imitate. They then can listen to the playback of that section, so they can hear the exact inflection, syntax rhythm, pauses, repetitions, emphases, non-verbal sounds, and melody of the speech.

4. Each person within the group tries to repeat the phrase, imitating as closely as possible all of the above-mentioned elements.

5. All the groups come together and listen to all the “imitations” of selected phrases.

This is an exercise in close listening, and also in discovering how much we know about a person’s thought and feeling through the music of their speech.

**CONTACT:**

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