

Viola Spolin's Philosophy About Concentration and Collaboration During the Stage Actor's Training

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Abstract

Even today, Viola Spolin continues to be one of the most recognizable and celebrated names in the world of performing arts. Her timeless work continues to allow people from all backgrounds to meet and rediscover play as a collaborative means towards the goal of achieving self-discovery and emotional intelligence within an active and lively environment: the theatre workshop. It is therefore impossible for her method not to be included in the training of beginning student actors. Working on observation while discovering the workspace, the self and the stage partners are practices that need to be constantly trained by those interested in studying the art of acting, even more so if they intend to follow the path of becoming professional actors. The following article is a reflection on the benefits of using the point of concentration in the training of the stage actor, as well as the fact that theatre is an art form specifically concerned with group work.

Keywords: actor training, focus, point of concentration, acting, theatre games, emotional intelligence.

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Introduction

In Viola Spolin's view, theatre is an artform that can be learned and practiced by anyone, in a variety of circumstances, whether classical or unconventional, and the underlying element of this approach is *the point of concentration* or *focus*, as it is sometimes referred to.

Through focus, theatre, the most complicated of art forms, can be taught to the young, the old, to plumbers, schoolteachers, physicists and housewives. Focus frees all to enter into an exciting, creative adventure, making theatre meaningful in the community, neighbourhood and home. (Spolin, 1999, p. 22)

Viola Spolin defines the point of concentration as "a chosen agreed object (or event) on which to focus; a technique to achieve detachment; the object around which players gather; [...], a vehicle that transports the player; it opens the student-audience to receive the communication; concern" (1999, p. 366).

And preoccupation, she says, is "the energy source; that which is not visible to the audience; by creating two-way problems, preoccupation eliminates the 'watcher' and thus makes playing possible" (1999, p. 21).

In the third edition of *Improvisation for the Theater*, Viola Spolin opts to replace the term *point of concentration* with the more active term *focus* (1999, p. 21), so as to further emphasize the importance of action in the actor's work. In the following discussion, however, I have chosen to employ the original term in order to avoid possible confusion and because this is the wording used both in most written works expressing this particular subject, as well as during the work of the student actor of the Romanian drama school.

The point of focus is intended to help the student act intuitively, without intellectualizing the problem at hand, freeing the mind from preconceptions, and activating the freedom to behave organically and interact with stage partners. Over time, by working with the point of concentration, the actor will learn to eliminate those mechanisms that can be detrimental to the creative process and activate their spontaneity, which is an essential element for the actor because it is fuelled by intuition—that inner voice that we *hear* when our rational and emotional minds are aligned, therefore manifesting the authenticity of our full being.

Viola Spolin discusses four main qualities of the point of concentration:

1. ***It divides complex techniques into approachable sections.***

When one has an organic action, not a cerebral one, to do on stage, a functional unity is created. By starting with simple things, such as exploring the surrounding space or examining an object, the actor avoids being overwhelmed or intimidated by the complexity of the tasks at hand and can later channel that same focus into the exploration of emotion or character. This simplification also eliminates the student's fear of disapproval and their need for teacher validation—which can become addictive and lead to the removal of the student's artistic autonomy.

2. ***It provides direction and stability to disordered creative energy.***

Creativity is a very important part when studying the art of acting. However, just like any other field, discipline is required to enhance this energy, which can sometimes become chaotic and unproductive. The point of concentration imposes certain limits which, like the fixed rules of a game, allow the actor to tackle each problem one at a time, without wasting energy in several directions at once. In this way, the courage to act spontaneously will gradually replace the barriers produced by the various concerns the actor may have during the work.

3. ***It ensures problem focus and facilitates collaboration between partners.***

Where the focus is on a partner or the self, scriptwriting, dramatic emoting, and psychodrama can become tempting for the emerging actor. If, however, the chosen point of concentration is simple and external to the actor, as in a play, each member of the group will act on it individually, and the relationships between partners will arise spontaneously, without the need for premeditation. This avoidance of overthinking sets the stage for the manifestation of individuality within the artistic act, making it possible to concentrate authentically on the partner or the self.

The example that best illustrates this idea is to liken the point of concentration to a ball, with each player involved in acting upon it. This involvement helps the actor to avoid self-exposure, self-excitement and leads to the discovery of total freedom of action, without unnecessarily burdening the actor's mind.

4. ***It renders the experience organic and unpremeditated.***

Triggering spontaneity is another benefit of using the point of concentration. However, this is not possible when the actor feels themselves being watched from the outside or are watching themselves. The need to eliminate the spectator is also mentioned by Stanislavski in his remarks concerning the art of the actor. He points out that, in everyday life, concentration and attention occur naturally, but on stage, the actor must learn this process anew, in front of the audience, making the difference between pretending to pay attention and truly activating one's attention. To show this distinction, he discusses the effort involved in studying an object by the light of a lamp (2021, pp. 180-181), when the stage and audience are hidden in darkness, and compares it to the same situation when the light is turned on. With a clear focus, given by the point of concentration, the actor's mind is freed from subjectivity. In its place, confidence, inspiration and creativity become accessible, allowing the actor to work constructively.

Another topic Viola Spolin touches on when talking about the use of the point of concentration is the reluctance of some actors to take theatre games seriously. Perhaps one of the most damaging consequences of resisting the point of focus is indiscipline, because discipline can only result from a total commitment to the problem. This may be observed in young student actors who have preconceived notions about what the art of acting is and how it is to be practiced.

This resistance can take the form of refusal to participate, refusal to get involved in solving the problem, attempts to impose their own solution on the group, ridicule of the exercises, exhibitionism, self-affection. Viola states that the psychological reasons behind this behaviour are based on the feeling of loss of familiarity, of individuality, and as a consequence, the student often has the impression that they are not progressing, despite their attempts to assimilate the given topic.

However, practising these exercises will, in time, demonstrate their usefulness in terms of self-awareness and will help the student to realise the benefits that can be derived from an assertive way of working, intuition will become operational, and the fear of making mistakes will be replaced by that of creative freedom.

In the very simplest of terms, the point of concentration “is the ‘ball’ with which all play the game,” (Spolin, 1999, p. 22) and in order to fully enjoy the benefits of implementing focus into the exercises that enable students to explore the art of acting, they need to *keep their eye on the ball*.

Theatre, a synonym for community

Independently of the chosen approach, the actor’s art workshop is a laboratory of experimentation in which participants employ action to explore their own thinking mechanics. In Viola Spolin’s view, talent or lack thereof is irrelevant; the main determinant of success is natural spontaneity. This can be achieved by eliminating the blockages acquired as a result of the various cultural and psychological constraints of everyday life, by using exercises that activate the senses and facilitate the expression of each individual’s authenticity within a group. Each game or exercise presents a problem for players to solve collectively so that lessons can be learned through this practical experience.

On reflection, the whole of human society operates on the principle of collaboration and concession. As a mirror of and for humanity and founded on relationship, on communication through the transmission of a message to an audience, theatre operates in the same way. “Society is a distinctly human entity and has analogies with biological life, analogies that can be summarised as distinctiveness, cooperation, solidarity.” (Darie, 2015, p. 6)

As previously mentioned, Viola Spolin’s approach is based on *the point of concentration* which helps the actor to direct attention to the problem which must be solved on stage. One of the basic functions of the focus point is to serve as „a catalyst between player and player and between player and problem” (Spolin, 1999, p. 22) by engaging the actor’s focus upon solving the problem in collaboration with the partners on stage.

As previously stated, any given game is defined by its rules, the boundaries that familiarise the player with the purpose and the necessary actions they must perform in order to *win*. Nevertheless, in Viola’s theatre workshop everyone is a *winner* because every person who gets involved is opening themselves up to change and is therefore learning something new.

The rules of the game bring people together due to the fact that they are meant to organise chaotic creative energy and guide actors towards a common goal,

allowing them to manifest their authenticity, eliminating counterfeit behaviour and facilitating cooperation.

This combination of individuals mutually focusing and mutually involved creates a true relation, a sharing of a fresh experience. (...) Individual energy is released, trust is generated, inspiration and creativity appear as all the players play the game and solve the problem together. 'Sparks' fly between people when this happens. (Spolin, 1999, p. 24)

Although the trigger of spontaneity will always place us in an unknown area which we can explore and learn new things from, it is also natural to feel the sensation of apprehension towards the unknown, and in some cases a sense of threat to one's individuality. Consequently, those actors who fear the loss of individuality or control will tend to stage-manage, to over-dramatize, exaggerating the proposed situations in order to showcase the intensity of their feelings, or to manipulate colleagues into acting according to the script they have created on their own. This resistance generates blockages and is the opposite of the creative freedom Viola Spolin refers to. However, practicing exercises over time will highlight the importance of eliminating this type of defence mechanism and of the detrimental effects of such mechanisms to the process of creation.

A flexible and accommodating environment is always supportive of the creative process. Therefore, to achieve good results, the workspace must be one in which the group will become empowered and homogenous. "A group of individuals who act, agree, and share together create strength and release knowledge surpassing the contribution of any single member. This includes the teacher and group leader." (Spolin, 1999, p. 38)

The role of the teacher or theatre workshop coordinator is often wrongly understood. He or she is neither the ultimate decision-maker nor someone the group can do without. Given that the teacher's sphere of observation involves the group as a whole, but also the participants individually, it is more correct to see the teacher as a guide rather than an authority figure. The teacher is the voice that should provide the most appropriate guidance in order to get the group back on track and keep them focused on the collective goal of solving the problem. The teacher's role is situated within the group, not above or outside it, and in order for this to become a benefit of the drama workshop, it is necessary for trust to be developed between the group members.

Just as the group can be considered an entity comprised of several different entities (actors), we can also say that, in terms of tasks, the common activity can be divided into individual actions, each of which is aimed at achieving the joint objective. In this way, trusting that each member of the group will work towards the fulfilment of their own task, the mutual problem will also be handled.

A very important aspect, when speaking about a group that aims to study a particular subject matter, in this case the art of acting, is discipline. Viola Spolin's philosophy is that

Discipline imposed from the outside (emotional tug-of-war for position) and not growing out of involvement with the problem, produces inhibited or rebellious action. On the other hand, discipline freely chosen for the sake of the activity becomes responsible action, creative action; it takes imagination and dedication to be self-disciplined. When the dynamics are understood and not superimposed, rules are abided by, and it is more fun that way. (Spolin, 1999, p. 40)

Each member of a group possesses a unique individuality, a particular character and a distinctive mindset. Some people will have natural tendencies to undertake leadership roles, while others will be more inclined towards passivity. The basic idea in theatre, on which the principle of collaboration is also based, is that all these diverse personalities can function together without betraying their own values, principles, etc. In other words, it is possible for everyone to express themselves freely, without being judged or labelled.

The value of a cohesive and operational team is undeniable in all areas working with this form of organisation. The same is true during the study of the actor's art, which can be defined as "a way of learning through the technique of knowledge and self-discovery. And this can only be achieved in a climate in which each member feels protected, encouraged, supported, accepted, helped and above all, appreciated" (Darie, 2015, p. 11)

„Spolin called her teaching methods non-authoritarian, non-verbal, and non-psychological." (violaspolin.org, 2021) This model of inclusive learning is also characterised by the way the exercises are assessed. The coordinator is not the one who tells the student actors what they have done *right* or *wrong*, these notions having different definitions and connotations depending on the individual.

Furthermore, observing one's self and taking note of the modifications that have taken place, is an exercise in and of itself, a practise that allows the observer to understand various details about themselves in the context of the workshop. Therefore, there is no such thing as *right* or *wrong* in this setting. The evaluation of the experiences gained during the workshops is done as a group, in a way that avoids labelling and judging others. Each participant is free to learn what he or she needs from the experience and to share with others what he or she feels the need to verbalize.

Viola Spolin's contribution to the field of the arts contains many therapeutic qualities as well, as this type of work is based on authentic human connection, a connection that takes place in real time and space. It is a methodology that aims to avoid preconceptions and fixed, unchanging practices. It is for this reason that it changes and evolves with the times and serves as the basis for many other approaches that have the purpose of helping people connect with themselves, others, and the surrounding world at large.

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