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Spaces of Change: Three Acting Exercises and a Conversation

by Michael Osinski, Julian Stetkevych, and Lana Sugarman

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The genesis.

At the 45th Annual Mid-America Theatre Conference in Atlanta, GA, in 2025, we presented our exercises as workshops in the Theatre Pedagogy symposium. Michael presented "The Verb Gauntlet" as part of a Pedagogy Symposium Exercise/Activity Demonstration. Julian and Lana had met through their training and mutual friends and colleagues at the Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium's Teacher Training Program.[1] They had presented together previously at MATC in 2024. In 2025 they co-presented the workshop "Exploring Embodied Moments of Change." Their two exercises are contained in the following conversation, though in the workshop they presented them as a sequence, sharing the delivery of warmups and the participant reflections.

In an ideal conference confluence, Michael approached Julian and Lana later in the conference to discuss the resonance between our three exercises and asked if we'd have any interest in publishing together in *Theatre/Practice*. As Lana put it excellently in our conversation, one of the key connection pieces in our exercises was the delineation of space, which we all explored through the use of a physical grid or separation on the ground that our participants could move through. Michael had also spoken to editor Karin Waidley about

[1] The GLMCC offers teacher and actor training every summer. The training program is completed over three summers. More info on GLMCC here: www.greatlakesmichaelchekhovconsortium.com/. Julian also has training through the Michael Chekhov Association (MICHA). More info here: www.michaelchekhov.org/

publishing in *Theatre/Practice*, and with her advice, we tied the exercises together by engaging in a discussion about not only our exercises but also our approach to creating new exercises and delivering them to our students.

Below you'll find step-by-step guides for our three exercises, followed by a curated conversation that delves into how they are connected and how they all offer students 'spaces of change.'

The application.

THE VERB GAUNTLET

by Michael Osinski

I developed the Verb Gauntlet in my morning acting class at the National High School Institute at Northwestern University (referred to as the "Cherubs" program) and in Beginning Acting at St. Lawrence University. One of my Cherubs colleagues mentioned that they would write verbs down on index cards and throw them on the floor during rehearsal to nudge their actors to play different tactics throughout a scene. I quickly saw the value of such an exercise in an introductory acting class, particularly for monologue work.

In the Verb Gauntlet, student actors travel on a loose 4x4 checkerboard – 16 squares total. Each square contains a verb printed on 11x17 paper within it. When each actor moves to a new square, they must play that square's printed action, whether they have planned to land there or not. The Verb Gauntlet works best for students delivering monologues, as they can move to a new square every time they start a new beat, but it can also be used for improv and scene work.

The exercise aligns with Stanislavski's ideas of Tasks and Adaptations. If actors must perpetually accomplish major Tasks, this exercise provides them with "the genuine, productive and purposeful actions necessary to [fulfill] them."[2] But it also reminds them they cannot play the same action for a sustained period of time if they want to accomplish their Tasks. They must possess the "ingenuity…to adjust their [behavior] and so influence other people. […] The more complex the Task and the feelings to be conveyed, the more different, various, [colorful], the more subtle the Adaptations must be."[3]

This exercise embodies one of Jon Jory's suggestions in *Tips: Ideas for Actors*. Jory describes a time when he asked a director for help with a tricky moment, and the director simply told him to "do something else":

> "It turned out to be wonderfully helpful, actually. I gave him choices until we hit on something better. I was freed of trying to follow an arcane explanation. It wasn't an

[2] Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 143.
[3] Ibid., 259-260.

intellectual problem. My acting self, moderately knowledgeable about the play and situation, simply kept coming up with new takes on the moment."[4]

OBJECTIVES

In simple terms, the objectives of the Verb Gauntlet are the following:

- To familiarize students with the concepts of Action and Tactic with regard to acting
- To nudge students to adjust and change their tactics within a monologue
- To help students physicalize their chosen tactics in performance
- To encourage students to try actions they might never have considered
- To demonstrate the significance of beats with regard to acting

PREPARATION

Before participating in this exercise, students should have accomplished the following:

- Print their chosen or assigned monologues. (This activity does not work well when students read off a phone or tablet.)
- Read their monologues and understand the given circumstances.
- Break down the monologues into beats.
- OPTIONAL: Learn about and play with the Laban Movement Efforts. (I find it helpful to introduce these in the class prior to the Verb Gauntlet.)

Before leading this exercise, instructors should have accomplished the following:

- Decide which 16 actions they want students to play with.
- Write each action on its own index card.
- Print each action in large type on an 11x17 sheet of paper.

ACTIVITY

1. **Play a game of competitive charades as warm-up.**
   Organize the class into 2 teams. Each team will try to be the first to act out and guess all the verbs printed on the index cards. (The instructor will need to maintain the sequence of index

[4] Jory, *Tips: Ideas for Actors*, 189.

cards and keep track of which verb each team is currently guessing.) The person acting out the word is not allowed to speak or make sound effects. Since the teams compete simultaneously, they will need to work quietly and strategically. When one person from each team guesses the word, that person runs up to the instructor and whispers the word into their ear. If the word is correct, that person gets to see the next verb, and they must act it out for their team.

2. **Introduce the concepts of ACTION and TACTIC.**
   Connect these concepts with the game. This is a good time to stress that actions should be *transitive verbs*, since these must always be played on, at, or to someone.

3. **Set up and explain the Verb Gauntlet.**
   Lay out the 11x17 sheets of paper in a 4x4 matrix on the floor. (Do not do this step in advance, as it will reveal the verbs used in charades.) Tell students that when they are inside the matrix, they must play the action that is directly underneath them no matter what. Establish some ground rules for specific verbs that might lead to unwanted behavior. This is a great time to do a consent check-in, if you have not already done so.

4. **Demonstrate how to walk the Verb Gauntlet.**
   Invite 1 student to have a conversation with you on the Verb Gauntlet. Make your objectives something simple, like "to find out how the other person's week has been going." While conversing, casually stroll from one verb to the next, without making conscious decisions about where to go. Change your actions to suit each new verb. End the conversation after you've explored 5-7 verbs.

5. **Garner feedback from the class.**
   Ask students to highlight the actions that resonated most with them. Also ask them to identify what you and the participating student had to do to communicate the change, specifically in terms of posture, tempo, volume, etc.

6. **Pair up students and ask them all to try it out.**
   Give them the same objective you used. Have all the pairs try it out simultaneously. It will be mayhem, but it gives students the chance to practice without the pressure of performance. Remind them they are playing the action ON their partner. For example, if the verb is "surprise," they are not acting like they themselves are surprised. They are trying to surprise the other person. If there's time, ask for feedback on this.

7. **Invite 2 students to deliver their monologue on the Verb Gauntlet.**
   Decide who is Partner A and Partner B. Partner A will deliver their monologue – playing the action underneath their feet – and Partner B will be their silent but engaged scene partner. When Partner A reaches a new beat, they must travel with Partner B to a new verb, *but they should not plan their destination in advance*. They may land on a verb that doesn't seem to make sense, and that's okay. They should play it anyway. The pair will continue to travel on the Verb Gauntlet until they reach the end of the monologue. During all this, Partner B is being the "best scene partner possible," meaning they act as if the action Partner A is playing on them is having the desired effect.

8. **Ask the class to provide feedback.**
   In this case, you're specifically looking to identify the actions that felt surprisingly effective or completely ineffective. This is often the point where students discover a new action they can play that they never would have considered if they hadn't completed this exercise. Partner B should share their impressions as well.

9. **Pair up students again and ask them all to try it out with their monologues.**
   Remind them not to plan out their path on the Verb Gauntlet. Make sure each student has a chance to deliver their monologue *and* get feedback from their partner. Again it will be mayhem, but that will help alleviate pressure. Continue to remind them they are playing the action ON their partner. If there's time, get feedback from the group.

10. **Task students with creating prescribed paths for their monologues.**
    Based on the experience they just had and the feedback they got from their partner, they

should write the verb they want to play in each beat on their monologue. Encourage them to incorporate any surprising discoveries. Remind them they can change the location of their beats based on the work they've done here.

11. **Invite students to deliver their monologues on their prescribed path.**
    At this point, it's good to have individual students perform for the class and receive feedback, but you can also let this be mayhem again. Just make sure students have the opportunity to reflect on the experience.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If any student requires accommodation, consider incorporating the following practices:

- Provide large-print versions of the monologue.
- Ask a student to quietly feed lines to the student delivering the monologue.
- Avoid "spotlighting" students or requiring all students to perform for the class.
- Give students who use ASL additional time to memorize the text beforehand.
- Assign visually impaired students an additional partner, who can guide them around the Verb Gauntlet and tell them which verb they have landed on.
- Reserve a spacious room to accommodate students with wheelchairs or crutches.
- Allow students with mobility issues to stay in one place and ask another student to randomly show them index cards with the verbs on them.
- Let students "opt out" of the exercise and observe their classmates' work.

FINAL NOTES

Students quickly formulate ideas of the 'right' way to perform the monologue. This exercise reminds them there is no 'right' way to do it. It also prevents them from getting stuck in one action and gives them some alternative actions to consider.

Make sure students encounter this exercise at the appropriate time in their work. If they are not familiar with the text yet, it will hamper their ability to change tactics. If they have already spent a great deal of time on the text, it will confuse them as they approach their final performances.

Choose a broad array of verbs – positive and negative, hard and soft, direct and indirect. Here are the 16 verbs I use on my Verb Gauntlet:

- Surprise
- Teach
- Investigate
- Praise
- Seduce
- Destroy
- Comfort
- Scold
- Protect
- Encourage
- Mock
- Confront
- Curse
- Intimidate
- Electrify
- Entice

Finally you can find an online facilitator guide for this exercise, complete with photos and videos, at https://sites.google.com/view/the-verb-gauntlet/the-verb-gauntlet.



Fig. 1
Sample floor setup for Verb Gauntlet (St. Lawrence University, April 2025)



Fig. 2
Students playing "Verb Charades" as warm-up for the exercise (St. Lawrence University, April 2025)



Fig. 3
Students working with partners – on the Verb Gauntlet – to try out different verbs for each beat of their monologues (St. Lawrence University, April 2025)



Fig. 4
Students creating a prescribed path on the Verb Gauntlet for the monologues (St. Lawrence University, April 2025)

EMBODIED TRANSFORMATION THROUGH ATMOSPHERE

by Lana Sugarman

The exercise below is an exploration of the Atmosphere tool from the Michael Chekhov Technique. It is inspired by activities introduced by faculty at the Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium[5]. In the classroom and rehearsal space I am curious about how actors can create repeatable, exciting moments of transformation. The development of this exercise sprung from the questions: "How can I empower students to make strong, full-bodied choices?" And then, "How can I encourage them to find variety, or polarity (extreme contrast) in their physicality and vocalization?" This led to an expansion of the 'Atmosphere Bubble' that is sometimes used in Michael Chekhov Technique, and what I have coined the 'Polarity Split.'

Pre-Exercise:

Put tape down on the floor to split the room into two clear halves with a square perimeter that could be 'stepped into'.

Warm-up:

We begin with the Michael Chekhov warm-up, Crossing the Threshold. This allows students to ground themselves and intentionally step into the Creative Artist Space.

- Start with everyone standing in a circle. Stand in a place of readiness. Close your eyes or look at the floor in the center of the circle with soft focus. Feel your feet, soften your knees, breathe into the belly. Notice where you are starting from.
- Visualize a threshold in front of you. This can be simple, like a chalk line, or something more extravagant like a doorway. On this side of the threshold is your normal, ordinary everyday self. On the other side of the line is the Creative Artist Space. This is a place you want to be! It is filled with play, focus, energy, or whatever you need today to feel supported and present.
- When you're ready, step over the threshold into this space and let it affect you somehow.

[5] The Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium offers training for teachers and actors in Northeast Ohio.

- Blink your eyes open and make gentle eye contact with your fellow artists, radiating warmth.

Create an Atmosphere Bubble:

"Chekhov talks about atmosphere as something that can lead an actor in rehearsal and performance. Atmosphere means the space that is around us. The space we occupy. It is possible to manage a certain amount of space. We can work with the space that is immediately around our bodies."[6]

- Walk the space. Play with different tempos of walk. Take in the room and let yourself be drawn to a specific spot on the floor. Find stillness there.
- Imagine that there is a bubble in front of you. It hovers in the air, and you realize you can touch it without it popping. In fact, you can stretch this bubble- make it bigger. Take the time to make this bubble a bit wider and taller than you are.
- Allow yourself to step into this bubble. Take it for a walk. Know that at any point you can step out of this bubble or pop it if needed. And if this bubble were to fill with something, you'd have no trouble breathing in it.

1st Atmosphere:

- Now imagine that this bubble is starting to fill with an atmosphere of glitter. Receive it and let it affect you. Does your tempo change? If you have a line of text, explore voicing it in this glittery space. Begin to acknowledge and greet the other people in the space. Now let this atmosphere dissipate- the bubble is empty. Pause and breathe. Shake off any glitter residue.

2nd Atmosphere:

- Start to walk the space again and as you do, your bubble begins to fill with the atmosphere of a crowded New York subway car that smells like urine. Let this play on

[6] Petit, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*, 166.

you. Come back to your line of text. Notice the other people in the space. Can you find a feeling of ease? Now let this atmosphere leave the bubble. Shake it off.

3rd Atmosphere:

- Finally, let the bubble space be saturated with an atmosphere of red velvet. Take a walk, let this velvety vibe affect you. If you're working in a veiled, subtle, way, allow yourself to play with simple, full-bodied, and strong choices. Take in the space around you and the people in it. Begin to connect and share your text with someone. Can this atmosphere have varying tempos? Your bubble begins to empty. Take a moment to step out of your bubble, and feel free to pop it or send it off into the sky.

Polarity Split Room:

- Stand outside the taped down square perimeter that has the split down the middle. Half of the students will be on one side, half on the other.
- Side 1 of this square is filled with an atmosphere of cheeky mischief. Side 2 of this square is filled with an atmosphere of sacred reverence.
- For students on both sides, take one limb, a hand or foot, and allow it to cross over the line into your assigned atmosphere. How is it different here? Notice any reaction to this space and then take back that limb.
- When you're ready, step into the square and become aware of the air and space around you. You can begin to move through the space. Let this atmosphere play on you and affect how you feel and move.
- When you're ready, incorporate the following line of text from Romeo and Juliet: 'Parting is such sweet sorrow.' Speak it aloud.
- Exit your square and change sides. Repeat the same steps in the contrasting atmosphere.
- At some point in this exploration, step directly into the opposite atmosphere and let it transform you. Interact with your fellow actors.

Chekhov tells us that two atmospheres cannot coexist-one atmosphere will inevitably overpower the other. Let the line in the middle of the square dissolve- you can now move anywhere you'd

like but continue with your original atmosphere of sacred reverence or cheeky mischief, until you are compelled, or must shift.

Spyback:

- Reflect on your experience with the Atmosphere Bubbles. Did one atmosphere in particular lead to strong reactions or changes in your body or inner world?
- What was it like to speak the Shakespeare text in different atmospheres?







Figs. 5, 6, and 7: Images of The Polarity Split Exercise led by Lana Sugarman in an Acting Workshop with Seat of the Pants theatre company at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Cleveland, Ohio (May 2023).

EXPLORING MOMENTS OF CHANGE

by Julian Stetkevych

I developed the Moments of Change exercise in response to the acting challenges faced by actors as we work on pivotal moments of discovery or change in a character's life. How can we guide actors to experience these critical moments of discovery? How can we make this process repeatable and exciting every time? By adapting and exploring the Michael Chekhov Acting Technique, I created an embodied experience that captures the moment before, transitions into the moment of discovery, and evolves into a changed understanding of the character's world.

In a character's arc, there are always moments of discovery and change. But those moments are frequently challenging to work on outside of a rehearsal room. Often, actors are expected to have a sense of what that moment of change or discovery means to their character and how they will respond to it before entering rehearsal or arriving on set to film. Additionally, we always want to encourage responding to the reality and impulses of the moment and receiving the other characters on stage, but there are also moments in scripts where the actor may be alone as they discover new information or undergo an experience. For instance, how should I respond to a telephone call with no one on the other end, or to finding a meaningful prop that is meant to influence my character? I created this exercise utilizing Michael Chekhov's four Qualities of Movement to facilitate moments of discovery, make it repeatable, give it a chance to change and develop over time, and allow it to serve as a physical representation that the audience can observe. The four Qualities of Movement are a core exercise of the Michael Chekhov technique.[7][8] They have been highly effective for me and student actors to explore character and text. I realized that I could use the Qualities of Movement to explore moments of change by exploring the experience when one quality shifts into another.

[7] Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*, 8. In exercises 3-6, Chekhov gives a simple introduction to the four Qualities of Movement.
[8] Petit, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*, 42 & 115. On page 42, Petit introduces the four Qualities. In the second half of his book, on page 115, he gives examples of application.

Objective:

To explore the psychophysical embodiment of characters through four distinct qualities of movement—Molding, Flowing, Flying, and Radiating—and to practice the moment of transition between these qualities as a means to experience authentic character discoveries and emotional shifts.

When I teach this progression, I use a warm-up that involves en-roling and de-roling, enabling the participant to shift from their mundane, lower self to the artist's elevated ego and then back into character. This process encourages a safe separation of the individual from the intense emotional experiences associated with the character.

Preparation:

Before leading this exercise, the instructor should complete the following steps:

- Prepare an empty playing area and tape it/divide it into four sections.
- Label each quadrant with one of the four Qualities of Movement.
- Prepare music if you choose to use it. Music is a wonderful maker of atmosphere in the room, and I find that it often frees the actors to be more expressive and less self-conscious with their voices. I recommend music without lyrics.
- If you are leading this as an exercise without the students having prepared or chosen texts, you should have some lines printed out for them. I find it best to keep the lines short since they will not be memorized. I will indicate the moment of change for them in the line.[9]
- An alternate version of the exercise uses props. If you are going to use this exercise with props, either have the actors bring a prop specific to their character or provide multiple props for them to play with. Place the props on the taped-out lines, either on the ground or on a table.

Before participating in this exercise, the actors should have done the following:

[9] E.g., Romeo: But, soft, what light through yonder window breaks? // It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. (// represents the moment of discovery.)

- Have a character they wish to explore, and prepared text for exploration, a text provided by the instructor, or, if utilizing the prop version of the exercise, a prop that is significant to their character or to a moment in the play.

Warm-up:

I encourage any simple warmup that allows the actors to begin to access their body and breath. Additionally, this is where I include the en-roling exercises. The Michael Chekhov Acting Technique includes two clear en-roling exercises, and here are my versions adapted from my training:

- The Actor's Ideal Center:

There are many versions of this exercise that I have experienced in my Chekhov training. Here is one: Have the actors stand in a circle. First, ask them to rub their hands together to create a sensation of warmth. Then, hold their hands up to the sky in the center of the circle, imagining a sun radiating energy, creativity, joy, ease, and so on. Take in the rays through their palms and then through their whole bodies. When ready, they should jump up and grab a piece of that energetic sun for themselves. After that, they can place that piece of sun into their center just behind the sternum. Take a full breath and open up the body to 'radiate' their new energy to the circle. I developed a Chekhov-based mantra for the group to repeat after me: "I am a creative artist. I radiate energy." For Chekhov, this is the actor's ideal center: a place that endlessly radiates and fuels the actor's creativity. [10]

- Crossing the Threshold:

Again, there are many versions of this exercise. While together in a circle, have them imagine a circle of light or an individual doorway just in front of the actors. Ask them to imagine that on the other side, they see their ideal artistic self and a creative playing space, free of the worries of their everyday life. You can ask them to name or imagine some of these mundane concerns. But beyond the threshold lies the ideal artistic self, prepared to work,

[10] Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*, 7; Petit, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*, 74 & 93. Presented by Petit first as 'imaginary centre,' then again in the application section. But through my training, I was told that for Chekhov, the Actor's Ideal Center was the image of the sun in the heart center.

take risks, and grow, along with a space that nurtures both their individual artistry and that of the entire ensemble. Invite them to fantasize about what it will be like to cross the threshold and become this other version of themselves. When they are ready, they cross over and take a new breath in this creative space and self.

The Exercises

Ideally, the instructor has taught the ensemble the Qualities of Movement before, as the Moments of Change exercise builds on this foundational Chekhov exercise. As part of this progression, a brief exploration of the four Qualities is ideal to remind the actors of the different feelings.

Exercise 1: The Four Qualities of Movement

The Chekhov Technique offers four distinct archetypal qualities to explore through movement, which correspond to the Classical Greek elements. Notably, the technique defines these four as the *feeling* of that quality. We are meant to wonder about the psychophysical response to playing with that quality. This means that one is not merely playing as if they are the quality or element; instead, they are authentically responding based on their reaction to playing with the quality. In all four instances, the actors are encouraged to discover the uniqueness of each quality by allowing movement, breath, and creative imagination to inspire any sensation that emerges, and then to speak or act from that sensation.

1. **The Feeling of Molding (Earth)**

- Imagine the room gradually filling with fog, feeling its gentle pressure and weight.
- Begin with slow, subtle movements (such as hand, neck, and nose) to create shapes in the fog.
- Gradually visualize the fog becoming denser (from fog, to sand, to clay), increasing tactile resistance.
- Focus on gestures with clear beginnings, middles, and ends, noting the sensation of moving through a thick substance.
- Experiment by tracing patterns with specific body parts (hand, feet, nose) as if leaving marks in the clay.

- Introduce staccato variations of gestures to explore sharp, precise movements through the resistance.
- Play with speaking your line through the feeling of Molding. Imagine the words and sounds taking shape in the space.
- Come to stillness and resonate on the experience of playing the Quality.

2. **The Feeling of Flowing (Water)**

- Visualize the room slowly filling with water, rising from ankles to knees, hips, chest, and ultimately to the ceiling.
- Begin to imagine currents moving through the space. Allow your body to respond freely to the currents, like seaweed swaying gently in the water.
- Movements should transition smoothly from one gesture to another without distinct stops or starts.
- Experiment between legato (smooth, continuous) and staccato (sharp, quick) movements, allowing the flow to guide you.
- Now, play with speaking your line through the feeling of this quality. Can the words flow out of you and through the space?
- Come to stillness and resonate with the experience of playing the Quality.

3. **The Feeling of Flying (Air)**

- To start sense gravity's weight pulling downward, then experience a sudden release into lightness.
- Alternate intentionally between heaviness and ease/lightness, making conscious choices about when to rise and when to descend.
- Experiment with gestures and movements that illustrate the interplay between lightness and gravity.
- Begin to move through the space with the quality of flying. Explore both gentle, easy motions and decisive, sharp dives or ascents, allowing gravity to influence direction.
- Again, play with speaking your line through the feeling of this quality. Let it fly!
- Come to stillness and resonate with the experience of playing the Quality.

4. **The Feeling of Radiating (Fire)**

- Visualize directional energy radiating outward from your body, emphasizing intentionality and clarity.
- Begin radiating from specific points (fingertips, crown of head, breath), expanding to emanate from every pore.
- Experiment with directing your energy in various directions (forward, backward, upward, downward) while maintaining clear intention.
- Play with the tempo and force of your Radiating (staccato and legato). Know that Radiating/fire doesn't have to be destructive, it can contain sensations that lead to joy, wrath, sensuality, or love, for example.
- Finally, play with speaking your line through the feeling of Radiating. How can sounds, words, and intention radiate across space?
- Come to stillness and resonate with the experience of playing the Quality.

5. Reflection with Participants

- Take a few moments to reflect on the experience with the participants. What was it like experiencing your character in the different Qualities? How did each affect their piece of text?

Exercise 2: The Moment of Change

Introduce the four quadrants, each representing one of the four Qualities of Movement (Molding, Flowing, Flying, Radiating). In this exercise, we begin by exploring a character within one quadrant, repeatedly speaking a line to embody the Quality of Movement fully. When prompted, the actors cross into the adjacent quadrant at a beat shift or moment of discovery, allowing the new quality of movement to immediately inform the body and vocal expression. Encourage experiencing the moment of change rather than anticipating it. Allow participants to freely experiment within quadrants, speaking their lines without judgment or striving for perfection. Allow participants to repeat transitions multiple times, exploring different combinations and observing how each quality affects their emotional and physical expression. Gradually encourage them to clearly experience and articulate these transitions both physically and emotionally, noting how each movement quality uniquely influences the portrayal of the character.

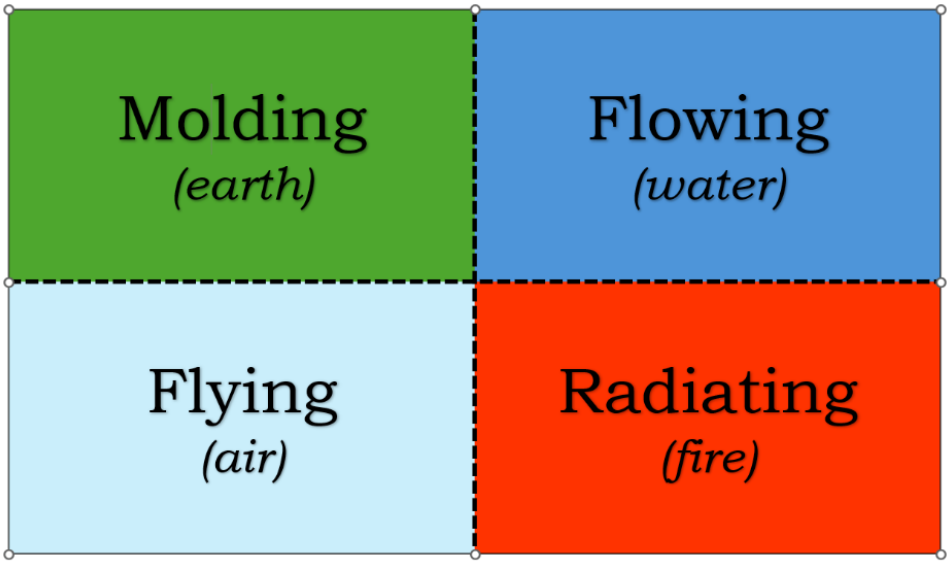


Fig. 8
Diagram of the four quadrants corresponding to the four Qualities of Movement

If playing with a prop, follow the same steps but have the props laid out at the dividing lines of the quadrants. The props will be what the actors touch and discover, and possibly take with them, to cross to the other quadrant.

Some things for the facilitator to look for or encourage are:

- Beat shift made tangible – the taped border makes an authentic emotional pivot tangible instead of one that is internally manufactured.
- Allow text to become "elemental" sound – use each quality to play with the text as sounds first, breaking expectations and habits, and enabling actors to bypass intellect.
- Encourage that there is no "correct" pairing of qualities; actors will discover what feels truthful and will find many possibilities if they allow for a state of play.

1. **Beginning Quality Exploration:**

- Stand in your chosen quadrant, reconnect to your Actor's Ideal Center, and then begin to discover the character within the Quality.
- Allow the Quality or element to start to build around you. Reminder: "We don't have to be good actors—just play."
- Explore legato vs. staccato within that element.
- On a new breath, speak the first half of the line once; let the feeling of the Quality shape the pitch, speed, resonance, and so on.

- Initially, freely experiment with speaking the lines without judgment or striving for perfection. Just let the line come out—no editing.

2. **The Shift:**

- Finish the current repetition, then step cleanly across the tape line into the next quadrant.
- As you cross the tape or the lead foot lands, feel the new element wash over you and breathe it into the body.
- Now, speak only the second half of the line inside this new Quality. Don't judge it, don't prepare—discover it.
- Now dial back the external representation; keep the new quality alive as an inner secret. Continue to repeat the second half of the line.

3. **Reset & Replay:**

- Return to the first quadrant of the pair; re-embody its element.
- Speak the first half of the line there, then cross for the second half in the neighboring quadrant.
- Savor the moment of crossing, the moment of discovery. Allow it to surprise and change you. The most exciting moment is often when we cross the line and experience the moment of change.

4. **Repeat in all four Qualities Quadrants**

- Now, continue exploring by iterating through all the Qualities. Repeat the previous steps, starting in each quadrant, so every actor explores all four qualities and unique transitions.
- Practice making these shifts without preconceived expectations, experiencing rather than anticipating the moment of change.
- After exploring the fourth starting quadrant, if time permits, provide a few minutes for the actors to play and experiment with the quadrants and crossing the lines, allowing them to experience change and discovery in their text and character.
- When done, take a moment to de-role from the character by stepping out of the quadrants and releasing the Qualities. Then they may step out of the artist self by removing the golden sun center.

5. Reflection with Participants

- Take a few moments to reflect on the experience with the participants.

My Students' Reflection:

- Participants agreed that the exercise revealed deeper, genuine character emotions and variety in interpretation.
- The exercise was recognized as beneficial for monologue work, especially for creating variety and authenticity when performing solo.
- They emphasized the effectiveness of psychophysical engagement to bypass intellectual judgments, bringing about genuine emotional discovery.

The conversation.

SPACES OF CHANGE:

A discussion between the artists

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation between the three authors, including the questions we developed to steer that conversation.

Generally, how have you taken your training and used it to create new exercises/approaches?

Lana Sugarman (LS): My training and experience with the Michael Chekhov Technique is a big piece of that, and it's where you and I have connection points, Julian, through the Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium. There's such a gorgeous swath of tools in that toolkit, that it's really influenced how I approach teaching in the classroom and integrating it into other modalities, like some classic Stanislavski and a collection of previous trainings. But I appreciate how playful and embodied the Michael Chekhov Technique is.

Julian Stetkevych (JS): I'll jump off of you, Lana, because we share the same background. I know that you and I both trained as actors before we were teachers. This is probably my 10th year of teaching. I think time has allowed me to be so much more permissive and malleable in what I teach, because I have the confidence in myself to know that I can take something that was taught to me, but also make it my own, or take it someplace else, and I don't think I had that comfort level early on. I thought I had to follow the various rigorous trainings I've been taught.

When I look specifically at the exercise I'm talking about today, one of the great things about the Michael Chekhov technique is that it is a toolbox of exercises, improvisations, and ways into them, and its connection to Stanislavski's system. I teach the Stanislavski basics semester at my university, but I approach it through the lens of Michael Chekhov. When students ask me what Michael Chekhov is, I say it's simply "embodied Stanislavski." You take all of Stanislavski's intellectual ideas, and ask: "What is the physical game I can play that can lead me to embodying this?"

One of my big acting realizations that I share with the students is: What if acting is easy? What if you don't have to do a million things? You just have one tool, and that one tool has four choices? Which, for this exercise, led me to Chekhov's Qualities of Movement. It's so hard in the moment to think of a million different choices. But usually one of four is pretty easy to have in your body. So that inspired me for this exercise. And then in grad school at the University of Pittsburgh, I did one or two days of Rasabox[11] exercises.

LS: We love a Rasabox.

JS: And so part of the grid that I'm using comes from that. So it's sort of like: "Oh, there was a fascinating thing that this pedagogy did. And there's a fascinating thing that this one does. And here's a problem I'm trying to solve." I feel that now, in my more experienced state as a teaching artist, I have the ability to consider combining different ideas.

Michael Osinski (MO): Well, I'm primarily a director. I do not consider myself an actor at all, and any acting training I've had has only come through my grad school experience at The Theatre School at DePaul University. I was required to take two years of acting, the first year being a Stanislavski-based approach with a smidge of Meisner, and a bunch of other eclectic approaches. An interesting looking toolbox is what I would say. But most of my initial teaching was teaching high schoolers as part of the National High School Institute program at Northwestern University, a.k.a. the Cherubs program, which is five weeks of intense high school seniors who love theatre. I've taught acting there for 10 years. And when you teach in a program like that, you're not doing scene study, you're not doing analysis. I always needed something to keep them awake at 8:30 in the morning and give them a physical tool to use in their acting, because we simply don't have time to go through and identify the given circumstances based on our reading of the play. It's not that sort of program. Also because a lot of the students in the program are "smartypants" intellectuals, who are used to using that part of their brain, giving them something they can *do* helps promote the idea that they need to be listening and have that

[11] Schechner, "Rasaesthetics." Richard Schechner's Rasa Boxes are a psychophysical training tool designed to help actors access, embody, and quickly switch between distinct emotional states. For the exercise, the playing space is divided into nine distinct emotional states.

kinesthetic response. So I try and keep them off the page as much as possible. The Verb Gauntlet comes out of that, needing something physical for them to do, to understand a concept.

What are some of the major things you see students struggle with? And how do these exercises help them overcome these struggles?

MO: The overarching thing I see students struggle with is that they forget that when they're acting, they also have to be human. For some reason, you give them a script or ask them to play somebody else, and they suddenly forget how humans actually behave and respond to each other. It's one of the first things we talk about. You know, an acting class is largely about reminding you how to be a kid again. Because when you're a kid, you are responding instinctively. You're not thinking about things too hard. We're trying to get them to turn their brains off so they can just pay attention to what's happening. It's funny how, as we become adults, we need that filter to reclaim that instinctive response. Aside from that, I also just see students struggling with wanting to play the same action over and over and over again for an entire scene, which then turns into the most boring thing we could ever witness. I don't know if you two encounter similar things with your students.

LS: Sure. How do we get the students from their head into their body? And then how do we get them to explore bold, strong expression, as opposed to a more subtle, nuanced approach? Especially at 8:30 AM. That variety piece, Michael, that you talk about - How do we allow for exploration and opposite actions? In the Michael Chekhov technique, we call it "polarity." And how do we find that with ease? I was teaching an audition technique class this semester, and even between two monologues, what's that transformational moment? The transition between each piece into something entirely different? My atmosphere exercise has been really helpful with, "how can we step into an entirely new space and consider the energy we're bringing in?" And then, "how are we being impacted by the environment and the energy around us?" I think my Atmosphere exercise is a nice way to find a quick flip that's playful and is going to encourage something completely different, and hopefully, more full-bodied in some capacity, because it's tricky to get the students to be silly and not overthink.

JS: Yeah, I just want to echo what you are saying. I'll say part of the Chekhov work that always inspired me is that he focuses on the creative imagination. So, it's not some kind of internal

digging up, but it's in the imagination that you're talking about as the state of play, right? And we have the neuroscience articles[12] that show that students learn so much faster by engaging in play. And I think that's one of the things that brings our exercises together. They're asking the students to be in embodied play, and for me, I'm always trying to get them to make big choices, but also not to get stuck in any choice they make. So much of the work we're doing in the classroom or early in the rehearsal process is *process* and not product, and they always want to leap to the product and make the "right" choice. If I ever hear a freshman actor say, "Oh, but my character wouldn't do that," I immediately say, "Stop!" There's nothing more limiting than taking choices off the table that you haven't played yet. So one of the things our exercises, and others like it, are seeking to do is acknowledge that the actors are still in process, that there's a million answers out there. If you have a way to keep exploring, if you're not making it binary, there's all this time to make new discoveries that are going to surprise you because they're playful. And these exercises are set up for that surprise, for not planning too far ahead and seeing what actually happens to you in these moments, versus what you *think* is going to happen. Taking actors out of their intellect and into that sense of play. And when I use exercises like the ones we're talking about, rarely is it the day before the show goes up. It's too late. It's early in the process that there's so much room for play, experimentation, and getting things wrong. But that "wrong" is *right* for so long, until it's time to make the choices from the things you've actually played versus the things that you're afraid of playing.

MO: Yeah, and not just "wrong." I don't know if you encounter this, but I often find students think that they're playing something too big. And then, when I ask them to go bigger or make a bolder choice, they think, "Oh, that feels like it's too big." And I'm like, "No. Now you're actually acting."

JS: Yeah. You know, our students today are on their phones, and everything is very contained, internalized, focused on one thing. How do we break them out of that and into something that actually takes up space?

[12] Liu et al., "Neuroscience and Learning Through Play: A Review of the Evidence."

How does this exercise fit into a classroom and/or rehearsal process?

MO: I use the Verb Gauntlet primarily during monologue work. Before doing it, they have to know what they're saying. They have to have read over it enough to know what all the words mean. They have to have some sense of their given circumstances. And they must have already broken the monologue into beats. In other words, they have to have some thoughts about their monologue, but they cannot be at a place where it feels final yet, because this is about exploring what each of the beats *could* be. Something I encourage them to do as the first phase of the exercise is not to plan what action they're playing for each beat. They are simply walking to a new space and playing that new action without any thought whatsoever to why it would be that. I don't want them to have crystallized anything yet, because I want them to consider the possibility that some actions they have never thought about, or they thought might be entirely ridiculous or the complete opposite of what they are trying to achieve, might actually be a more effective choice. The intention is to get them to shut off that part of their brain that is saying, 'This is wrong. This is too big. This is not going to work.' and just try it out and get feedback from the class. And they often say, "Oh, my God! When you stepped on 'intimidate,' in this moment that you thought was really kind of soft and nice, something new cracked open for us." So that's where it fits in my process. It could definitely be part of a rehearsal process, too. Like, if you're working on a big block of text. Or you could even convert it to scene work if it's a two-person scene. But it definitely feels more geared towards a classroom than a rehearsal. I would never use this in a professional rehearsal, but I would use this potentially in a rehearsal at a university.

JS: It's easier for my exercise to be more of a self-exploration than trying to work on it with scene work. And since mine is specifically about moments of change, it's trying to help actors navigate a huge beat shift. There are significant moments in a show, and some of the most beautiful work I've seen on stage is that moment of change, that moment of realization, that horrible phone call when a loved one has passed away, or something has happened—and what is the way to practice that safely? My first inspiration for this exercise really came from solo moments on stage where I've said to myself, "how do I act [rehearse] when there's no one else to act with? And I'm receiving a piece of stimulus, and it's supposed to rock my world?" Another way I've done the exercise, using the grid of four quadrants, is to ask the actors to place an important prop on the boundary line. So, if it's the telephone, they can be living in one quadrant,

pick up the telephone, and step into the other quadrant when they hear the news. Because there's no one on the other line on stage, right? You just have to “hear” it. When I initially came up with this, it was more about those moments where something dramatic shifts, and I didn’t want just to intellectualize it with the given circumstances, or try to dig up something from my past. What is something that I could actually experience, and that the audience could actually witness, that affects my body and see some kind of physical change happen, and they don't have to know what was on the other end, but they can see the effect of it on the artist? So, I think that could be something useful in the rehearsal. In the classroom, it's helpful to just have students play around and try a million different versions of this moment of change.

LS: I'm really appreciating what you're saying about receiving. I feel like my atmosphere exercise is so much about receiving the atmosphere, letting it play on you - to be *affected* by something; these external circumstances, or this defined quality. And so, I find I usually integrate this in the middle of a semester. It's not something I do early on, because atmosphere is a bit abstract. Sometimes I won't introduce it until a second level class. That being said, I think it could be introduced at multiple levels, depending on the images that I'm using. How abstract is it versus something more familiar that they can immediately tap into? Given circumstances that they might recognize. What's an atmosphere of ‘slumber party’? Are there things that are more tangible for them that might help them, as you were saying before, Michael, “remember to be human”?

The tool of atmosphere is something that I can use in the rehearsal space, as well as the classroom as it’s great for scene work. That being said, my specific exercise of the atmosphere bubble, and then the polarity split, is very classroom-oriented. And I often do it once I've spent some time activating the imagination. Once I’ve built a relationship with students, and they're really willing to play in a more “outside the box” way, then I will integrate my exercise.

Other uses for this exercise?

JS: My student participants noted how well my exercise might work for monologue work. Because when I do monologue work - similar to you, Michael - I have them break it up into beats, and we then apply techniques to experiment with the beats. So, the students remarked that that having the space split into quadrants, they could step over the line on the next beat shift.

Because they knew they had to make a dramatic shift, an embodied shift, on every beat, and that using this exercise their character would feel alive.

MO: The only other use I can think of for my exercise comes before they've even tried it with text. I try to demonstrate it by having a conversation while walking on the Gauntlet, which turns into improv. It's just two minutes of improv, and I think that you could use that as a structured way of getting people to start doing long-form improv by having this imposed-upon change that has to happen along the way. I think any sort of reminder to beginning actors or student actors, or even sometimes professional actors, that you have to change what you're doing at some point is good. Now you have to do something bigger or radically different. Sometimes with student actors [doing improv], their goal is to try to make everybody laugh. And sometimes I feel like all improv either devolves into a Meisner fight or into someone being gross about something, especially with student actors. So maybe this provides the necessary framework to unlock their creativity without going off the rails.

JS: The best improv is just impulsively playful, and that's when the audience loves you. But I was also thinking how I sometimes teach using open/neutral scenes, and your exercise, Michael, could be a fun way for them to explore when the lines have no context.

MO: I've thought about doing scene work on the Gauntlet and having scene partners stand on different squares. I just always appreciate creating a framework for things. The reason we love playing games is because we have a clear objective and clear rules. That's why every game of Monopoly ends in tears or fighting, because no one ever obeys the rules of Monopoly, because they're boring, and it makes the game too long, and the only objective is to bankrupt everybody else you're playing with. But at least there is a clear structure. I only enjoy games when I know what the rules are and when everyone abides by them. So now you know who I am in the escape room.

JS: Well, those rules are sort of built into the way that Chekhov talks about the Stanislavski system. Chekhov has four core tenets called the Four Brothers, one of which is Form. Every game needs to have rules and form. And what we're all providing is idea of, “Hey artists. You don't have to play everything. We're going to give you the form. Now have fun. You're not going to fall off the edge. We've given you the playground.”

What do we see as the similarities between our exercises?

LS: I think it's interesting that we are creating form. We're creating structure on the floor through specific taped out areas that we're then transitioning into and out of. And whether it's 8 verb sections, or quality of movement sections, or even just a split down the middle from "mischief" into "reverence", we are actually giving actors this physical space to cross over. The Michael Chekhov Technique is so great about creating containers so that we're consciously stepping in or stepping out of something. This allows us to transform, to find change and variety, and to shift from getting stagnant and stuck. There's so many possibilities.

JS: I might just be repeating what you're saying, but I think what we're realizing, and probably what we've been taught and are trying to carry forward, is that there's something really powerful about space. It forces physicality, right? It forces embodiment, to have to step in and out of something. And by making it an external thing, there's an internal freedom, because you don't have to produce it. We're allowing it to be produced for you. And part of it is, I think, especially with young people, they walk in from a day with their backpacks and phones and everything, and when you define the space as a space to play, which I think all of us do in our theaters and rehearsal spaces, I think that's just really freeing. And I think that's why we've talked about the responsiveness of the students to these different approaches.

MO: I don't know if you two find this, but when students really latch onto it, at a certain point, a student will tell me, 'I don't think the verb I need is on the ground right now,' and I'm like, 'Oh, that's great! What verb would you want to put there?' And I could even see how you, Lana, with the atmospheres, could customize that for a rehearsal process.

LS: Very much, yeah.

MO: we give them the structure and the rules, so then, once they know the rules, they're ready to break the rules in a way that helps them. I feel like the Verb Gauntlet is designed to remind students that something changes, and you both are providing them with a structure to help them manifest that change. That's how I've looked at this.

What other tools and/or side coaching do you use to help students find variety and make bold choices?

JS: “Are you breathing? Are you allowing the body to move and shift? Are you able to get out of your judgmental intellect, and just be in the state of play that we're asking for?” And I find so much comes back to breath. If I can just get them breathing and being silly for a moment, or letting the quality take over for a moment, then they start to find the way. So sometimes they need that little push or reminder into play, into being a human being, and I always find that that's really just breath; our control or restriction of breath.

LS: I find I often play with tempo, encouraging students to explore the quality of different tempos, as well as both the extravagant and the nuanced versions of their expression in each space.

JS: The other thing that I’ve added is music because that's instant atmosphere, right? It helps them shut a part of their brain down that is worried about what other people are doing. They feel freer to say words when they don't think other people are listening to their words, and so having some extra sound in the room has kind of freed them up to make larger vocal choices.

MO: With my exercise I find myself reminding them to make sure that the action they're playing is also being reflected in their body and voice. Sometimes they think they're doing something different, and I tell them they’re not. So getting them to go bigger is where I’m often coaching them. Also I remind them that they're playing the action on another person. I always put the verb “surprise” on the floor, and then immediately they act like they themselves are surprised, and I'm like, “No, no, no, you are trying to surprise *the other person*. That's great that you're surprised. And that's amazing. Thank you for showing me that. But that's not the intention of what we're doing here.”

JS: Another thing that I found is, if we're asking them to play sometimes, the words actually don't matter yet. I found it was interesting to ask them to think of the words as just sounds, because they're living in the quality of movement, like the feeling of flying, and what are flying words? What are flying sounds? So that they're not holding on to, and judging, and trying to already make decisions when they're supposed to be in play. Sometimes they have a very

limiting understanding of how they think the line should be delivered, and part of what I'm trying to free up is the room to discover things. And I can see how that tracks to yours, Michael? If you've stepped out of "surprise," and you don't sound different…What's one of the other ones?

MO: "Intimidate."

JS: Right. If those sound the same, then yeah, you're not playing it right? Something hasn't been released, something's not being embodied if the audience can't tell the difference.

MO: Yeah. And I do encounter some students for whom this ends up getting them in their heads. It gets too complicated for them, because there's 16 different verbs. I try to make sure that I've chosen verbs that are different enough that they're not asking themselves to distinguish between "intimidate" and "encroach" and "bully." Those all feel a little bit similar. And so the other prep thing I do is to introduce the Laban movement efforts before we've done this, because some students can embody eight things a lot more easily than sixteen. So I often encourage some students, if this gets them too in their heads, maybe they just need to stick to eight and respond to that. Are you punching or pressing?

Open-endedly, let's share; When's the next time you might use your exercise, where does it lead you to continue exploring acting pedagogy, etc.

JS: I'm directing *Romeo and Juliet* next Spring, so I could definitely see myself using this with some of the 2-person scene work. Or helping some of the students early on work on monologues, on longer bits of text, to get them playful and making discoveries. We come into many famous shows with ideas of what they are and how they should be played. Juliet is this, and Romeo is this. And how do we then break them out of these traps? The reason we see plays and musicals over and over again is to see the *how*. How does this actor do it? We don't want to see every Juliet be a wallflower, or be naive, right? There's so much more to every character, especially what you might discover and bring to a character versus what you think it should be. We always talk about "Streetcar." It's impossible to watch with anyone because of the imprint of Brando on the part. But having the ability to be playful and make different choices can maybe release us from some of the pressures of those roles.

LS: This is an exercise I use a lot in my Basic Acting II class. But I find the principles, even smaller versions of it, are really helpful. Sometimes I won't even use the word “atmosphere.” I'll just say the “vibe.” Can you try your monologue with the vibe of “Bridgerton,” then the vibe of “Euphoria.” There's a lot of polarity there. So sometimes the vocab is a little bit different if I do bring it in earlier on, especially for non-majors. And then I've really enjoyed being in rehearsal processes where we are just slapping on some different atmospheres to the scene. Like you’re saying, Julian, where does that creative individuality coming out? I will play with it when I direct *The Wolves* in the fall. How are the subjective and objective atmospheres conflicting within the group dynamic of the team? Can we explore a scene with an atmosphere of sisterhood and then try it with an atmosphere of danger or suspicion?

MO: I'm going to be directing a production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, and I don't think I can use my own exercise as part of my rehearsal process. But I do think that I'm going to be able to use your exercises for this. The ensemble members have to play so many different characters, and I think that being able to step into an atmosphere would help. This sort of reminds me of the times that I've directed a show at the Cherubs program. It always felt like both too little time and too much time, and when it reached a point where it felt like too much time towards the end, and they're all just doing the same thing, and it's getting kind of boring and repetitive, we would often do a ‘genre run’. At certain points in the show, where it felt like there was a beat or a scene shift, you yell out a different genre, and they have to embody that. Whatever that means to them. But I can see myself using more of this, the idea of the atmospheres they're stepping into. Especially for a show where it feels like we are often inhabiting the atmosphere of the main character's brain, and how he is processing the world. So it's not an objective reality that we are presenting. We're leaning more into expressionism in some ways.

Any final thoughts?

JS: I just want to say thank you, Michael, for approaching us at the conference, and saying, ‘Hey, we should do something.’

LS: Agreed.

MO: And I appreciate you both jumping on board. And I'm hopeful that what we're providing to people is some practical advice. I always appreciate reading articles where I can almost immediately see a practical application for what I'm reading, and I feel like the three of us have some really great exercises that are not too complicated. Anyone who reads our descriptions and conversation should have a pretty good understanding of it and can apply it to whatever they're doing, without having to go through a whole year of training to fully understand how to use it in the room. It feels like we've sort of given them little snippets that are based in something bigger.

JS: Yeah, I know we talked about it at MATC, and you gave examples, talking about introducing Laban or what Lana and I called “secret Chekhov,” right? Sometimes you can't spend a year teaching somebody a full acting technique. But I can say “genre” instead of “atmosphere,” and nobody's going to freak out. They're going to know what you want. They're going to know what to play. They're going to have an understanding that it's a world you live and breathe in, that affects you, and there's a certain type of behavior. When I teach my exercise, it's the four Qualities of Movement, and that's very Chekhovian. But sometimes you can just call it the four elements. So yeah, Michael, I think though we have the specifics of the ‘how’, and ‘why’ and terminology that we use, the overall approach is: here's a fun game.

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