



AATE + Westtown School

Theater Anywhere: A Cookbook of Activities

Alex Ates interviewing Scarlett Kim

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>> Alex Ates: Hi, everyone. I'm Alex Ates from Westtown. Today, I'm joined by Scarlett Kim. Scarlett, thank you so much for being with us—it is really delightful to have your expertise and creativity being shared. So, I'm curious, what's your recipe?

>> Scarlett Kim: Hi, everyone. My name is Scarlett Kim. My recipe is about exploring movement improvisation through spacial relationship with the camera both solo and as an ensemble. So, the medium of virtual theater is really interesting because it's neither film or theater and because it's a new medium, there isn't a set lexicon of vocabulary and we can draw from both, the language of film and theater to make choices. I found that working in this new medium, it's been actually reinvigorating my relationship to live theater because it really uncovers all of my subconscious habits.

So, one of the most empowering things about making virtual theater has been performers curating their relationship to the camera directly. In this medium, every performer can be their own DP and their own designer, and they can tell the story by scripting an intentional relationship to the camera. So, thinking of the Zoom rectangle as a kind of stage space, we may all be kind of used to this standard torso shot, but there are different ways of furnishing the space with the performer's body, and with objects, and designing the environment.

So, the first thing I want to talk about is scale: exploring the extremes of scale in relation to the camera is a really exciting

way of exploring a performer's relationship to space. So, positioning yourself really close to the camera like this, you can achieve a kind of close up effect like in film but in an actor-driven way. This can be an interesting way to explore directing attention to parts of one's body and explore movement and physicality in a heightened manner.

So, a variation of this exercise would be creating a small toy theater, or a tabletop object theater piece, which can feel kind of daunting in real life but, in virtual theater, everything is possible. And, there is already this little mini-stage, for you to populate with things that you can manipulate and activate.

So, on the other extreme creating landscapes, whether it's literal or whether it's abstract, whether it's indoor space or outdoor space, and finding one's body position in it, and how the body moves through, can be a great exercise. It's a great way for performers to train themselves through the form in a very intimate relationship to the space and not just think of their performance in isolation. And this doesn't have to be anything fancy or involve construction, in fact, using what you have already like everyday objects and performing in one's own personal space or a familiar outdoor space is such an interesting experience for the performer and the audience because it's not representational, nothing is standing in for anything and there's such a sense of intimacy and honesty that really opens up new layers and meaning in the performance. So, for example, I'm here in my studio. I've been performing with you guys at a certain medium-length scale and relationship to the camera. But, our relationship totally changes when I go into the space and perform in this little D.I.Y. living room set that I've created here. It maybe feels a little more voyeuristic, a feels a little more dramatic, theatrical, there are so many ways of thinking about it that, again, draws from the language of film as well as theater.

So, entrances and exits! As you explore the extremes of spacial relationships with the camera, another fun thing to consider is entrances and exits. So, again, thinking of the Zoom rectangle

as an onstage space, what are ways one can enter in and exit out? What about an in-between moment where we see a part of the performer's body in the frame and part of it outside of the frame?

In the theater, sometimes transitions are supposed to be these hush-hush things where we scurry around in the dark and try not to be seen, but there's so much potential in transitions in how to tell the story. Exploring different visual and compositional strategies and how to enter and exit out of the frame can be a really useful exercise in talking about what onstage and offstage means.

Alright, so far, we talked about ways in which you can work with heightened awareness of the confines of the Zoom rectangle and building a world within and also how you enter in and exit out of that space. This can be individual explorations in real-time or compositions and sequences and etudes that can be created in each artist's own time and shared later as a group. In a group setting, it's really fun to think of bringing together these prepared individual compositions in spaces as a kind of video collage. So let's say you've prompted a group of artists to prepare a choreography and response to the image of the bottom of the ocean. The individual etudes can be sequences serially, one after the other, like a film. Or, perhaps there can be, on top of that, a binding element like music or a narrative voice, or a voiceover, or the etudes can be visually collaged in a grid, where the audience will be able to see visual echoes and resonances between the individual rectangles, whether you intend it or not. There's also a million ways to layer these individual feeds so that they have a more intentional compositional schema. What would it be like to layer three different renditions of the bottom of the ocean compositions on top of each other and make each of the performers slightly transparent? That would create a really interesting sort of surreal, impressionistic landscape of images and movement, so finding (glitch) space where (glitch) and connecting individual performers and their spaces together, always yields really surprising and interesting results.

So for this, something like that kind of experiment you can use NDI Tools and OBS which allows the central computer to composite multiple feeds into one composition and stream it and stream it. We, unfortunately, don't have the time to go into the technical back end, but please feel free to reach out and I'll drop a link here in case you'd like to learn more about integrating multi-locational performances, and I'd love to talk.

So, finally, all of what I mentioned above can be a really great, real-time group improvisational movement exercise as well. Whether it's something you do for warm-up or something you do as a devising strategy in building a theatrical collage or a more impressionistic play. You might want to try applying some tactics that the surrealists used in creating "exquisite corpses" where the artists build absurd, intuitive overall logic and composition in a collaboration by contributing discrete parts.

With the world-building through the spatial composition idea that I mentioned in the beginning, yeah, try asking your ensemble of performers to build the bottom of the sea as a group. So Zoom may be not the best platform for this because everyone sees everyone else's feeds in different orders in Grid View, but you can try this on Skype where you have more customization of the grid, or other video call platforms.

How can a chair in one performer's square turn into a sky, a piece of the sky, in another performer's rectangle? And what if the performers were doing one large physical improvisation assuming they were all together in one large surreal, interconnected space? With the entrances and exits exercise, you could try what happens if one performer exits from the rectangle and "becomes a different person" by another performer entering into their rectangle at the same time. This format of virtual theater allows (ironic glitch) in glitches and non-linear logic in thinking about time and space. So, taking advantage of all those possibilities is really exciting. What if all the performers in the ensemble contribute one body part, and the

group forms a kind of chimeric monster creature together? And performs as one entity?

So, much of what we explored today, what I talked about today can be translated into the process of making live theater. For example, what does it mean to perform directly to the camera? What does it mean to ignore the presence of the camera and perform as if I'm in the space by myself or with a scene partner? These questions can be a great way to explore modes of performance on stage in terms of the performer's relationship to the audience, in regards to the fourth wall.

So, at the same time, I think, for me, it's important to not think of virtual theater as something to replicate live theater or to replace it but it's really its own medium with its own unique parameters. I've found that it's really liberating to respond to and play with the unique elements and possibilities of this medium and challenging myself to really not know and to be curious as much as possible. It's been really a great opportunity to unlearn my habits, and in how I think about performance and compositions and to really boldly follow my impulses.

>> Alex: Wow!

>> Scarlett: Yeah, I think that's it.

>> Alex: Oh Scarlett, you rock! That is so inspiring. So, one of the things I'm curious to get your take on is, like, thinking about the Zoom square as its own theater, and thinking about the body's relationship to the camera, I also feel like one can very much get comfortable hiding because you only see certain parts of the body. And I'm wondering: Do you have any advice for being brave with this style of theater and recording?

>> Scarlett: Yeah, that's a really great question. I think it's, I myself included, there's a hesitance or anxiety and discomfort, in a way, of performing in a vacuum. It's hard. In real space and real-time, you can kind of respond to—and be

energized by—the energy of those around you. And you know, acting is reacting, so you're in the real room with real people, but in this medium, I found that yeah it takes a certain amount of work, or preparation in a way, to really be able to liberate your impulse and enfranchise them. I think an exercise specifically for that I found useful is mirroring, so, you know, that theater exercise where you mirror but it turns into a kind of very fluid exchange between bodies where it's unclear who's the leader and who's the follower. So I find that because that's very task-driven, you have a very specific objective that you're doing, that allows folks to break out of this torso shot and go into a more, you know, different kinds of explorations of space and also the relationship between the camera and themselves. Also, flocking, if you're in a group ensemble setting can be a really exciting way of exploring just group dynamics and also because everyone's space is going to be different, everyone's camera and camera position is going to be different, and just celebrating that as opposed to "no everyone must be the same." It's like no, it's actually really interesting to see how everyone takes the impulse of the leader in a flocking exercise and adapts it to their body and their space. I find that that kind of celebration of individuality and individual spaces and uniqueness can also kind of also promote a sense of comfort and confidence.

>> Alex: Hm. Scarlett Kim, thank you so much for your recipe. And I wish you well in these remarkable times.

>> Scarlett: Thank you so much, Alex, and I look forward to exploring this medium more and also see what everyone else in the world comes up with.