

5-2009

## Going with the Flow: Identifying a Single Commonality in Written and Performed Acting Theory

Katharine A. Schellman  
*College of William and Mary*

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**Going with the Flow:  
Identifying a Single Commonality in Written and Performed Acting Theory**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and Speech  
from the College of William and Mary

by Katharine A. Schellman

Accepted for High Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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**Richard Palmer**, Director

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**Elizabeth Wiley**

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**Brad Weiss**

Williamsburg, VA  
**May 5, 2009**

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## INTRODUCTION

### *PREVIOUS STUDIES*

Beginning in the twentieth century, several modern theatrical theorists have attempted to make sense of — and eventually reconcile— the differences between performance theories using a variety of approaches. A study of these theories takes on the roles of both the artist and the investigator, as it must focus on both the process and act of performance— the art— and the cultural influences on and implications of a theory— the investigation. The material to draw from is vast; performance theories exist across the world, and many have been developed or used over a period of centuries.

In the 1970s, British theorist Peter Brook traveled across North America and Africa studying performance in the different cultures he encountered. His goal was to discover a universal performance language, one that could be applied and understood regardless of cultural differences.<sup>1</sup> Theorist Eugenio Barba studied “the socio-cultural and physiological behavior of man in a performance situation” by placing performances in an unfamiliar cultural context;<sup>2</sup> his method, which he termed theatre anthropology, used performance as an anthropological tool.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Brook, he did not attempt to create “a science of theatre,” but rather to find underlying principles that are “good advice”<sup>4</sup> regardless of the style of performance being used. Phillip Zarrilli’s look at the effects of cross-cultural contact among performance cultures is centered on understanding the impact of variations between performance theories. He focuses especially on the historical and cultural context in which

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor The University of Michigan Press: 2006) 338.

<sup>2</sup> Eugenio Barba, “Theatre Anthropology,” *The Drama Review* 26 (Summer 1982) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon, 338.

<sup>4</sup> Barba, 5.

theories were developed, and the “variable set of assumptions about the body, mind, their relationship, the nature of the “self,” the “inner” experience of what the actor does, and the relationship between actor and spectator.”<sup>5</sup> Both Brook’s and Barba’s approaches are oriented primarily on understanding the art; Zarrilli’s has a wider investigative focus.

### *PARTS OF PERFORMANCE*

Though Barba’s research into theatre anthropology does not seek to create a standardized approach to performance the way Brook’s does, both focus on the same parts of the performance process: the use of the body and breath in various types of performance. Barba particularly examines the application of techniques found in various Asian theatrical styles to a Western acting paradigm using common principles, such as opposition, equilibrium, and immobility.<sup>6</sup> This research into the physical commonalities of performance theories looks at the “how” of performance— the *physical method* of a performance, how the physical performance is enacted, visibly or otherwise; how the body and the breath are used.

Similarly, many cross-cultural comparisons of performance have focused on the “why” of performance— the *cultural or social intention* of a performance, why it is being done and why the audience is watching. Recent studies especially comparing Eastern and Western performance theories have focused on the *why* of these styles. Carol Martin has compared the differences in achieving the goals of feminist theatre using either Brechtian performance or Chinese theatre; in this context the *why* of performance is discussion of and

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<sup>5</sup> Phillip B. Zarrilli, “An Enactive Approach to Understanding Acting,” *Theatre Journal* 59 (2008) 635.

<sup>6</sup> Zarrilli, 12-18.

commentary on the role of women in both society and theatre.<sup>7</sup> I Wayan Lendra's comparison of Balinese dance to Grotowski's physical theatre examines the similar spiritual *whys*, especially an appreciation for a minimalist aesthetic, which the training processes of both were intended to convey to performers and spectators.<sup>8</sup>

The existence of such commonalities in the *how* and *why* is indicative of the significance performance holds in a plethora of cultures. Performance as a cultural element can be found worldwide, on every inhabited continent, and throughout history. Taken further, this idea of performance commonalities begs the question: could a single commonality be found across styles and theories of performance, and can it then be found in the application of theory to actual performance?

Taken in context of the *how* or *why*, the variety of performance types seems too great to allow for a single underlying commonality. Theorists identify a plethora of reasons and ways to perform — for the purpose of art, religion, or social commentary; using either heightened or realistic language; enacted through common everyday movement or through accepted stylistic signifiers, to name a few differences. However, a third possible category exists: the “what” of performance.

The *what*, as I will define it, is the goal of a performance theory, rather than the goal of the performance. Between the process articulated by a theory— *how*— and the effect it is intended to have on the audience— *why*— is the actual moment of performance. This is a separate moment than either process or effect; *what* is the moment of performance as experienced by the performer alone. The purpose of this study, like those done by Brook,

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Martin, “Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theatre,” *The Drama Review* 43 (Winter 1999): 77.

<sup>8</sup> I Wayan Lendra, “Bali and Grotowski: Some Parallels in the Training Process,” *The Drama Review* 36 (Autumn 1992) 127-128.

Zarrilli, and Barba is to attempt to identify a commonality existing throughout performance theories; I will focus, however, not on the physical *how* or the intended *why*, but on the *what* each theorist intends their performers to experience. To do so, I will use a concept developed and identified as part of the psychology of everyday life: flow.

### *CSIKSZENTMIHALYI AND FLOW*

In his work on psychology and anthropology at Claremont Graduate University, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the idea of “flow” as a common goal in human interaction. Flow, as he defines it, is a merging of attention, awareness, and action,<sup>9</sup> creating a holistic sensation that connects the body to its environment; it occurs when a person is completely involved in whatever action he is undertaking.<sup>10</sup> According to Csikszentmihalyi, “a person in flow finds himself in control of his actions and the environment... [providing] clear, unambiguous feedback”<sup>11</sup> and is “as happy as a human can be.”<sup>12</sup> Pure flow is the ultimate purpose in any human interaction, especially that involving ritual or performance, and serves to completely connect a person with his world.

### *DEFINING FLOW*

Moments of flow are described as occurring during an enjoyable process when “what we feel, what we wish, and what we think are all in harmony... exceptional moments...in a

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<sup>9</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, NY Performing Arts Journal Publications: 1982) 48.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Turner, 58.

self-contained universe.”<sup>13</sup> To identify the presence of this moment in both theory and practice, definite conditions for being in a state of flow must be established. Csikszentmihalyi’s studies identify nine main elements present when one is wholly engaged in an enjoyable creative process; these serve to identify a person in a state of flow, at their “exceptional moment”:

- “1. There are clear goals every step of the way...
2. There is immediate feedback to one’s actions...
3. There is a balance between challenges and skills...
4. Action and awareness are merged...
5. Distractions are excluded from consciousness...
6. There is no worry of failure...
7. Self-consciousness disappears...
8. The sense of time becomes disturbed...
9. The activity becomes... and end in itself...”<sup>14</sup>

All nine of these points are interrelated and create a circular continuum of action, awareness, feedback, and more action. Having clearly understood goals allows the person in a state of flow to know exactly what needs to happen next, unlike the person outside of flow who may not have a clear process in mind.<sup>15</sup> A person in flow also feels not only that his or her skills are necessary to meet the challenges presented, but that those skills are being challenged, not just used.<sup>16</sup> When this balance is present, a person feels adequate to any task

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<sup>13</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 111-113.

<sup>15</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 111.

<sup>16</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York, NY HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.: 1997) 30.



necessary, and so there is no fear of failure; if failure is not a possibility, then the right action and response can be found in every situation. In order to find the correct response, though, one must be so aware of his or her environment that the appropriate action is found almost instinctively, to the point where action and awareness of the surroundings start to become the same thing.<sup>17</sup> Once action and awareness have become the same thing, everything in the surroundings is part of the immediate action, so nothing environmental is sensed in the normal fashion, including the passage of time. Any feedback is immediate and encompassed in awareness/action; if the person in flow receives feedback, he or she is able to respond to it immediately and appropriately.<sup>18</sup> A person in flow is entirely engaged in the activity at hand: his or her attention is ordered and focused, with no distractions or irrelevant thoughts, and so there is no room for self-consciousness.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, when the necessary sequence of actions is clear, a person is able to perform his or her task without hesitation; when there is no hesitation as to action or rightness of action, an activity becomes enjoyable in its own right, rather than as a means to an end. An activity that produces flow is one that has the potential to achieve this cycle through its nature— clear goals, high level of challenges and skills, unambiguous feedback, few distractions— and that engages a person in an enjoyable way.<sup>20</sup>

In an artistic setting, identifying this state of flow becomes difficult: a more creative problem is unlikely to have a single definite solution and so often requires a less definite response from the participants; it is less clear what needs to be done in order to reach a state

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<sup>17</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 118-119.

<sup>18</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 38.

of action/awareness.<sup>21</sup> Individuals in artistic fields, therefore, often develop a personal system of feedback in addition to the external one, which provides them with an internalized image of what works and does not work. Often this is provided simply by past experience, through trial and error.<sup>22</sup> In a performance context, however, this internalized feedback could also be found in the internalization of a performance theory; Zarrilli's "set of assumptions" includes accumulated knowledge about what works and does not work,<sup>23</sup> which could help performers enter a state of flow by creating "a personal approach, an internal model that allows them to put the problem into manageable context"<sup>24</sup> rather than leaving them with an indeterminate artistic dilemma. A performance theory, then, would contain within it a method for reaching a state of flow and achieving the *what*.

Csikszentmihalyi considers artistic engagement an activity highly likely to produce flow<sup>25</sup> and several written descriptions of performance experience seem to support this. When comparing the sensation of training in African performance to training in Japanese *Nihon Buyo* movement, scholar and performer Barbara Sellers-Young describes her "experience of self [as] a unified whole... a total intensive engagement in the moment."<sup>26</sup> Thomas Hanna, a philosopher and scholar of performance, describes the use of the body in performance as a "flowing array of senses" which provides "an awareness of your internal

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<sup>21</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 114.

<sup>22</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 116.

<sup>23</sup> Zarrilli, 635.

<sup>24</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 117-118.

<sup>25</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Sellers-Young, "Somatic Process: Convergence of Theory and Practice," *Theatre Topics* 8.2 (1998) 175.

landscape.”<sup>27</sup> Both of these descriptions are reminiscent of the essence of Csikszentmihalyi’s nine points, the ultimate sensation and awareness that is produced in a person in flow.

### *PURPOSE OF STUDY*

Flow, by this definition, could be considered central to the development of a common theatrical *what*. If a state of flow is essential to the creative process— a process that is certainly necessary to some degree in any sort of performance, regardless of the theory it draws from— then flow could be found to define the theatrical *what*; it is reached through the *how* and, by linking participants and environment, allows for the *why* to be achieved as well.

If, as Csikszentmihalyi describes, flow is universal to the human condition rather than specific to a single culture or creative outlet, it provides not only a *what*, but a *what* common to all theories. A cross-theory *what* would not codify the process or purpose of performance in the way that Barba or Zarrilli’s studies attempted to do, but it would demonstrate the underlying human aspect of performance, irrespective of context or action, and give performers a starting point from which to approach a tradition radically different than the ones with which they are familiar.

I will approach identifying the presence of a common *what* from two different angles. First, theoretically, through the study of representative performance theories of differing styles; the presence of flow as a fundamental goal within these theories would indicate that this *what* exists as an ideal, experiential goal in the performance process. Second, practically, through information gathered from professional performers; the actual achievement of flow on a regular basis by performers from differing styles and theories

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<sup>27</sup> Sellers-Young, 177.

would show that this *what* is not just an ideal, but a reality of performance regardless of theoretical and stylistic identification. These two approaches are not intended to be interdependent, but rather to further support (or disprove) each other's conclusions. Any study of performance theory is immediately hindered by the scope of the material available, and I do not anticipate being able to do justice to every performance theory in existence. I do, however, predict that I will be able to find a basis to conclude that a common, experiential *what* exists among radically different styles of performance theory, both in the principles of the theory and in the practice and use of these principles by professional performers. Finding elements indicative of the presence of flow in both these areas would lay the groundwork for understanding what is essential to the creative performance act, independent of technique, style, or theoretical goals. A consistent lack of identifiable flow elements, in both theory and survey responses, would indicate that flow does not exist as a common theatrical *what*.

### *RESEARCH DEFINITIONS*

In order to determine whether a cross-theoretical *what* exists, certain definitions must be established to allow for comparison between disparate theories. A performance theory, as defined by Phillip Zarrilli, is “a set of assumptions about the conventions and style which guide... performance, the structure of actions which [are performed], the shape that those actions take (as a character, role, or sequence of actions...), and the relationship to the audience.”<sup>28</sup> In the context of earlier terminology, a performance theory is a differentiated how-why set: *how* the performers physically act and relate to the audience, the conventions

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<sup>28</sup> Zarrilli, 635.

and style that define *why* the performance is being done. Though Zarrilli's definition does not specify the presence of a *what*, it can be found in the space between the stated *how* and *why*. The *what* can be understood to be the experience of the performer in the act of performance, the mental place reached through definite action; this experience enables the performer to create a relationship with the audience. The need for an immediate relationship between performers and audience implied in this definition indicates the specificity of live performance, which is itself defined by Zarrilli as the process in which "a (theatrical) world is made available at the moment of appearance/experience for both the actors and the audience";<sup>29</sup> performing itself is "embodying a representation of a role or character" through "a dynamic, lived experience in which the [performer] is responsive to the demands of the particular moment within a specific (theatrical) environment."<sup>30</sup> The performer him/herself is a "sentient being able to be, do, respond, and imagine in (theatrical) environments."<sup>31</sup>

## RESEARCH METHODS

The method Csikszentmihalyi describes for researching personal examples of flow is a face-to-face interview with his subjects. This interview takes the form of the conversation in order to prevent the researcher from accidentally revealing the purpose of the study and influencing the answers of the subjects, but it is directed by the researcher to produce answers to specific questions. Though this would have been my preferred method for the practical aspect of my research, the time and travel constraints of being a full-time student

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<sup>29</sup> Zarrilli, 641.

<sup>30</sup> Zarrilli, 638.

<sup>31</sup> Zarrilli, 638.

prevented this. Instead, I constructed a questionnaire to be filled out by individuals to gather information on their background, training, and performance experience (see Appendix 1.) This questionnaire I formatted into an online survey form at an independent web address with the intent that each participant could be directed there and the results would be sent directly to me.

The potential participants contacted were all known professional performers, and were identified through a variety of means. These included suggestions from colleagues, open requests for participation both in print and online, and through publicly available work that they had either written or participated in. In order that each participant receive the same information about the study, the introduction, disclaimer, and informed consent form were presented at the website rather than when they were first contacted (see Appendix 2.) In order to get as wide a variety of participants as possible, I could not approach each in person; to keep my method consistent for each participant, each was approached through email (in some cases through other forms of internet contact) in a consistent manner (see Appendix 3.)

Since the structure of the survey and purpose of each question is not immediately apparent (to prevent as little researcher bias from affecting the participants as possible) I would like to take a moment to elaborate on the design behind the questionnaire. It can be divided roughly into five parts.

Part one, the unnumbered questions, gathers basic identifying information about the participant in order to contextualize their answers and distinguish them from each other in the final reporting of information.

Part two, questions 1-3, asks the participant about family and cultural background. These questions do not have a direct bearing on the results of the study— they do not relate

to the presence or lack of flow in performance, nor do they distinguish performance styles among participants. Rather, they are designed to stimulate the mindset of the participants; by examining and describing in writing their upbringing, cultural and religious, and the way these affected their professional goals, the participants were prepared for the type of critical and self-examining thought necessary to answer questions in the following sections in a way that would provide enough information to be useful to the study.

Part three, questions 4 and 5, begins to get more into the specifics of my thesis. Both questions are designed to give a direct idea of the style in which the participants both were trained and in which they perform. The goal of the study was to have as wide a variety of performance styles represented as possible. My initial plan when designing the study was to identify individual representatives of individual theories; once the questionnaires began to be returned I discovered that this would not be the case, as many performers now study as many styles and theorists as possible, and end up picking and choosing techniques from styles as they are appropriate. The effects of this will be discussed in a later section.

Part four, questions 6-9, is structured differently than the other sections in order to allow for some quantitative analysis in addition to all the anecdotal information from the other sections. For each question, at least half of the possible answers correspond directly to Csikszentmihalyi's nine points; that is, ranking them as a low number greater than zero for questions 7 and 8, or as a high number for question 6, indicates the presence of one of the nine points. Other possibilities either do not relate to flow, or would directly indicate that it is not present according to Csikszentmihalyi's nine points. As in part three, the ways that these questions were answered by many participants differed from what I expected before the study began. The effects of this will also be discussed at a later time. Question 9 also falls in

this category, even though it requires only a yes or no response; in this case, yes indicates a component of flow, no indicates the opposite.

Part five, questions 10-18, is designed to gather anecdotal, qualitative information about the participants' performance experience in order to determine what they feel occurs when they are performing and which experiences are more or less successful, important, or meaningful. Each of these relates directly to some aspect of flow as described in Csikszentmihalyi's nine points, such as self-consciousness, time constraints, or action/awareness. Two questions from which I especially hoped to gather direct information on the presence or lack of flow were questions 12 and 13, relating respectively to the participants' best and worst performances.

The online survey was structured to allow unlimited writing space for the anecdotal answers, allowing the participants to freely answer as much or as little as they wished. It was available to contacted participants for four months.

The second aspect of my research attempted to answer the same questions as the study through the study of performance theory rather than of performance experience. Finding this method and its goal outlined in a way that fully matches Csikszentmihalyi's process was not probable; though many acting theories have an associated body of work, either written or communicated directly from teacher to student, few are systematically organized. Those that do present a specific process frequently deal with *how* and *why* without directly addressing the result these have on the performers' experience. Identifying flow within the theories themselves, then, is not a matter simply of finding Csikszentmihalyi's nine points, but of identifying a structure similar to them within the structure of a theory.



Examining ever possible theory, though ideal, is not within the practical scope of this study. Many theories, however, can be grouped together into like categories. Robert Gordon suggests six possibilities for divisions: realistic characterization; the actor as an instrument; theatre as play and games; performance for exploration of the self and the other; and performance as an exchange of culture, and acting for the purpose of political change.<sup>32</sup> Zarrilli adds a seventh: acting as “the embodiment and shaping of energy.”<sup>33</sup> Since Zarrilli and Gordon designed their categories for Western theatre and this study is concerned with both Western and non-Western theatrical traditions, I will modify their divisions slightly, but overall use the same groupings to divide theatrical practices into six general categories, from which I will then pull out representative theories to examine for indications that flow is part of the process.<sup>34</sup> This process does require certain assumptions, most importantly that the results found for a sample theory will hold true for the other theories it represents. However, since the scope of this study is limited by the time and resources available to complete it, such an assumption is necessary.

## **PERFORMANCE THEORIES**

### *INDONESIAN RITUAL PERFORMANCE*

Although Zarrilli presents his addition of performance through the shaping of energy as a recent development in Western theatre, it can be found world-wide in the form of ritual

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<sup>32</sup> Gordon,, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Zarrilli, 636.

<sup>34</sup> As Gordon’s final category, acting for the purpose of political change, deals more with the goal of the entire performance rather than the specific process of the performer, I will not be including it in my categories.

theatre. As this is one of the oldest performance styles, it is a good starting place. This idea of traditional theatre, used in the past as part of religious practices and now existing in both religious and secular forms, is especially persistent in non-Western parts of the world.<sup>35</sup> As my example for this category, I will examine Indonesian ritual theatre, which, though it can be found as a secular practice, retains much of its religious/cultural significance and is very similar to its traditional form.

Theatrical tradition in Indonesia has existed for centuries in a relatively unchanged form and is a fundamentally religious experience for all involved. Through a specific training process, begun when the performer is very young, these traditions have been handed down each generation, preserving the cultural, religious, and personal meaning of each aspect of performance. Though it is considered a form of entertainment, a true performance also expresses the inner nature of the performers, creating a connection between them and the spectator and thus becoming an offering to the gods.<sup>36</sup> Often, ritual performances are presided over by priests or other spiritual leaders, intended to evoke a cultural religious identity and bind the audience to the performers, the ideals they represented, and the leader.<sup>37</sup> In Indonesian understanding, a performer's personal energy is not a solitary thing; it is strongly connected to the energy of the physical world. Thus, the power of the theatre is not contained in the performers as independent being, but their ability to use their own personal energy by connecting it to the outside world.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Zarrilli, 637.

<sup>36</sup> Lendra, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Masakuni Kitazawa, "Myth, Performance, and Politics," *The Drama Review* (1988) 36 (Autumn, 1992) 161.

<sup>38</sup> Kathy Foley, "My Bodies: The Performer in West Java," *The Drama Review* (1988-) 34 (Summer 1990) 65.

In training for ritual performance, the performer comes to understand his or her own inner life by first learning characters which are as different from him or herself as possible, only moving on to characters which are similar after the first are mastered. The first character, or mask, learned by a student of Indonesian theatre is named Panji, and requires the most control over the body. When performed properly, Panji requires a low center of gravity, a center of thought above the head, and a visual focus in front of the performer but not raised to the audience. This internal juxtaposition keeps the energy flowing through the performer; the field of vision connects this flow to the outside world. Panji's flow of energy should give "the impression of being recycled back into his body."<sup>39</sup> Mastering Panji gives the performer control over connecting his energy to the energy of the world; once this can be accessed at will, the second mask, Pamindo, teaches the connection to others. Pamindo's center of gravity is slightly higher than Panji's, her center of thought slightly lower; this brings her visual focus to the eye level of others. Because of this, Pamindo interacts more directly with other characters than Panji does, as well as with the audience. Her mask requires the circular energy flow mastered with Pamindo but expands that circle to include the people that surround the performer and the energy they provide as well.<sup>40</sup>

This process creates a better understanding of the components that make up the self: when the elements of all the characters are combined, they represent multiple sides of human personality, stages in life, and the components of the universe. By teaching the performer to access his or her energy in ways that either emphasize or diminish his or her own personality, Indonesian training brings the actor to a closer understanding of his relationship to the world

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<sup>39</sup> Foley, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Foley, 68.

and the people around him.<sup>41</sup> Once the performer can draw on this connection to the energy of the world, his or her personal energy is in turn increased.<sup>42</sup>

Indonesian dance performance is strongly related to and influenced by Sanskrit *natya*, (which roughly translates to dance-theatre-music, and is the basis for most classical Indian theatre-dance, such as Kathakali,) so it is useful to investigate both. These styles of performance are taken from the *Natyasastra*, a sacred text attributed to the mythic-historical figure Bharata-muni that serves as an instruction to performers. The original full text was fragmented centuries ago, however, and the principles contained in it have been primarily passed down through active practice and oral tradition.<sup>43</sup> The performance of *natya* depends on the principle of *rasa*, described as “the cumulative result of *vibhava* [stimulus], *anubhava* [involuntary reaction], and *vyabhicari bhava* [voluntary reaction].”<sup>44</sup> *Rasa*-based performance is intended to involve the audience as deeply in the emotion of the performance as the actors; the *rasa* is presented by the performers and the corresponding *sthayi bhava* is experienced by the audience. For example, if the *rasa* desire is portrayed by the performer, the audience experiences love; if humor, then laughter; if surprise, then wonder.<sup>45</sup>

There are nine *rasas* total; however, there are only eight *sthayi bhavai*. The ninth *rasa*, *shanta*, translates to “bliss,” and is the ultimate mix and balance of every other *rasa* and *sthayi bhava*. *Shanta* has been described as the “white light” of performance, “the transcendent *rasa* which, when accomplished, absorbs and eliminates all the others.”<sup>46</sup> A performance in which *shanta* is present allows both performers and audience to experience

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<sup>41</sup> Foley, 65.

<sup>42</sup> Foley, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Schechner, “Rasaesthetics,” *The Drama Review* 43 (Fall 2001) 28.

<sup>44</sup> Schechner, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Schechner, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Schechner, 32.

this pure feeling of bliss, free from any other emotional or physical distraction,<sup>47</sup> and idea which, among other elements of the theory, is immediately reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi's flow. This idea of *rasa* is also central to many forms of performance in Indonesia, which has strong roots in Hindu religious performance.

### *STANISLAVSKI'S SYSTEM*

Gordon's first category, realistic characterization, is often thought of as "classical" Western theatre, though it was developed recently, since it became the foundation for twentieth-century performance in Europe and much of the rest of the world. The goal of this style is for the performer to use his or her body and emotions in a way that most resembles what will be perceived as everyday behavior. The psycho-physical performance style is strongly focused on the mental development of the actor in relation to the material, and often only secondarily on the effect this has on the physical. Though it developed primarily in the West, its influence and use has spread worldwide. The most frequently used representative of this category is Stanislavski's acting system.

The "system" developed by Konstantin Stanislavski in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often considered the basis for modern Western acting, is a theory of performance practice based on Stanislavski's own experiences as an actor and a director.<sup>48</sup> During the late nineteenth century, the empirical sciences were being developed as a way to understand the world; Stanislavski's system was intended to serve as a science of acting based on two main principles: one, that the actor must use the processes of actual human

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<sup>47</sup> Schechner.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Benedetti, *The Art of the Actor*, (New York, NY Routledge Publishers: 2007) 109.

behavior in his art; two, that emotion comes from interacting with the world.<sup>49</sup> Acting, then, should be a natural process in order to be believable and to positively evoke response in the audience.<sup>50</sup>

Stanislavski's system is divided into two parts. First, the actor goes through a period of training and personal preparation, designed to teach full control over the physical and psychological resources available to each individual,<sup>51</sup> using techniques such as muscular relaxation, affective action, and memory/feeling exercises.<sup>52</sup> Second, the actor participates in a coherent rehearsal process to ensure that each performance will be consistent, comprised first of exploration of the circumstances and events of the play, without text; second, analysis of the text and background of the play; third, shaping the insights of the first two steps into a controlled performance. If an actor has already achieved full control over his or her personal repertoire of emotion and action, Stanislavski believed that logical action through a play could and would produce logical emotion.<sup>53</sup>

This process, which Stanislavski describes as going “through conscious technique to the subconscious creation of artistic truth,”<sup>54</sup> allows an actor to “release creative energies and ...natural emotional response[s] organically, without forcing, without falling into familiar acting clichés.”<sup>55</sup> An actor can then achieve a state of readiness in which it is easy to react to any problem posed by the play because all resources and abilities are immediately at hand.

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<sup>49</sup> Schechner, 120.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski & the Actor*, (New York, NY Routledge/Theatre Art Books: 1998) 1-2.

<sup>51</sup> Benedetti, *Art of the Actor*, 121.

<sup>52</sup> Benedetti, *Art of the Actor*, 129.

<sup>53</sup> Benedetti, *Art of the Actor*, 121-123.

<sup>54</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character* (New York, NY Routledge/Theatre Arts Books: 1977) 275.

<sup>55</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski*, 5.

This he calls the general creative state, in which the “apparatus of physical technique must not only be highly trained but also perfectly subordinated to the inner dictates of [the] will... developed... to the point of an instantaneous, unconscious, instinctive reflex.”<sup>56</sup> Both the description of this state and the goals of the actors’ training are described in language that is highly similar to Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory; this will be discussed further in a later section.

### *JERZY GROTOWSKI*

Gordon’s fourth category, acting as exploration of the self and the other, focuses strongly on non-realistic performance designed to explore the limits of self-identification. Often this style of performance is highly physical in nature. It can be adapted to apply to either Western or non-Western performance. I will use it to explore performance that is categorized as “physical” (with focus on the movement of the body to express or produce emotion, rather than on the mental process) that do not require a realist aesthetic, and I will include in this category physical theatrical styles that also incorporate a certain amount of ritual focus in them. This is a relatively recent (twentieth century) development in Western theatrical tradition; previous styles had either been religious in nature or secular, but without the focus on ritual processes to develop the actor as a means of exploring the character. One of the best known styles in this category, and the one that I will use as an example, is the theatre of Jerzy Grotowski.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Jerzy Grotowski created and developed his personal form of physical theatre, which also incorporated a distinct spiritual

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<sup>56</sup> Stanislavski, 282-283.

element. Grotowski believed that by embracing the element of mythology in their work, actors could “attempt to incarnate [it], putting on its ill-fitting skin to perceive the relativity of our problems, their connection to the ‘roots’... incarnate in the fact of the actor, in his living organism.”<sup>57</sup> The actor’s “living organism” is defined by both internal and external connectedness; Grotowski’s exercises help actors access their inner energy, putting them in touch with the “physical stream of consciousness,” making them more aware of what the limits of their own identity are, and thus more aware of where “the other” begins.<sup>58</sup> The intended focus during this work is not on the specific exercises done, but on developing the immediate awareness of the body, allowing it to relax and connect with the mind.<sup>59</sup> A strong link between body and mind allows the emotional range of the actor to expand, filling the entire spectrum of physical ability; in this system, emotional expression is not found by limiting the body’s range of expression to what is considered every day action, but by pushing past any self-imposed controls or limitations to achieve maximum power.<sup>60</sup> Once the actor understands this power as a subjective entity within himself,<sup>61</sup> he or she can see how it relates to the power of others, his surroundings, and other outside factors.<sup>62</sup> Grotowski focused strongly on the interaction between personal awareness and awareness of nature.<sup>63</sup> Performers achieve this cycle of energy through what he termed “openness.” Before beginning to move, each student must make a connection with his own “sleeping energy,” the

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<sup>57</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards and Poor Theatre* (New York, NY Simon and Schuster Publishing: 1968) 23.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Wangh, *An Acrobat of the Heart: A Physical Approach to Acting Inspired by the Work of Jerzy Grotowski* (New York, NY Vintage Books: 2000) 13.

<sup>59</sup> Wangh, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Wangh, 114.

<sup>61</sup> Zbigniew Osiński et al, “Grotowski Blazes the Trails: From Objective Drama to Ritual Arts” *The Drama Review* (1988-) 35 (Spring 1991) 101.

<sup>62</sup> Osiński, 103.

<sup>63</sup> Lendra, 121.



latent energy that Grotowski located at the base of the spine; once this energy was flowing then awareness and sensitivity increase and physical work begins.<sup>64</sup> The initial use of physical exercise to access sensory memories is intended to relax the actor and break down mental restraints that limit his or her range of expression;<sup>65</sup> once these barriers are removed, the performer becomes open to continuous sensory influence from the outside world and begins to live in a state of “panoramic perception.” By increasing awareness of outside influences and sensations, panoramic perception makes performers more aware of their own bodies and the independent energy contained in each movement, action, or thought.<sup>66</sup> Once again, theory— both the idea of panoramic perception and latent energy — seems strongly indicative of the flow state.

#### *VIOLA SPOLIN: GAMES AND IMPROVISATION*

Gordon’s third category is the idea of creating theatre through games and play. I will use this category to include forms of performance theory that are loosely structured and often informal, involving the use of games and scenarios to develop technique. The goal of such games is spontaneous performance; often this is then applied to improvised work. To represent this category, I will examine the theories of Viola Spolin.

Spolin’s Improvised Theatre begins with the use of games and exercises to train the actor’s awareness and responses and to develop a repertoire of techniques that he or she will

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<sup>64</sup> Lendra, 127.

<sup>65</sup> Wagh, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Lendra, 127.

then have available for performance.<sup>67</sup> Spolin's actors begin with a series of exercises and games. The initial warm-up exercises help the actors to focus on communication with inanimate surroundings: being fully aware and in active contact with everything in the scope of their sense, including their body. The performers then progress to verbal and physical communication with either themselves, other actors, or the audience.<sup>68</sup> The goal of these exercises is to help the actors achieve "penetration into the environment, total or organic involvement with it... on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive."<sup>69</sup> Warm-up exercises are then followed by games that stimulate creativity and awareness within the performer. Many of these games are very simple in nature. In "How Old Am I?" the performer, as a character, enters a setting, such as an airport terminal, that is simple and undemanding. Other actors observe and try to guess the age of the character.<sup>70</sup> Training with these games uses a very simple vocabulary— Who, Where, and What— intended to produce a full range of spontaneous expression in the performers; frequent changes and new challenges prevent the material from becoming repetitive or stale. Though Spolin originally developed her process for children to use, it has since been taken up by performers of all ages.<sup>71</sup> The eventual goal of Spolin's training can be either improvised performance— based on the loose structure of a scenario or game— or formal performance— based on the established structure of a play text the actor to access an internal level of intuition that was

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<sup>67</sup> Viola Spolin, *Theatre Games for the Lone Actor*, (Evanston, IL Northwestern University Press 2001) 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> Spolin, *Theatre Games*, 10-12.

<sup>69</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, (Evanston, IL Northwestern University Press 1963) 3.

<sup>70</sup> Lyovonne M. Trad, "Acting as Awareness," *The English Journal* 61 (Jan. 1972) 77.

<sup>71</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, ix.

previously unreached.. In either situation, though, Spolin’s goal is for the actor to achieve what she terms *spontaneity*.<sup>72</sup>

Spontaneity, a “moment of personal freedom... the moment when we are free to relate and act,”<sup>73</sup> allows the actor to “enter the area of the unknown and release momentary genius within himself.”<sup>74</sup> Spolin believed this level of intuition, leading to utter clarity of action, was best achieved through the use of games because they provided both structure and freedom. Games have a specific objective point, a goal that must be achieved and which provides focus for the participants. Because the game is only loosely structured, however, actors can pursue this goal in whatever ways they can come up with; natural competition within the group of performers and the interdependent nature of the work prompt them to increase the creativity of their responses if the original tactic does not produce the desired result.<sup>75</sup> Spolin encouraged response to and from the other actors and especially the audience; the actor, she believed “must no more forget his audience than his lines, his props, or his fellow actors...”<sup>76</sup> This level of focus and progression of creative response was ideal, Spolin found, for creating the element of spontaneity, the state most immediately similar to the flow state within her performance theory. Her theatre games were designed to create “direct, dynamic acting awareness of an acting experience [in which] experiencing and techniques are spontaneously wielded, freeing the student for the flowing, endless pattern of stage behavior,”<sup>77</sup> once again resembling flow theory. Theatre games alert the actor to the

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<sup>72</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, ix-x.

<sup>73</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 5-11.

<sup>76</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 14.

many different ways to do and say a single thing— to approach a single obstacle— by developing a range of techniques that come from total awareness of the self.

### *THE SUZUKI METHOD*

Gordon's fifth category, performance as a means of cultural exchange, he uses to refer to theorists who deliberately combine and explore foreign performance styles in collaboration with local or familiar ones.<sup>78</sup> I will use this category specifically to refer to performance theories which use a combination of cultural styles as a way of stimulating change, producing dialogue, or invigorating performance within their own culture and style. This definition naturally lends itself to the recent forms which combine Western and Eastern forms of performance. To represent this category, I will examine the work of Tadashi Suzuki.

The Suzuki Method, developed by Tadashi Suzuki, is often considered a fusion of three distinct forms of Japanese theatre. By adapting techniques from traditional *no* and *kabuki* theatre and combining them with the more modern *shingeki* theatre— which stages plays in a western style— Suzuki intended to “revitalize techniques and attitudes of tradition within the context of contemporary theatre.”<sup>79</sup> Suzuki, however, had a very different view of the performer than the styles from which he drew. Theatre, in his Method, is a state of constant “crisis” for both the performer and the audience because crisis is uncomfortable and

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<sup>78</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of Playing*, 333.

<sup>79</sup> Yukihiro Goto, “The Theatrical Fusion of Suzuki Tadashi” *Asian Theatre Journal* 6 (Autumn 1989) 105.

pushes participants past what they might consider their boundaries.<sup>80</sup> Performance is an “event [that] takes place between the actor and the spectator” while completely guided by the vision of the director,<sup>81</sup> and the result should be “closer to intuitive or animal responses... rather than socially-conditioned or self-conscious comportment.”<sup>82</sup>

Performers in the Suzuki Method are trained in a very specific physical paradigm; focusing on “the physicality of the Japanese as an agricultural people,”<sup>83</sup> their training begins with a series of physically and mentally demanding exercises, enacted at a state of absolute intensity and commitment, and with the impossible goal of perfect physical control.<sup>84</sup> These exercises, which include forms of full-body movement, ways of walking and breathing, and periods of statue-like stillness, are intended to introduce key principles of Suzuki’s theory, such as centered balance and energy, rhythmical movement, openness, and controlled use of space. They are not intended to be used as forms for performance, but to teach a performer the discipline and control he or she needs to be able to perform.<sup>85</sup>

One of the unarticulated but constantly present principles of the Suzuki Method is known as *jo-ha-kyu* and comes directly from tradition *no* performance styles. The phrase represents three elements of a continuous cycle: resistance (*jo*), rupture (*ha*), and held suppression (*kyu*). These are articulated through the basic exercises, are vital to the performer’s concept of how an action is divided,<sup>86</sup> and relate to Suzuki’s idea of stillness as essential to performance. Suzuki’s stillness is not a passive one, but requires strong mental

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<sup>80</sup> Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theatre Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York, NY Palgrave Macmillan 2002) 122.

<sup>81</sup> Goto, 106.

<sup>82</sup> Allain,, 122.

<sup>83</sup> Goto, 113.

<sup>84</sup> Allain, 102-114.

<sup>85</sup> Allain, 103.

<sup>86</sup> Allain, 117.

and physical concentration.<sup>87</sup> It is characterized by resistance (*jo*), a tension within the body; the *ha* is a sudden breaking of that tension, an explosion into movement; the *kyu* brings the movement back into the performer's still control and creates the next moment of *jo* in a continuous flow of energy and awareness.<sup>88</sup>

The concentration required to achieve this stillness, followed by explosive movement, goes “beyond the visual to attain infinite expression.”<sup>89</sup> As described by one performer, this concentration is a matter of specific yet infinite focus; the point of focus is placed as far away as possible, at a distance of infinite remoteness, and the performer focuses on envisioning a constant and infinitely small flow of light from that single point. This infinite, focused concentration results in a “feeling that ... awareness of [the] body and its internal sensations [are] sharpened to a fine edge of brilliance and purity like a sword.”<sup>90</sup> Like the descriptions of performance state in the previous theories, this one is highly indicative of the presence of the flow experience.

### *PROMETHEAN MIME*

Gordon's second category, “the actor as scenographic instrument,”<sup>91</sup> moves away from naturalistic performance, even naturalism in a stylized setting, and focuses on performance forms that see the actor as a presenter, similar to a musician or dancer. The actor is intended to “indicate a character without attempting to create the illusion of being the

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<sup>87</sup> Goto, 115.

<sup>88</sup> Allain, 117

<sup>89</sup> Goto, 115.

<sup>90</sup> Goto, 115.

<sup>91</sup> Gordon, 6.

character.”<sup>92</sup> I will relate this idea to my final category of modern mime, for which I will examine the work of Etienne Decroux.

In the twentieth century Decroux developed a new form of mime, known as Promethean Mime, in which the actor was “an instrumentalist of his own body,”<sup>93</sup> expressing a constant contradiction in movements and motivation. In Promethean Mime, art is a complaint, a constant struggle against the forces of the world, and this struggle is expressed in the tension and achievement of the primary unit of expression, the body.<sup>94</sup> The mime in Decroux’s work is “at ease in unease”<sup>95</sup> and so the body of a Promethean mime is constantly in struggle against itself, while still maintaining the core principles of harmony, logic, efficiency, and beauty. Adjacent body parts are taught to battle against each other through strict control of musculature and rhythm of movement: while the chest struggles to bend in a forward direction, the waist struggles against the pull of gravity to remain upright and move laterally.<sup>96</sup> The mime is taught to achieve this tension through a series of exercises, learned through observation rather than spoken instruction, which are practiced constantly throughout the career.

Decroux’s style of training the actor is similar to that found in the Indonesian theatrical tradition I examined earlier. A combination of pedagogy and ritual, Promethean Mime is intended to be studied to the exclusion of any other form, and is presented to the students non-verbally. The instructor and most advanced students mime through the statues and figures Decroux created, which newer students must copy without verbal instructions,

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<sup>92</sup> Gordon, 89.

<sup>93</sup> Deirdre Sklar, “Etienne Decroux’s Promethean Mime,” *The Drama Review* 29 (Winter 1985) 71.

<sup>94</sup> Sklar, 66-68.

<sup>95</sup> Barba, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Sklar, 67-68.

training themselves to become aware of the minutest movements of the body and the changes these initiate in tensions. Only after a mime has been completed is it then discussed, and its individual principles of struggle and release examined.<sup>97</sup> The intention of these figures is to train students in absolute control over the individual portions of their bodies and to be able to constantly evaluate their own work, in much the same way that the flow state provides control and feedback. The body, according the Decroux, must be able to “regulate its step to that of thought”<sup>98</sup> — in other words, to be able to move at any speed at will, to change directions without a conscious decision while still maintaining the previous thought/movement— so that individual, adjoining parts may be played like an instrument with as much ease of movement as there is struggle of musculature.<sup>99</sup>

## **THEORETICAL RESULTS: THE PRESENCE OF FLOW IN PERFORMANCE THEORY**

As predicted earlier, none of these theories, used as representative of general categories, contain instructions that could automatically be considered an obvious reference to a state of flow. Most focus on describing what process of preparation a performer must go through and why the performance is done. However, a closer examination can find several details that fit closely with and seem to suggest Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of flow within each performance theory.

Flow, as shown earlier, is cyclical in nature; each element leads into the others, producing a constant stream of action/awareness within a person, placing them completely

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<sup>97</sup> Sklar, 73-74.

<sup>98</sup> Sklar, 71.

<sup>99</sup> Kitty Cunningham, “The New Mime Festival at Dance Theatre Workshop,” *The Drama Review* 24 (Dec. 1980) 104.



and instinctively in tune with their environment. This cyclical energy path is found throughout the previous theories. Indonesian ritual performance makes use of cyclical energy to help performers achieve a state of calm and empathy with the masks they embody, originating within the performer and eventually expanding to include the environment and the observers. Grotowski's mind-body link follows the same cyclical pattern, creating an awareness in the performer that initially includes his or her own body and emotions, and eventually external connections to the audience and the performance area space as well. Both performance styles emphasize this interaction between personal and external awareness, relying on one to increase the other in turn. The *jo-ha-kyu* principle in Suzuki's performance theory, though applied differently, follows the same continuous cyclical pattern, with each element of movement feeding directly and automatically into the next, until the initial moment is reached once more, without the need for thought divisions between actions. The continuous tension between adjoining body parts found in Promethean Mime is often seen as similar to the *jo-ha-kyu*.<sup>100</sup> Both use the presence of constant tension to create a continuous sense of movement, even in a body that is physically still. Because the body is battling itself in every position it assumes, the movement cycle in Promethean Mime never ends, even when the physical movement does. Spolin's discovery through theatre games follows a cyclical pattern: by entering into the game and accepting its rules, the performer is released into a state of personal freedom. The energy created by this allows him or her to function as a fully organic unit of the group, which in turn releases the group into a state of freedom to discover.<sup>101</sup> With each new discovery made, the personal freedom of the individual increases, allowing progressively more and more growth and discovery. Though the nature

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<sup>100</sup> Barba, 22.

<sup>101</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 6.

of each cycle varies based on the theorist, for each the cycle is present. The elements of development and discovery in each theory feed back into each other, allowing for the growth of the performer, in the same way the elements of flow support and increase each other.

Each of these theories has parts that closely match several of Csikszentmihalyi's nine elements of flow. Within the nine points, there is some indication of cause and effect: the first five elements can be considered to produce the final four (for example, *because* distractions are excluded from consciousness, self-consciousness disappears.) The first five, then, relate more directly to process; it is these five that I found to be present in the theories I examined.

To be in a state of flow, Csikszentmihalyi's emphasizes the need for balance between skills and challenges. This balance goes both ways: a person in flow must feel that his or her skills are adequate to the challenges faced, but also that the challenges are testing their skill level enough. The theories examined here recognize this need: part of the process for each contains specific training in the skills considered necessary for performance. These vary from theory to theory, but all are designed to teach the performer control over physical and mental processes.

The purpose of this control is to provide performers with the immediate tools they need to respond to any demand (or challenge) that arises or is asked of them. This immediate response parallels the state of action/awareness found in the elements of flow: being aware of a challenge becomes the same as knowing what action to take in response. Stanislavski sums of this state of action/awareness as one in which the "apparatus of physical technique [is] highly trained [and] perfectly subordinated to the inner dictates of [the] will... developed...

to the point of an instantaneous, unconscious, instinctive reflex.”<sup>102</sup> Grotowski describes it as a “physical stream of consciousness;”<sup>103</sup> Suzuki as “closer to intuitive or animal responses... rather than socially-conditioned or self-conscious comportment.”<sup>104</sup> Spolin found that entering into “the rules of the game” allowed actors to be “truly open to receive”<sup>105</sup> the techniques and skills necessary. Decroux wants his actors to be able to regulate the pace of action “to that of thought.”<sup>106</sup> In Indonesian theatre, the performer is taught to identify with characters that are as alien from him or her as possible, with the intent that he or she becomes completely aware of the emotions and desires of every character; the final goal of many forms of Indonesian performance is to enter a state of trance, in which the performer acts from unconscious instinct, personally unaware but entirely active and engaged.<sup>107</sup>

Moments of flow are specifically described as when “what we feel, what we wish, and what we think are all in harmony... exceptional moments...in a self-contained universe.”<sup>108</sup> In addition to the specific elements of theory that match Csikszentmihalyi’s nine points, the descriptions of the practice of these theories resemble this description of a state of flow.

The ninth *rasa, shanta*, the perfect balance of all other performance experiences, is described as a transcendent experience, of performers who achieve it being free from all emotional and physical distractions.<sup>109</sup> Spolin’s idea of spontaneity, the release of momentary genius, is described as a “moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a

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<sup>102</sup> Stanislavski, 282-283.

<sup>103</sup> Wangh, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Allain, 122.

<sup>105</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 4-5.

<sup>106</sup> Sklar, 71.

<sup>107</sup> Lendra, 115.

<sup>108</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Schechner, 32.

reality and see it, explore it, and act accordingly.”<sup>110</sup> The general creative state in Stanislavski’s system is intended to put the actor in a state of both conscious and subconscious awareness, in which all responses are instantaneous and all levels of training are perfectly accessible.<sup>111</sup> Grotowski’s state of panoramic perception opens to actor to immediate awareness of and response to all sensory perceptions, both external and internal.<sup>112</sup> The state of “infinite expression,” a perfect balance of tension and relaxation achieved by a Suzuki performer, was described by a performer as a feeling of such awareness that every sensation he was aware of was “sharpened to a fine edge of brilliance and purity.”<sup>113</sup> And in the practice of Decroux’s theories, the body and the mind are intended to move at the same pace— the pace of thought— with absolute ease while still maintaining conscious awareness of action and surroundings.<sup>114</sup> These descriptions are surprisingly similar, considering the very different natures of the theories they come from. Each concept resembles the elements that make up the state of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi; in each, what the actor senses, decides, and does are in perfect harmony to the point of absolute clarity of action. The goal of each of these theories seems to be to put the actor in that flow-state, that “self-contained universe”<sup>115</sup> where they are still on some level aware of every stimulus around them.

## **PRACTICAL RESULTS: ANALYZING SURVEY RESPONSES**

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<sup>110</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, 282-283.

<sup>112</sup> Lendra, 127.

<sup>113</sup> Goto, 115.

<sup>114</sup> Cunningham, 104.

<sup>115</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*, 29.

The thesis that achieving a state of flow is a performance “what” common to diverse theories is supported by the theories themselves; each one examined seems to contain the intention of achieving a state remarkably similar to that of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow; many theorists, in the training process they develop, also include instructions for what must be done to reach this state. Of note is the fact that, though Csikszentmihalyi’s theories on flow were not developed and published until the twentieth century, even the theories which were developed centuries before contain this commonality. The implications of this will be discussed in more detail at a later point.

Of immediate concern, though, is the practical examination of this thesis. If evidence of flow as a common *what* is present in performance theories, does that necessarily imply that it will be present in the practice of those theories? Occasional comments by actors that I found in theoretical research, such as those by Suzuki actor Fueda Uichiro,<sup>116</sup> seemed to indicate that it would. The survey I designed was made with the hypothesis that from the responses of performers from a variety of theoretical backgrounds descriptions of flow-states would continue to emerge.

As the purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of performers from a variety of backgrounds, I began by examining part three of the questions<sup>117</sup> to determine the extent of this variety. A total of twenty-four theorists/performance styles were cited by the participants as styles that they had worked or trained in; each category used in my theoretical

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<sup>116</sup> See p. 24-25. Uichiro’s comments specifically address his method of achieving the necessary concentration on stage. For him, the “infinite expression” of the Suzuki Method was found in a single distant point of light; he was able to “[keep his] gaze riveted in a transcendent attitude upon this single point at a distance despite other realities...” (Goto, 115). For the original comments by Uichiro, quoted in Yukihiro Goto’s “Theatrical Fusion,” see the 1984 study by Frank Hoff, “Looking into the Distance: A Study of Stage Presence in Noh Theatre,” published in *Japan and America: A Journal of Cultural Studies* (107).

<sup>117</sup> For divisions of the questions into sections, see p. 12-13.

study was represented, if not the specific theories that I used to represent them. (See Appendix 4.) As noted in the appendix, nearly all actors identified with more than one theorist's influence. I had not anticipated this when creating the study, expecting that though there might be some overlap, performers would primarily identify their careers and preferences with a single style or theory. Most respondents, however, indicated that they studied a variety of performance styles and, rather than identifying with a single approach, "pull from styles and theories that will assist... in the current project..."<sup>118</sup> I do not feel, however, that this detracts from the significance of their responses. Rather, I find that the ability of performers to draw on such diverse styles and incorporate them into a single, personal method of performance further indicates the existence of an underlying commonality that makes them all equally accessible to a single performer. Consequently, no respondent's answers were discounted because of identification with multiple performance theories.

In part four of the survey, participants were asked to quantitatively rank statements as they applied to three areas of performance: what they found challenging, what they found enjoyable, and what they felt constituted a successful performance. These questions were designed to identify whether the nine points of flow were present or not in performance for the participants. However, questions 6-9 were designed to gather information about overall performance experience, while flow, as an "extraordinary moment," does not occur in everyday experience. If it is the common *what* of performance theories, its elements should

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<sup>118</sup> Though some participants gave permission for their names to be used, most preferred to remain anonymous. In general, to avoid using the names of participants, I have given each a number based on the order of their survey submission. In some cases, a particular participants' responses will be especially significant in relation to other answers he/ she provided. In these cases, I will refer to him/ her by this number.

be present to a moderate degree in all enjoyable, successful performance and to a definite degree in extraordinary moments of successful performance.

The questions in part five of the survey, therefore, were designed to address both the everyday and the extraordinary experience of performance. Questions 14-18 are directed towards all levels of performance experience (extraordinary and everyday) and address the specific flow elements of focus, distraction, self-consciousness, purpose, action/awareness, and feedback. Questions 10 and 11 address the qualitative, everyday experience as a professional performer. Questions 12 and 13 are specifically concerned with extraordinary experience, both good and bad; for these two, the presence of flow elements in good performance and the lack of flow elements in bad performance would indicate support of my hypothesis.

In questions 6-8, several answers were intended to identify the same element's presence or lack, but addressed it from a different angle. For example, question 6 asked what the participant found most challenging as a performer, and category k was "feeling self-conscious," while question 8 asked what made a performance successful, with option g as "lack of self-consciousness."<sup>119</sup> Both of these categories correspond to point 7, "self-consciousness disappears." In these instances, ranking the categories with a high number for question 6 and a low number for question 8 would indicate that an element of flow is present. For each question, 6-8, participants were asked to use the ranking scale 1=most (*most* challenging, enjoy *most*, *most* successful.) Some categories did not relate to the nine points of flow but were included, one, because they were viable, possible answers to the question; and two, to prevent identification of the purpose of the research. An example of this is

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<sup>119</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 111-113.

including “presenting political/social ideas” as an answer to the question, “What do you most enjoy about performing?” The possible number rankings for each question were divided up into approximate thirds of low, middle, and high, (most, middle, least), and the number of answers that fell in each third were totaled and compared. (See Appendices 5-7.) In reporting, I will address only those categories that directly relate to my investigation of the nine points of flow.

From question 6 (what do you find most challenging to you as a performer), the categories of primary concern<sup>120</sup> are h- “focusing only on performance”; k- “feeling self-conscious”; and l- “worrying about failure.” Of secondary concern are f- “connecting with the audience”; i- “using personal energy”; j- “physical act of performance”; and h- “connecting with other performers.” A high ranking on these categories would indicate the presence of an element of flow. The results to question 6 varied more than for other questions 7 through 9. The rankings for categories of secondary concern all indicated elements of flow. 53.8% of respondents ranked “using personal energy” in the lowest range of challenge (10-14); 42.9% ranked “connecting with the audience” and 53.8% ranked “physical act of performance” in the least challenging category (10-14) compared to 23.1% and 30.8% that ranked them between 1-5, respectively; and 40.0% ranked “connecting with other performers” in both ranges. However, those of primary concern yielded opposite results: 53.8% ranked “focusing only on performance” in the most challenging range (1-5), compared to 30.8% that ranked it 10-14; “feeling self-conscious” showed a weak preference towards

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<sup>120</sup> Categories of primary concern are those that correspond directly to one of the nine elements of a state of flow. Categories of secondary concern are those that relate indirectly and which explore the ideas of flow established through the study of how individual theories relate to the nine points. A list of correspondence between categories and elements of flow may be found in Appendix 9.



the presence of flow, with 40.2% ranking it 10-14 compared to 38.5% ranking it 1-5. “Worrying about failure” was ranked in both 1-5 and 10-14 46.2% of the time. I will discuss possible reasons for this division between primary and secondary categories in a later section. All of these categories elicited responses that fell strongly in either the “most” or “least” ranges; for none of them was the middle range (5-9) selected the greatest number of times.

The responses to question 7 (what do you enjoy most about performing) yielded more definite results. The categories of primary concern within this question were a- “the challenge of performance”; e- “the ease of performance”; and m- “the performance itself.” Of secondary concern were h- “connecting to the audience”; j- “connecting the other performers”; and k- “pride in your work.” For all of these, a low ranking (1-5, the most category) would indicate the presence of an element of flow. Unlike responses to question 6, all of these categories demonstrated a trend towards the presence of flow. 58.8% of respondents ranked “the challenge of performance” in the most category (1-5), compared to 17.6% that ranked it 10-14. “The ease of performance” was ranked 1-5 by 46.7% of participants, compared to 33.3% that selected answers in the 10-14 range; and 60.0% ranked “the performance itself” between 1-5, while only 13.3% placed it in the 10-14 category. This pattern was continued in the secondary categories, with “connecting to the audience,” “connecting to other actors,” and “pride in your work” being ranked in the 1-5 range by 62.5%, 64.7%, and 46.7% respectively. The average difference between the 1-5 rankings and the 10-14 rankings was 34.4%. However, this trend was also shown in the non-flow related answers; all categories had a greater percent of rankings in the 1-5 range than the 10-

14. The average difference between the two rankings for all categories was 32%,<sup>121</sup> indicating an overall trend towards participants generally enjoying their work. This, however, does not detract from the value of the responses, as will be seen in the discussion of question 9.

Of these three, question 8 related most directly to the experience of flow. By surveying what participants felt made a moment in performance good/successful, I intended to identify the qualities present during those moments which had the potential to be “extraordinary” flow moments. The categories of primary concern were b- “achieving clear personal goals”; d- “achieving clear professional goals”; e- “feeling your skills were well used”; f- “exclusive focus during performance”; and g- “lack of self-consciousness.” Of secondary concern was c- “positive audience reaction.” For all of these, a low numeric ranking would indicate the presence of an element of flow. The responses to question 8 strongly inclined towards these low rankings; all received the greatest percentage of rankings in the most range (1-3) with the average being 60.4% compared to an average of 20.2% for the 8-10 range.

Question 9 identified one of the primary qualities of flow activities, though not one of the elements of flow itself. Csikszentimihalyi identifies flow activities as ones which are enjoyable, and which the participant finds fun while engaging in them. Question 9, then, simply addressed this point. As shown in the responses to question 7, participants’ demonstrated a tendency to find performing enjoyable; responses to question 9 confirmed this. One participant did not respond; all others answered yes to the question “Do you find performing fun?” with only two adding the qualifiers “usually” or “most of the time.” This

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<sup>121</sup> Not including category n, as this was the optional “other” category and was not the same for (or even considered by) all participants.

quality of fun and enjoyment was reflected in responses to other sections of the survey. In commenting on her reasons for choosing a performance career, participant 12 stated that, "...theatre has the power to edify and change people... and it's also marvelous great fun!" Participant 8 commented that, "...they call it a play for a reason. If you're not having fun, you're doing something wrong."

The questions in part four of the survey indicated a trend towards the presence of elements of flow, regardless of the identification of the performer with any particular style or theory. However, the overall trend was indefinite, especially from question 6. In many ways, this is unsurprising: these questions address the experience of performance in a quantitative way, and the arts are a qualitative rather than quantitative phenomenon. Part five of the survey, therefore, allows participants to report their experiences in an unstructured, anecdotal way, and as a result provides definite corroboration for the trend found in part four.

The lack of distraction and self-consciousness were two elements of flow that part four did not necessarily identify, but when asked directly whether they experienced either many responded simply "no," "never," "almost never." One respondent wrote "I can't recall ever being self-conscious while onstage," another that he occasionally felt self-conscious about his balance because of a neuro-muscular disease he has dealt with, but that he could not recall feeling self-conscious about his actual ability to perform. Some participants did identify reoccurring problems with both self-consciousness and susceptibility to distraction; number 10 wrote,

I'm often distracted during performance and it depends on the nature of the show, the cast, the director... the nature of the house, the particular house, and my physical and psychological state at the time... I'm too often self-conscious onstage. I regularly feel myself dragging or rushing.

However, even performers who identified regular problems with self-consciousness or distraction qualified this in their other answers, especially when discussing their best and worst performances. When responding to questions specifically about self-consciousness, participant 3 responded that he suffered from it,

During a bout of stage fright which lasted 7 years... I suffered from doubting myself and my effectiveness as a performer before an audience. A fear of failure that cuts against every ounce of concentration—the opposite of confidence.

This implies not only a lack of flow elements, but a cyclical nature to their lack. His further responses, however, indicate that once this cycle is broken the presence of flow elements once again becomes possible. When describing his worst performance, participant 3 identified it as the beginning of his severe stage fright and added, “I was not happy with... my involvement in the production—I was not given much of a “voice” in the work nor felt the role has much importance in the production.” In this case, the lack of one element of flow — he did not feel his skills were being balanced by adequate challenge — led to the lack of others— distractions and self-consciousness entered the picture in a debilitating way, and worry about failure became regular. When describing his best performance, however, participant 3 specifically mentioned the balance he experienced between the style of performance, what he could do, and what the character required; rather than being self-conscious or distracted, he was “confident in [the character’s] confidence—no doubts, no worries.”

Additionally, in response to question 15, he specified that he was never aware of time constraints on stage, just his own self-evaluation, a constant sense of “is it working correctly?” This personal restructuring of self-consciousness and distraction as self-awareness was found in many other responses as well. One participant characterized the

feeling as being “able to recognize distractions without letting them distract me.” Participant 16 replied, “Nothing is ever a distraction because as a performer I have to manage everything in the theatre.” Participant 9 did not even consider the idea of self-consciousness part of his concept of performance; categories 6k and 8g both received a ranking of 0 on his survey; he later elaborated on this idea:

I’m not sure in what sense you mean self-conscious. I am certainly conscious of myself—but if you mean embarrassed... no. If you mean concerned how my performance will be received—yes, sometimes.

Another commented, “I hope that I am more self-aware than self-conscious.” Participant 12 likewise made the distinction between embarrassment and consciousness onstage:

In rehearsal I might feel temporarily embarrassed, but usually I can lose myself in the performance and forget to feel self-conscious. I am only aware of time constraints insofar as I sometimes notice that energy seems to be low or the show seems to be dragging... I feel very much caught up in the moment... but there is a sort of super-conscious, impartial observer that hovers quietly in the back of my mind and is aware of the performer, especially in moments when something is going wrong or might go wrong.

This idea was certainly not unique to the quoted performers, but was found in a majority of the survey responses. The concept of self-awareness and super-conscious, of managing distractions within the context of the performance rather than being distracted by them relates to other flow elements, specifically the ideas of action/awareness and feedback. These two of the nine points were in some ways the most strongly present in survey responses. Participant 12 identified herself as “caught up in the moment” onstage, as a result of “watch[ing] and listen[ing] carefully.” The comments of participants 9 and 16 on distraction reflect the same mindset. Participant 4’s comments reflected her concept of awareness as the actor and action as the character:

There's always the actor-brain and the character brain... That's the part that remembers what the blocking is, where the audience is, how much I have to project my voice. If all goes well, actor-brain works at a subconscious level and character brain dominates. But it really has to be a mixture of both...

Others identified the same phenomenon:

I'm always a performer, whether I'm conscious of it or not, so as I develop the character and story-telling... ideally my choices will avail me to attend to 'performance' issues without disconnecting me from the intellectual and emotional experience of my character. That is to say, I strive to make my performance one in which I can concentrate on what my character wants and what my character is feeling while being able to speak up, articulate, or cheat out to the audience as necessary.

This idea of being "in the moment" is common to many theories, including some of those specifically examined earlier, and several actors related it directly to their ability to achieve other elements of flow. In response to the time-consciousness portion of question 15, one participant answered, "If I am thinking about time, I am not in the moment," indicating that achieving one was dependent on the other. Many respondents also related their experience of action/awareness to their ability to obtain immediate feedback from both other performers and the audience. The same participant who related time-awareness and action/awareness also commented,

I don't like to set things. If the moment moves me, if the actor opposite me gives me something new to respond to I'll go with it. The audience is trickier. I don't want to play to them but with them. Sometimes the dialogue demands slight alterations in performance.

Other participants, when answering whether they were willing to change their own performance based on responses from other actors or the audience, expressed the same idea:

that immediate feedback to their actions was one of the most helpful parts to achieving what they considered a stand-out performance, and even, in the case of participant 17, “the joy of live theatre.” Most identified responding to this feedback as something that “absolutely” occurs “constantly.”

A few responses indicated a preference for feedback from other actors over feedback from audience members; though participant 8 characterized a level of dialogue with the audience— “I want to give something to the audience, and at the same time, I want them to give something to me”— s/he also elaborated,

I’ll never change due to the audience response, but I will always react to what another actor gives me. Acting is reacting, and [if] I give the exact same performance every night, I’m doing an injustice to the audience and my fellow cast mates. Being in the moment is paramount.

Other responses, however, indicated a strong preference for audience feedback. One characterized the audience as “the best director,” adding,

It’s impossible and artificial for the performance not to change. With experience hopefully one learns which moments to expand, contract, or augment based on ‘input’ from your other players (this includes the audience).

Determining whether participants felt performance was an end in and of itself (question 16) did not give as clear and uniform a response as was found for many other elements of flow. Many respondents replied to this question by addressing the overall goal of theatre itself, rather than their personal performance (the reasons for this and effect it had on this study will be address further on). This led to the majority of the responses addressing the concerns of dialogue with the audience, in essence the theatrical “why,” which was not the intent of the question. However, within the responses that did consider the personal act

of performance, rather than the overall purpose of theatre, focused on the simple need to perform well in the moment. As one respondent said,

I think the actor's job is to present one character, in context, in collaboration with the other actors— to the end of drawing the audience into the situation and action of the play.

These responses, then, indicated a level of flow elements present both to some extent in the general experience of performance and to a greater degree when a performance moment was very successful. The “extraordinary moment” (and its complete opposite) however, are not really addressed in these questions, but in questions 11-13, concerning epiphanies, best performances, and worst performances.

The responses of most participants who identified performance epiphanies centered on the merging of action and awareness and their own personal system of feedback. Many respondents identified that they had experienced epiphanies, but that they were, as described by participant 10, “varied and sometimes difficult to articulate.” Those who were able and willing to articulate their experience generally focused on the same ideas: feedback and action/awareness. One described his/her experience as discovering “clarity of action.” Two separate responses, that their epiphanies concerned “evaluating what played absolutely right in performance” and “some insight [helping me] know what it was I failed to do” are mirror images of the same thing: both epiphanies serve as a form of feedback to the performers, allowing them to articulate goals and successes that they do or do not achieve.

The idea of best performance produced an interesting variety of answers. Though most participants could identify a single (or several) stand-out moments in their performance career, many were unable to articulate what qualities made it stand out so strongly. “It’s hard



to intelligibly describe what made it the best,” one stated. Another couldn’t pinpoint what in her own actions or behavior had worked so well, but knew that everything that night had worked in a way that had “never happened before:”

The house was packed to the rafters. The atmosphere was electric and everyone in the cast was brilliant that night from the get go. I remember thinking to myself that this had to be one of those nights... And when the scene was done I was shaking and crying and the audience burst into applause as I left the stage. That had never happened before. And— unfortunately— never after! But it was the best I think I have ever been...

When participants were able to identify what made their performance “the best,” however, their responses strongly corresponded to the nine elements of flow. Especially present were the blending of action and awareness; the benefit of immediate feedback; lack of distractions due to focus, and extreme confidence preventing any self-consciousness or worry of failure.

For many, immediate feedback from the audience related directly to feeling that their skills were balanced against the challenges presented: “I knew I owned that role,” one participant wrote, “...I could feel the audience, and the way they felt about me.” “Evidence to reinforce my feeling of having done so well was the response of the audiences to the show,” said another. “I had more feedback... than ever in my experience... I felt very confident.” For others, a strong merging of action and awareness resulted in success: “The script went out the window,” one wrote describing a potentially disastrous situation, “but I knew who I was and what I wanted... It couldn’t help but be fresh and honest because we had never done it before.” Likewise, participant 12 described her best performance as one in which “actions felt clear, felt inevitable in a way. I did and said things because I had to.”

Though many respondents were unable to clearly articulate their “best,” the responses of those who were able to almost seamlessly blended the elements of flow present; they all are caused by and result in each other. In describing his best performance, participant 11 describes a nearly perfect union between every element of flow:

I was given 48 hours notice to go on as the lead [*clear goals*]... I was never so ‘present’ in a performance [*action and awareness merged*]. I have never relied so entirely on my fellow actors-- trusting them implicitly [*immediate feedback*]. I have never listened so intently onstage [*exclusion of distractions*]. I knew the words and music and just let them flow through me [*balance of challenges and skills*]... I responded naturally and spontaneously to whatever I was given [*activity as an end in itself*]. I have never felt a performance go by so quickly or effortlessly [*sense of time disturbed*]... [I was] supremely confident [*lack of self-consciousness, no worry of failure*].

The questions about worst performances, however, produced similar responses from the clear majority of participants. Unlike their best performances, in which many were unable to clearly identify a single quality or moment that resulted in such success, few had such difficulty in describing what resulted in the opposite. Nearly everyone who identified a worst moment was also able to identify one or two factors that caused it; overall, these were the direct or indirect lack of an element of flow.

“I was embarrassed to be part of the production,” wrote participant 5, commenting on her self-consciousness during performance. “I just was never easy in the role,” said another who experienced the same problem. “I was not prepared,” said participant 4, who suffered from too acute an awareness of time. “I allowed nervousness and self-doubt to govern my performance... I didn’t take the time to breathe and recover.” Often, distractions are identified as destroying the performer’s sense of awareness. One participant’s most disastrous show was one where a baby was crying in the front row the entire show and he,

“... just could not focus. I was so off for the entire show.” Another described many performances that he would consider his worst, and said the element they all shared was “not being properly prepared or failing to concentrate during the show... I have been distracted.”

Overall, the survey responses indicated a strong trend towards the presence of flow within the experience of all participants, both in quantitative and anecdotal responses. In some cases this was identified by the presence of flow elements during successful experiences; in others, by the lack of flow elements during unsuccessful ones. Initially, this seems to indicate support for the thesis of this paper: though separate performance theories articulate a different process, or *how*, and serve different purposes, or *why*, they all seem to go through a common stage between the two, a *what* identified in both theory and performers’ experience by the presence of flow. However, before I can draw this conclusion, the effects of several factors within the study must be examined.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

In carrying out this study, the most difficulty resulted from the limitations on time and mobility created by my status as a full-time student. Because completing my degree required that I be in Williamsburg attending classes for nearly all the time that this study was being conducted, I was not at liberty to travel in order to either interview or contact participants. As a result, I made the decision to contact all participants uniformly through email and an online survey. This allowed a uniformity of process, but severely limited by ability to find and retain participants. Though all potential participants that I contacted expressed interest and a willingness to participate in my research, only about half of them

actually completed the online survey. Because all contact was done through email, I was unable to personally express my desire for or remind them to participate; the limited amount of time I had in which to complete my study prevented me from identifying and contacting other potential participants after the low participation rate became evident. This resulted in a much lower number of participants than I would have wished for. The questions answered or not answered also varied for each survey submitted; as respondents were instructed to answer only those questions that they wished to and felt comfortable providing information about, several left certain sections blank, and these were often the ones intended to provide the majority of information for this study. It was rare that participants did not provide information about their background or performance training, but many left blank either the ranking questions in part four; the questions about best versus worst performance, or their experience of epiphanies.

As a result of these factors, the average number of surveys used for my results was about seventeen for each section. This, I felt, severely limited the conclusiveness of my data, particularly the quantitative section. Within the participant group there was a wide variety of style/theory identification; this I feel certainly indicates the viability of my results. However, the small number of actual participants prevents them from being fully conclusive. Performing this study again with fewer time constraints and the ability to more personally contact potential participants would increase the number of respondents and therefore produce more conclusive results.

Additionally, if I were to perform this study again, I would modify certain parts of the survey used, particularly those in the quantitative section (questions 6-8). When analyzing the data gathered, I discovered that the way I had phrased several questions was more

ambiguous than I had believed. Question 6 asked participants to rank categories based on the level of challenge they posed, but provided no means for the participants to indicate to what extent they were able to overcome this challenge. A rank of 1, for example, given to “feeling self-conscious” could indicate either that the participants found it challenging and suffered from it regularly during performance, or that they found it challenging but were able to overcome it and perform un-self consciously on a regular basis. It can be assumed that this second option is a valid interpretation of some of the responses, because categories such as “presenting a character believably” were also more likely to be ranked in the most challenging range, despite the fact that being able to regularly do so is absolutely necessary for a professional performer in most theatrical styles. The distinction becomes important as the former would argue against the presence of flow, while the latter would argue for it. Having a question that allowed the participant to rank their ability to regularly overcome the categories they found most challenging would have been more helpful in analyzing the results. Likewise, in question 7 (what do you enjoy most about performing) a category such as “the ease of performance” retains a certain amount of ambiguity. If the participant ranks it high, is this because he or she does not find it easy, or because he or she does but that is not one of the reasons they enjoy performance? Many of the rankings, I found during collecting survey results, needed clarification or qualification in order to be fully helpful in determining their relationship to the elements of flow. The ranking 0 also became problematic; I had no way of knowing if it indicated that the performer simply did not understand the category; if they did not feel it applied to their style of performance, or if it was so intrinsic to their acting/ easy for them to do that they simply did not consider it. Ranking “feeling your skills were well-used” as a 0, for example, could indicate either that the participants felt their skills

were used satisfactorily simply by the act of performance, regardless of whether it was successful or not; or, that they did not feel using skills well mattered in determining the success of a performance. Again, the different options have different implications for determining the presence/lack of flow. These uncertainties could be clarified in further study by asking participants to elaborate on any rankings of 0 that they choose.

Other qualitative questions did not necessarily produce the results they were expected to, particularly questions 11, 16, and 18. Though question 11 was intended to inspire answers about the “extraordinary moment” experienced during performance, many— nearly the majority— of respondents answered it relating to their overall acting experience, particularly as concerned character development and or the learning/rehearsal process. This severely limited the usefulness of this question; most of the responses did not end up concerning the subject of my study at all. Similarly, though most participants understood question 18 to refer to responses from the audience and other performers during an actual performance, a few took it to mean suggestions from fellow actors off-stage about others’ performance. This prompted a few responses that were very emotional and direct in nature, but once again not related to the subject I was studying. Likewise, question 16 did not prompt the answers I wished because most participants interpreted it as the meaning of theatre as an overall tool and experience, rather than relating it to their own goals for the independent act of each performance. Each of these problems, however, could be overcome by clarification. In each case, my survey failed to clearly distinguish between performance as the immediate on-stage experience (if a stage is being used, of course) and the overall process of developing and presenting a play or piece. Clarification could be provided by the simple definition of this distinction, either for each question or at the beginning of the survey.

In all cases where either the conditions of the study or the structure of the survey limit the conclusiveness of the information gathered, the problems arising could be overcome with slight alterations in further research without changing the overall nature of the study.

Finally, the conditions I have tested for were drawn directly from the nine elements of flow, all of which Csikszentmihalyi characterizes as present in flow-state. All nine points are present in the overall analysis of the survey responses; however, within individual responses, all nine are not always present. Individual responses, therefore, often indicate that a flow state is *not* consistently present, but the overall results of the study indicate that it is. This could be partly caused by the initial assumptions of this study: the six categories I examined were intended to represent all possible performance theories, but, given that far more theories were identified by survey participants than I examined, this may constitute a significant variable. This discrepancy could also be accounted for either by the personalities and experiences of the individual respondents, or by the structural problems in the survey discussed above. It does, however, indicate that further, and more in depth, research needs to be done in order to determine the exact nature of flow experience in performance

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In spite of the drawbacks to the structure of the study I examined in the above section, the overall results are consistent throughout, in both the theoretical and practical research.

The nine points of flow identified by Csikszentmihalyi are identified, both directly and indirectly, by the styles used to represent the six categories of performance theory. The extent to which these elements could be pinpointed varied from theory to theory. In Viola

Spolin's writing on her theory of theatre games, the elements of flow can be easily and clearly identified; her ideas include reference to goals for the actors; the development of challenges and skills; feedback from the audience and other actors; the merging of action and awareness; and the fun of the game as an end itself. Identifying these elements within ritual Indonesian theatre-dance, by contrast, is less straightforward; they must be found indirectly in the goals and achievements of each stage of mask-work used by the performer. This difference can be accounted for, though, by the development and process of each theory as a coherent set of ideas. Theatre-dance is a far older form of performance than Spolin's theatre games, and is designed to be communicated physically and personally, rather than through a widely-distributed written text. Most importantly to the conclusions of this study, the ultimate goal or perfect performance moment delineated by all the theories matched nearly perfectly with Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow experience as an "extraordinary moment" in which all nine elements are equally and cyclically present.

Though overall both the quantitative and anecdotal evidence gathered through the survey responses indicated a trend towards the presence of flow, some discrepancy appears, both from survey to survey and within individual responses. However, many of these discrepancies can be identified as due to both the nature of the questions and the subject being studied. In questions 12 and 13, participants were more able to identify a lack of individual flow elements causing a worst performance but only the overall experience for best performances. Though this made the information gathered from the questions seem less conclusive, in many ways it perfectly matches the nature of flow experience. Research into performance theories identified both flow and the act of performance as having a generally cyclical nature. It is therefore reasonable to discover that when all the elements are working



ideally together (best performance) it is difficult to identify one particular reason that success has been achieved, and that when the cycle is broken (worst performance) the opposite is true. Flow, by nature, is an indefinite phenomenon, and the responses to both questions 12 and 13 reflect this.

For some respondents, quantitative answers contrasted directly with their description of actual performance experience. Participants 9, 13, and 17, for example, all ranked “technical accuracy” as the most important factor in judging whether a performance was successful (question 8a). All of their answers to questions 12 and 13, however, indicated that this was not quite true: technical accuracy was important in determining whether a performance was *not* successful. In describing their worst performances, all three identified missed technical elements such as missed entrances or dropped lines. When trying to describe their best performances, however, the answers of all three had the same indefinite “good” quality that many of the others did. In response to 12a, participant 17 wrote,

I have no clue [what made my best performance]. Being onstage is like being both super acutely human, and simultaneously beyond and out of one’s body. ‘Great’ shows are due to very different reasons at different times... All of the elements basically mar my ability to accurately say what has been the pinnacle of my experiences on the stage.

For many participants, qualitative answers seemed to reflect personality— what they logically felt made a good performance based on personal preference— but their descriptive answers reflected a greater degree of similarity in experience, regardless of the rankings they gave individual categories. Personal differences or differences based on theoretical identification or training, then, could be affecting the quantitative answers, but the eventual experience of participants reflects a definite level of similarity regardless of training or style.

Similarly, participants whose answers reflected a recurring and regular lack of flow elements nevertheless identified flow moments. Participant 10 characterized him/herself as frequently self-conscious and distracted, but

My best moments have felt like I had an intimate discourse with the audience [*feedback*]... I felt that I was still telling a story... but their attention, energy, and responses were fully integrated, [*action/awareness*] without distraction, into my communication with them... I felt free of self-consciousness, but aware of myself on multiple levels.

Participant 11, who ranked both self-consciousness and worry about failure as most challenging to him, summed up the same feeling: “It’s lovely,” he wrote, “to be swept away for a moment when you lose yourself in the part.” Instances such as these reflect, not a constant presence of flow elements the way some other answers do, but a definite experience of the “extraordinary moment,” which, more than everyday experience, is what flow truly is.

The usefulness of responses to survey questions contained several surprises for me throughout the course of the study. Many produced references to elements of flow that had not specifically been addressed, such as a balance between challenges and skills being referred to while answering a question about self-consciousness. Oftentimes, even when questions were phrased separately with no intention of the responses being joined, the answers still related to each other. This, I feel, further indicates the presence of flow in the performers’ experience: the answers of the participants, and their natural relating of distinct elements of experience, in many ways reflect the cyclical, linked nature of flow itself. This, I felt, confirmed the overall success of the survey, in spite of the problems discussed in the previous section. Even those questions identified as needing further clarification were able, to some extent, to provide evidence of elements of flow. All participants, regardless of their

individual identification with specific theories or styles of performance, indicated that they experienced some degree of flow during performance.

This leads me to believe that, though the survey I used would need to be modified for further research, overall, its results supported the identification of flow as the commonality present in the performance experience.

Despite this, however, this particular study remains essentially inconclusive. Though the information gathered in it leads to the identification of flow as the common *what* of performance experience — the goal of theory and the result of its practical application— the limited number of participants leaves the results fundamentally indeterminate. From the responses of those who participated, a definite trend towards the common presence of flow can be identified, but further research remains necessary to conclusively state that it is the overarching commonality of performance theory. The strength of the results, however, leads me to predict that a similar study with broader scope than this would produce its successful identification.

Flow is essentially, however, a human experience, not strictly one centered on performance. Perhaps, then, the true commonality is not the nature of performance but of human experience. Reaching what is essentially a flow moment is a critical step to success in each theory examined, even those that drastically predate the identification of flow as a psychological concept. If flow is the goal of human experience, then it is natural that it would be present in all performance experience, regardless of the type of theory or performance being explored. What truly links these theories, then, is not the individual *how* or *why* that they articulate but the human element involved in them. Performance is essentially a human experience, regardless of technique or purpose, and if that experience is

common to all of them then they are not really so different from each other. This vision is described, whether purposefully or not, by Viola Spolin: “A player can dissect, analyze, intellectualize, or develop... but if he is unable to communicate it physically, it is useless within the theatre form... The artist must draw upon and express a world that is physical but that transcends objects... We must all find the tools for this expression.”<sup>122</sup> The eventual fusion of these techniques then, as described by so many participants, may be the future of performance theory.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THANKS**

There are many people without whom this study would never have been possible, and I would like to take this space to acknowledge their help and thank them for all their support:

Dr. Richard Palmer, who told me on my first day at William & Mary that I would want to do a thesis my senior year, and who very patiently advised me through the entire process;

Elizabeth Wiley and Brad Weiss, who very kindly agreed to sit on my committee;

Professors Christine Berndt, Christopher Owens, and Francis Tanglao-Aguas, who answered every question I had and provided resources without which my research would never have begun;

Brian Paljug, who knows far more about creating websites than I ever will;

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<sup>122</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation*, 16.

Alexander Danvers, my go-to guy for all my psychology questions;

All the participants, for whose insight and thoughtfulness I am eternally grateful, both for the benefit it was to this study and for the enriching value it had on my life;

And my family and friends, whose support kept me focused and motivated for the past year and a half.

## **APPENDIX**

### *Appendix 1. Questionnaire*

Name (optional):

Age:

Place of birth:

Current place of residence:

Current or most recent performance employment:

1. Describe your home environment growing up.

- a. Were you raised with any religious/cultural practices?
- b. Do you still identify with those practices?
- c. If no, do you identify with others?

2. In what ways do you think your family background was important in shaping your personal beliefs and goals? (Ethical or life values, life goals, your concept of success, value of your profession, etc.)

3. How did you develop an interest in performing? Was there a particular person or event that stimulated your interest?

4. Is there a particular school/theorist/style of performance that you studied?

a. Beginning of studies?

b. Others over the course of career?

c. Is there one particular style/theorist that you identify with the most or that you feel was most helpful to/influential in your development as a performer?

5. What particular school/theorist/style of performance do you most work in currently?

For questions 6-8, please rank the options by number, which one indicating the answer which is the most. If you feel an option does not apply to your sense of performance at all, place a zero next to it.

6. What do you find most challenging for you as a performer?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| a. developing a creative interpretation___ | b. becoming a character/entity___      |
| c. presenting a character believably___    | d. communicating emotion___            |
| e. focusing only on performing___          | f. connecting with the audience___     |
| g. communicating character intent___       | h. connecting with other performers___ |
| i. using personal energy___                | j. physical act of performance___      |
| k. feeling self-conscious___               | l. worrying about failure___           |
| m. other_____                              |  |

7. What do you most enjoy about performing?

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| a. the challenge of performance___ | b. being someone other than yourself___ |
| c. having a social impact___       | d. presenting political/social ideas___ |
| e. the ease of performance___      | f. religious/cultural impact___         |
| g. the creative outlet___          | h. connecting to the audience___        |
| i. the emotional outlet___         | j. connecting to other performers___    |
| k. pride in your work___           | l. the rehearsal process___             |
| m. the performance itself___       |   |
| n. other:_____                     |   |

8. What, to you, makes your performance good/successful?

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| a. technical accuracy___         | b. achieving clear personal goals___     |
| c. positive audience reaction___ | d. achieving clear professional goals___ |

- e. feeling your skills were well-used\_\_\_\_      f. exclusive focus during performance\_\_\_\_  
g. lack of self-consciousness\_\_\_\_      h. emotional impact on audience\_\_\_\_  
i. other\_\_\_\_\_
- 

9. Do you find performing fun?

10. What two pieces of advice would you give to someone beginning work as a performer?  
Please indicate which you feel is the more important.

11. Do you ever have “epiphanies” concerning your performance, either while performing or during down time?

- a. Please describe any you feel comfortable sharing
- b. When/what do they most concern?

12. Describe your best performance

- a. What was the situation?
- b. What made it the best?
- c. Did you feel confident at the time? If so, were you confident as a performer or as the role you were performing?

13. Describe your worst performance

- a. What was the situation?
- b. What made it worst?

14. Are you ever distracted while performing? How often? How easily? Are you distracted by the audience, by the other performers, or by yourself?

15. Are you ever self-conscious while onstage? Are you frequently conscious of any time constraints placed on you?

16. What, to you, is the purpose of performance?

- a. Social, religious, entertainment, or other? Is this the only purpose, or do you sometimes feel there is more than one?
- b. To you, is the act of performance an end in itself, or is there something greater to be achieved?
17. When you are onstage, do you think of yourself as a performer, or as the character/entity you are portraying?
18. Will you ever change a moment in performance based on response from another actor/from the audience?

*Appendix 2: Website Introduction*

**Performance Research 2008/2009**

**Welcome**

Thank you for your participation. Please read the following information before beginning to answer the following questions.

This questionnaire contains questions about your development and process as a performer. Please answer questions as fully and elaborately as you feel comfortable doing. The more extensive your answers, the more I will be able to use the information you provide. You may, however, skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, or provide only as much information as you wish. You may stop answering questions at any point. The space for "Name" may be left blank if you do not want the possibility of your name being included with any anecdotes you may provide.

After you return the completed questionnaire, you will receive more information on the goal and purpose of this investigation. Please do not discuss the questions or your answers with anyone else you know to be participating until after you have both finished and submitted your responses.

If you have any questions at any time, please contact me at [kasch3@wm.edu](mailto:kasch3@wm.edu).

Thank you again for your help, and best of luck to you in your work.

THIS PROJECT WAS APPROVED BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2008-09-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2009-09-01.

Click to continue...



*Appendix 3: Initial Email Contact with Participants*

Dear [Name of Participant],

My name is Katharine Schellman; I am a student at the College of William & Mary and I am contacting you about a line of research I am working on.

I am currently working on senior honors research, focusing on certain elements of performance theory across a variety of cultures. My research involves both investigating theorists/ theories, and speaking with performers who work in the style of those theorists. [Explanation of who suggested I contact the participant or what work of the participant made me approach him/her] to see if you would be interested in participating..

Participation involves simply filling out an online survey, located at <http://people.wm.edu/~kasch3>

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,  
Katharine Schellman  
College of William & Mary, class of '09

*Appendix 4: Actor Identification by Theorist*

*\* It will be noted that the total adds up to 288.2% identification. This is because most performers indicated that they identified with more than one performance style over the course of their training/careers. The numbers in the table represent how the participants identified their own influences.*

John Barton	11.8%
Morris Carnovsky	5.9%
Konstantin Stanislavski	47.1%
Michael Chekov	23.5%
Sanford Meisner	29.4%
Uta Hagen	23.5%
Stella Adler	11.8%
Peter Brook	5.9%
Lee Strasberg	5.9%
Mime	11.8%
Dance	11.8%
Marcel Marceau	5.9%
Charlie Chaplin	5.9%
Alexander Technique	5.9%

Martial Arts	5.9%
Mask work	5.9%
Commedia dell'Arte	17.6%
Viewpoints	11.8%
Viola Spolin	5.9%
Suzuki Method	5.9%
South Asian Dance	5.9%
Jerzy Grotowski	11.8%
Dario Fo	5.9%
Ivana Chubbuck	5.9%

*Appendix 5: Survey Data, Question 6*

\*\*As with Appendix 4, it will be noted that the total percent for each category does not always add to 100%. When responding, participants did not limit themselves to only selecting each number rank once. No participant selected all possible rankings within a question. This allowed the participants to rank the answers based on how they felt about each category uniquely, rather than needing to compare them to how they felt about the other categories. Additionally, participants had the option of selecting 0 if they felt an option did not apply to them and their performance experience. See Appendix 8 for a sample answer.

† As the total number of rankings available to participants was not equally divisible by three, the low, middle, high divisions are not even. In dividing these ranges, my primary concern was to keep the low and high ones even, as those were the two I was considering in my results. Consequently, the number of values in the middle range does not match the other two.

	<b>1 to 5</b>	<b>6 to 9</b>	<b>10 to 14</b>
<b>a</b>	61.5%	23.1%	15.4%
<b>b</b>	64.3%	21.4%	14.3%
<b>c</b>	40.0%	26.7%	33.3%
<b>d</b>	25.0%	41.7%	33.3%
<b>e</b>	53.8%	15.4%	30.8%
<b>f</b>	35.7%	21.4%	42.9%
<b>g</b>	40.0%	40.0%	20.0%
<b>h</b>	40.0%	20.0%	40.0%
<b>I</b>	23.1%	23.1%	53.8%
<b>j</b>	30.8%	15.4%	53.8%
<b>k</b>	38.5%	15.4%	46.2%
<b>l</b>	46.2%	7.7%	46.2%
<b>m</b>			7.7%

*Appendix 6: Survey Data, Question 7*

\*\* † See note on Appendix 6

	<b>1 to 5</b>	<b>6 to 9</b>	<b>10 to 14</b>
<b>a</b>	58.8%	23.5%	17.6%
<b>b</b>	56.3%	31.3%	12.5%
<b>c</b>	57.1%	7.1%	35.7%
<b>d</b>	57.1%	28.6%	21.4%
<b>e</b>	46.7%	20.0%	33.3%
<b>f</b>	35.7%	28.6%	35.7%
<b>g</b>	70.6%	11.8%	17.6%
<b>h</b>	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%
<b>I</b>	50.0%	14.3%	35.7%
<b>j</b>	64.7%	5.9%	29.4%
<b>k</b>	46.7%	26.7%	26.7%
<b>l</b>	64.7%	11.8%	23.5%
<b>m</b>	60.0%	26.7%	13.3%
<b>n</b>	66.7%		33.3%

*Appendix 7: Survey Data, Question 8*

\*\* † See note on Appendix 6

	<b>1 to 3</b>	<b>4 to 7</b>	<b>8 to 10</b>
<b>a</b>	43.8%	18.8%	37.5%
<b>b</b>	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%
<b>c</b>	66.7%	20.0%	13.3%
<b>d</b>	42.9%	28.6%	28.6%
<b>e</b>	66.7%	13.3%	20.0%
<b>f</b>	73.3%		26.7%
<b>g</b>	50.0%	31.3%	18.8%
<b>h</b>	73.3%	13.3%	13.3%
<b>I</b>	80.0%	20.0%	

*Appendix 8: Sample Answer to Questions 6-8*

**6. What do you find most challenging for you as a performer?**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>a.</b> developing a creative interpretation_4_ | <b>b.</b> becoming a character/entity_3_      |
| <b>c.</b> presenting a character believably_6_    | <b>d.</b> communicating emotion_13_           |
| <b>e.</b> focusing only on performing_4_          | <b>f.</b> connecting with the audience_5_     |
| <b>g.</b> communicating character intent_3_       | <b>h.</b> connecting with other performers_9_ |
| <b>i.</b> using personal energy_3_                | <b>j.</b> physical act of performance_0_      |
| <b>k.</b> feeling self-conscious_8_               | <b>l.</b> worrying about failure_1_           |
| <b>m.</b> other_____                              |   |

*Appendix 9: Correspondence Between Categories and Elements of Flow (Questions 6-9)*

1. There are clear goals every step of the way	
	7e. the ease of performance
	8b. achieving clear personal goals
	8d. achieving clear professional goals
2. There is immediate feedback to one's actions	
	6f. connecting with the audience
	6h. connecting with other performers
	7h. connecting to the audience
	7j. connecting to other performers
	8c. positive audience reaction
3. There is a balance between challenges and skills	
	7a. the challenge of performance
	8e. feeling your skills were well-used
4. Action and awareness are merged	
	6h. connecting with other performers
	6i. using personal energy
	7e. the ease of performance
	7j. connecting to other performers
5. Distractions are excluded from consciousness	
	6e. focusing only on performing
	8f. exclusive focus during performance
6. There is no worry of failure	
	6l. worrying about failure
7. Self-consciousness disappears	
	6k. feeling self-conscious
	8g. lack of self-consciousness
8. The sense of time becomes disturbed	
	6e. focusing only on performing
	7e. the ease of performance
9. The activity becomes... and end in itself	
	7e. the ease of performance
	7k. pride in your work
	7m. the performance itself

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