Messing with the Form: Reifying the Suzuki Method of Actor Training to Foster an Ensemble for Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*

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Dramaturgy of a Play: Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*

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**BRI:** Welcome, all. Thank you for joining us for Part One of our “Messing with the Form” Series. Today’s discussion will revolve around Anton Chekhov’s play *Three Sisters*—the creation, the dramaturgy, and a common problem with today’s productions. We have the honor and privilege of hosting a panel of experienced and distinguished guests, who have graciously offered their time to discuss *Three Sisters* with us here today. Our guests include the playwright himself, Anton Chekhov, his wife and actress, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, and Moscow Art Theatre co-founders, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. For those of you not familiar with our guests’ work and presence in the theater world, you will find short biographies about each in Appendix A. All of the quotes that come from the text of *Three Sisters* are extracted from the 1992 translation by Paul Schmidt. Thank you to all for being here today. We will begin shortly.

**THE CREATION**

**BRI:** To begin our discussion of *Three Sisters*, I would like to focus on the creation of the play—how it came to be and who was involved in the development. The floor is open, so everyone please feel free to chime in whenever you’d like. Mr. Chekhov, would you start us off?
A. CHEKHOV: Sure, Bri. I wrote *Three Sisters* in the fall of 1900, during my time in Yalta. I had been working with the Moscow Art Theatre for a few years at this point. They had already produced two of my other plays, *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*. *Three Sisters* was the first play I wrote specifically for them, for their company (Rocamora 21-22).

BRI: How did you and the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) start working together?

V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO: I wanted to produce his play, *The Seagull*. Konstantin Sergeyevich and I had just recently formed this new modern theater together, the Moscow Art Theatre. Konstantin and I met for the first time in May of 1897 at the Slavyansky Bazaar in Moscow. Our meeting lasted for eighteen hours (Rocamora 16).

BRI: Wow, that’s quite a long time.

K. STANISLAVSKY: Yes, well, we had a lot to discuss. Vladimir Ivanovich and I wanted to break the old forms and conventions of traditional theater in Russia at the time. We spent those eighteen hours coming up with a plan for how our new theater could do that (Rocamora 16). “We rebelled against the old manner of acting, against theatricality, against a false pathos, declamation and artificially, against bad conventions of staging and décor...against the whole system of production, and the contemptible repertoire, in theaters at that time” (quoted in Allen 11).

BRI: Within these new forms you wanted more truthful representations of life, rather than grand spectacles where the actors over-animate and the plot is unrealistic. Yes?
V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO: Precisely. I wanted *The Seagull* to be part of the MAT’s inaugural season, but Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was extremely reluctant to grant us the rights after the play’s disastrous premiere at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg (Senelick, 1997, 34).

A. CHEKHOV: Oh God, it was awful. The audience did not understand it at all. The opening night performance got laughable reviews. The correspondent for *The Fan* in St. Petersburg said that it seemed like “an amateur recital taking place on a professional stage” (Senelick, 1997, 36). I was simultaneously furious and mortified. But looking back, I may have overreacted just a bit. (*Laughs.* I wrote to my publisher, Aleksey Sergeyevich Suvorin, the next day and said, “Stop the publication of my plays. I shall never forget last evening…I shall not have the play produced in Moscow, ever. Never again shall I write plays or have them staged” (quoted in Rocamora 15). I can be a little dramatic sometimes. (*Laughs again.*)

BRI: But the Moscow Art Theatre did end up producing *The Seagull*, correct?

V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO: I had to beg Anton Pavlovich, but yes, we did. In one of my letters to him I said, “perhaps the play will not provoke storms of applause but a genuine production with *fresh* qualities, *liberated from routine*, will be a triumph of art—I guarantee it” (quoted in Allen 11). Now, one must understand that the traditional theater of Russia at this time consisted of stylized performances and dramatized events. Chekhov wrote plays about everyday life and sorrow, in everyday language, and that’s what we wanted.
A. CHEKHOV: I remember during rehearsals for my play *Uncle Vanya*, the woman playing Sonya knelt when she said “Papa, one must be merciful,” and kissed Serebryakov’s hand. And I told her “You mustn’t do that, this really isn’t a drama. The whole meaning and the whole drama of a person is internal, and doesn’t exist in external phenomena. There was drama in Sonya’s life before this point, there will be drama after it, but this is a mere incident, an aftermath to the shooting. And even the shooting is not a drama but an incident” (quoted in Senelick, 1997, 54).

V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHEKNO: The MAT’s production of *The Seagull* was a great success. We were able to capture the proper tone without turning it into a weepy melodrama. The MAT ended up getting the exclusive rights to *Uncle Vanya* soon after. But *Three Sisters* was the first play written specifically for us, for our company (Senelick, 1997, 58).

BRI: Mrs. Knipper-Chekhova, I understand you played Masha in the premiere of *Three Sisters*. Could you tell us about your experience rehearsing and performing this play?

O. KNIPPER-CHEKHOVA: Of course! It was two months before Anton Pavlovich would even let us read the play. *(Laughs.)* During these two months, Anton and I were in the middle of a tumultuous correspondence. This was about six months before we married. It was during this exchange of witty letters that we became enamored with each other. Our greetings would be “Dear Writer,” “Dear Actress.” He was constantly teasing me, saying things like, “What a role there is for you in *Three Sisters*. Ah, what a role! If you give me ten rubles, I’ll let you have it, otherwise somebody else gets it”
The rest of the company and I were hungry to read this new play and start working on it.

**K. STANISLAVSKY:** Anton Pavlovich finally read it to us on the 29th of October, 1900. And it didn’t really go as he’d hoped…

**A. CHEKHOV:** Not at all.

**K. STANISLAVSKY:** As I recall “some called it a drama, others a tragedy, without noticing that these labels embarrassed Chekhov. [He] was convinced he had written a merry comedy, and in the reading everyone took the play to be a drama, wept as they listened” (quoted in Senelick, 1997, 59).

**A. CHEKHOV:** Naturally, I made revisions. Copious revisions.

**BRI:** I’ve been told, Mr. Stanislavsky, that you and Mr. Chekhov didn’t always really see eye to eye when it came to his plays.

**K. STANISLAVSKY:** That’s true. We disagreed quite a bit on the staging of these plays—how a moment should be played, the behavior of a character, the stage directions. Quite a bit.

**A. CHEKHOV:** We didn’t agree on a literary level either. I viewed my plays as comedies and he saw them as tragedies and continually tried to stage them as such.

**BRI:** Could you explain to us the difference between comedy and tragedy?

**A. CHEKHOV:** Yes, of course. Aristotle claimed that all drama is imitation, or *mimesis.* That is to say, both comedy and tragedy are mankind making imitations of reality, the
same way a painting of a dog is an imitation of a real dog. Aristotle then argues, however, that comedy and tragedy differ in terms of *what they imitate*. Comedy is “an imitation of persons who are inferior; not, however, going all the way to full villainy, but imitating the ugly, of which the ludicrous is one part. The ludicrous, that is, is a failing or a piece of ugliness which causes no pain or destruction; thus to go no farther, the comic mask is something ugly and distorted but painless” (Aristotle 23-24). Tragedy on the other hand, in his opinion, is an imitation “of people who are to be taken seriously” (Aristotle 24). This distinction illustrates how I think *Three Sisters* is a comedy. My plays are not “cry-babies” or tragedies. With *Three Sisters* “I simply wanted to say to people honestly: ‘Look at yourselves, look at how bad and boring your lives are!’ The important thing is, they will, without fail, create for themselves another and better life. I will not see it, but I know—it will be completely different, and nothing like this life. And until it arrives, I will say to people again and again; ‘Understand how bad and boring your lives are!’ What is there in this to cry about?” (quoted in Allen 23). These characters are ludicrous and living ugly lives and so were the people who watched this play. While watching, one is not meant to take them seriously, but rather see a “piece of ugliness” that reflects one’s own life.

**KNIPPER-CHKEHOVA:** I wrote Anton Pavlovich about how our rehearsals for *Three Sisters* were going. At one point Konstantin Sergeyevich flat out recast my role of Masha and the role of Olga, who was being played by Margarita Savitskaya. Thankfully, Vladimir Ivanovich got them back for us (Senelick, 1997, 61). There came a day, however, where all of us in the acting company just stopped working, refused to act, and
sat there. We did not trust our director or each other really. We had not the slightest inclination as to what we were doing (Allen 27).

**K. STANISLAVSKY:** We literally sat there in silence for God knows how long. But while we sat there, I heard a scratching sound that somehow “reminded me of home; I felt warm inside, I saw truth, life, and my intuition began to work” (quoted in Allen 27). This was a real turning point. I realized we had been going about this all wrong. One mustn’t “bathe in the characters’ sorrow” (quoted in Allen 27) or their suffering, but rather one should stress their courage, cheerfulness, and desire to live.

**BRI:** So you’re saying this arbitrary scratching noise caused a sort of epiphany for you about how the characters should be portrayed?

**K. STANISLAVSKY:** Yes, for whatever reason, this scratching noise changed my whole approach to this play.

**BRI:** Mr. Chekhov, could you tell us more about how this play was different from the others you had written?

**A. CHEKHOV:** Of course. *Three Sisters* was the first play I wrote for a pre-existing group, the company of the MAT. I was able to tailor the characters to fit the talents and skills of the actors I knew were going to play them. Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold was, like his character Tuzenbach, of German parentage and took Russian nationality a few years before the play (Pennington 13).

**O. KNIPPER-CHEKHOVA:** My character Masha is fluent in Russian, German, English, and French just like me.
A. CHEKHOV: Yes, and my little Knipperschitz can also be found, as NYU Professor Dr. Carol Rocamora puts it, in Masha’s “mercurial moods, her rages, her depressions, her beauty, her intelligence, [and] her artistic temperament” (23). I find that spot on.  

(Laughs.)

O. KNIPPER-CHEKHOVA: (Glares at A. CHEKHOV) You’re not funny, Anton Pavlovich. The song in the third act that Masha and Vershinin sing together also came from my life. One of my previous suitors use to sing it to me and I told Anton Pavlovich about it (Rocamora 23). God knows why he chose to include it.

A. CHEKHOV: This was also the first play I wrote that lacked your typical main character, around whom all the action revolves. All of the characters are merely living their lives around and with each other, not in service of one or two foreground figures. Solyony and Anfisa are just as developed and influential as Masha and Tuzenbach (Senelick, 2006, 875).

BRI: Why did you write the play this way? Without main characters?

A. CHEKHOV: Like Vladimir Ivanovich and Konstantin Sergeyevich, I wanted to break the old forms of the theater. They aimed to achieve this through the reformation of acting and staging, while I was attacking the old conventions through my own medium—writing plays. As Treplyov proclaims in The Seagull, I too believed that “modern theater [was] trite, riddled with clichés,” and that “new forms are what we need[ed]” (quoted in Senelick, 2006, 747). No more prima ballerinas. No more dramatic soliloquys. The characters are hardly ever even on stage by themselves, and if they are, it’s only for a brief moment.
BRI: Excellent. I would now like to touch upon the structure of the play. *Three Sisters* is divided into four acts, which is a unique trait that distinguishes Chekhov’s work from others’, which are typically in three acts or five. The play operates under a cyclic structure, meaning that life, for most of these people, more or less ends where it began. Masha is still trapped in a loveless marriage, Irina still hasn’t found her true love, and Olga is still stuck in a job she hates. The play builds to its climax in Act Three with the fire, then “gradually returns to its normal rhythms, but keeps being interrupted by bursts of individual need” (Pennington 23). Natasha needs Andrei to be quieter, Masha needs to share one last embrace with Vershinin before he leaves forever, and Tuzenbach needs Irina to understand how he feels about her before he goes off to be shot. Nobody gets to Moscow, everyone is just as unhappy.

Another point worth exploring in terms of structure is the difference between an “action” and a “condition.” British writer and literary critic Henry James describes an *action* as an outward, external event usually depicted through physical movement that progresses the plot. On the other hand, a *condition* is a representation of something still, immobile that does not promote progression or change (Gilman 146). One might think that a condition lacks the possibility of being dramatic; however, James argues that to “portray” a condition could in fact be dramatic. Richard Gilman, American drama and literary critic, explores this concept further:

> The dramatic quality lies not nearly so much in ordinary plot as in the portrayal itself, in the aesthetic movements, the way the *thing*, as James was so fond of calling any particular artistic enterprise, was brought off. The imagination seeks its subjects beneath a thin skin of material events; motivations, the springs of
conventional physical behavior, and so of psychological drama, rise mostly from the pressures and, most often, the painfulness of inner recognitions” (147).

The concept of portraying a condition and it being dramatic is true within Three Sisters and Chekhov’s work in general; one finds the characters “centered on the internal” and therefore “an absence of explicit or definitive change” (James, quoted in Gilman 146).

The actual subject of Chekhov’s’ plays is, as James puts it, “the individual caught in the fact” (quoted in Gilman 147).

A CHEKHOV: Yes, this echoes what I said earlier when we talked about Uncle Vanya. Drama exists within a person, not in external phenomena, which is congruent with the idea that portraying a condition is dramatic.

BRI: I agree and I think this is how Three Sisters is successful in being an ensemble play. All of the incidents that occur in the play stem from the portraying of conditions, which causes no character to be more influential than another. The drama here is internal, and therefore exists with just as much prevalence in one character as the next. At this point I would like to transition to the dramaturgy of Three Sisters. We will resume shortly.

DRAMATURGY

BRI: This portion of our discussion is devoted to exploring the political and social context of Three Sisters and the world of the play. You will find a brief plot summary of Three Sisters, character descriptions, and notes on the time and setting of the play in Appendix B. We will begin by taking a question from the audience…yes, you sir, in the blue sweater.
**SIR IN THE BLUE SWEATER:** This question is for anyone. I would like to know what was going on politically in Russia in 1900. How did this influence the content of the play and the manner in which it was staged?

**A. CHEKHOV:** Well, we were in a transitional period during 1900 in Russia—caught between the liberation of the serfs and the Bolshevik Revolution. Tsarism was on its way out and Marxism was on the rise. The Marxist movement called for the industrialization of Russia, the promotion of communism and materialism—the priority of matter over mind—and for a revolution fueled by the power struggle between social classes (Ascher 1-3). Oh, and of course, World War I was just around the corner. Here let me paint you a better picture. (*Moves to dry-erase board and draws a timeline.*)

In 1900, the political pot of Russia was being stirred in many ways, but had not quite yet come to a boil.

**V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO:** And this political turmoil affected all of us. First of all, we had to be constantly wary of censorship when selecting our seasons for the Moscow Art Theatre. The censorship laws in Russia had been removed in 1855 when Tsar Alexander II came to power, but were reinstated during his reign in 1866. Then after Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, his son, Alexander III, put a censor on religious and non-Russian elements. He also promoted anti-Semitism and nationalism (Curtis 36-37). All of these restrictions meant that getting plays approved was tedious and sometimes very frustrating, especially since we were trying to create a revolutionary
theater that broke the old forms. The first play we produced, Tolstoy’s *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich*, was almost denied by the censors for the most ridiculous reason (*rolls his eyes*)—there were clergymen in some of the scenes (Benedetti 259).

**BRI:** I’m sure this political pressure was felt when working on *Three Sisters* as well.

**K. STANISLAVSKY:** Absolutely. There were rumors going around that *Three Sisters* was very critical of the army, which created a huge problem (Pennington 15). Military reforms started to be instituted in the 1870’s that placed a focus on modernizing the military and creating a military reserve out of the newly freed serfs, who had been barred from receiving military training prior to their liberation. The government was making a substantial effort to revitalize the Russian military (Curtis 36). Therefore, criticizing the army was seen as openly defying the government.

**BRI:** What did you do about the rumor?

**A. CHEKHOV:** First of all, the whole thing was a misunderstanding. I generally held the army in high regard (Pennington 15). But in my play, I did not want the military men to be portrayed as cliché with the “usual heel-clickers and jingling spurs,” as I described them once (quoted in Pennington 15). I wanted them to be simple, normal people without military mannerisms. Nevertheless, I brought in a real colonel to ensure there was no “slackness” in regard to uniform, behavior, or demeanor so that we wouldn’t offend the military or the government (Pennington 15).

**O. KNIPPER-CHEKHOVA:** But, oh how that backfired. (*laughs.*) In *Three Sisters*, Masha and Vershinin become smitten with each other very early on, but they are both
already married. The colonel rejected the idea that a military man would ever have an affair with a married woman. He assured us that this would never happen (Pennington 15). But despite his objections, the plot remained the same. Masha and Vershinin still have an affair.

**BRI:** But the play received the most flak from the Marxists (Senelick, 1997, 64). Anatoly Lunacharsky, a Marxist art critic and journalist of the time, thought *Three Sisters* was a “harmful, decadent play in which the entire cast personified pošlost, or a crass vulgarity” (quoted in Senelick, 1997, 64). He berated Irina and Tuzenbach’s desire to work, seeing it as stealing bread out of the mouths of those who actually needed to work to survive. (Karlinksy 191-192). Nikolai Rusanov, a socialist revolutionary, “likened the intellectual level of the play’s characters to that of coral polyps in a reef, devoid of any awareness and barely sentient of their environment” (quoted in Senelick, 1997, 64).

I, however, disagree with these two, finding myself more of the opinion of Mikhail Olminsky, a member of the Bolshevist party. He claims that Chekhov’s play was “devoid of realism,” saying that “such a prolonged and poorly motivated crying jag doesn’t happen in real life. The meaning of life is not the return of a paradise lost, but service to an unknown but radiant future” (quoted in Senelick, 1997, 64). I think, unlike Rusanov, that the characters in *Three Sisters* were actually very aware of their environment, and had a shrewd outlook on what lay ahead.

**NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO:** Yes, indeed. From a political standpoint, Anton Pavlovich’s play is rather prophetic. Tuzenbach proclaims in Act One that “there’s a storm gathering, a wild, elemental storm, it’s coming, it’s almost over our heads! And it
will clean out our society, get rid of laziness and indifference, and this prejudice against working” (Chekhov 8). This storm parallels the Russian Revolution and the drive to work mirrors the USSR’s idea of labor (Pennington 178). It’s uncanny.

BRI: Yes, miss? Yes, you in the third row.

MISS IN THE THIRD ROW: Could you tell us what the social climate of Russia was like during this time?

O. KNIPPER-CHEKHOVA: Like the political landscape at this time, the social landscape was also shifting. The Women’s Liberation Movement, the Tolstoy Movement…Russia was transforming. With the push for women’s emancipation, there were two groups who wanted two different things. The bourgeois feminists wanted freedom and suffrage for women of higher class, for the landed gentry, while the working-class feminists wanted equality for all women as a human right, regardless of class. The fight for women’s liberation became not only about gender equality but class too (Smith 1).

V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHEKNO: This is reflected in Three Sisters in two ways—Natasha’s plight to become equal in status to Olga, Masha, and Irina, and the fact that Natasha and Anfisa, two women of the proletariat, are the only two characters in the play who get what they want.

BRI: I agree. Natasha does break the class barrier, rising in status and leveling the playing field between her and the sisters. And though she is rude and cruel at times, she learned this behavior from the sisters. In Act One, Olga ridicules Natasha for wearing a
green belt, and then in Act Four Natasha turns around and does the same thing to Irina. I would argue that this is a comment on how the class barrier should be broken, or rather how it shouldn’t be. Instead of the lower class rising to the status of the upper class, it should be the other way around. The aristocracy should be knocked off their high horse and everybody should work. Tuzenbach foresees this concept too. He says that, as a wealthy baron in the military, “I intend to work, and in twenty-five or thirty years we will all work! All of us!” (Schmidt 8). The USSR was established twenty-two years later.

V. NEMIROVICH-DANCHEKNO: Natasha and Anfisa, representing the proletariat, are also the only two characters who achieve their goals. Anfisa gets put up in a faculty apartment at the high school with Olga. She exclaims at the end of the play: “The lord is taking care of my old age. I never lived so good, ever. I’m the happiest woman in the world!” (Schmidt 87).

BRI: Yes, this characterization portrays the proletariat as driven and successful. What about the Tolstoyan Movement?

A. CHEKHOV: In many ways Lev Nikolayevich (or Leo Tolstoy as you’d refer to him in the Western world) and I were rather similar. We were both writers for one. But less obviously and more significantly, we both departed from the Orthodox Church. Tolstoy developed his own beliefs and philosophy of life that became known as Tolstoyism. And the Tolstoyan Movement aimed to spread these principles all over Russia.

BRI: What were these beliefs?
A. CHEKHOV: Unconventional. *(Laughs.)* He rejected the Russian Orthodox Church, which eventually led to his excommunication in 1901. But there were five main principles of Tolstoyism, which were based on the Sermon on the Mount. *(Writes a list on the dry-erase board.)*

1. Love your enemies
2. Do not be angry
3. Do not fight evil with evil, but return evil with good
4. Do not lust
5. Do not take oaths

Tolstoy’s disciples led ascetic lives, preferring to be vegetarian, celibate, and sober *(Alston 1).* But it’s important to note that Tolstoy himself did not lead the movement.

BRI: And you yourself departed from the Church?

A. CHEKHOV: I suppose I sort of lost my religion. I was brought up in the Orthodox Church with the rest of my family. But I somehow became… agnostic I think is the best word to describe it. No, perhaps non-religious is better. I wrote to my dear friend and mentor Alexey Plescheev once and said,

“I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines and who insist on seeing me as necessarily either a liberal or conservative. I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not an evolutionist, nor a monk, nor indifferent to the world. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more, and I regret that God has not given me the power to be one… My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom—freedom from violence and falsehood no
matter how the last two manifest themselves. This is the program I would follow if I were a great artist.” (Chekhov, 1973, 109).

Tolstoy’s and my way of life were not unalike. I wrote to Mikhail Pleshcheyev in January of 1900 saying, “I am an unbeliever, but of all the faiths, I esteem the faith of L. Tolstoy the nearest to my heart and most suited to me” (Chekhov, 1973, 374). I think this is definitely reflected in my work. My characters are not really religious—superstitious maybe, but not religious. And the ones who may be religious are of the older generation. For example in act two, Masha hears the wind in the chimney and says, “Right before father died the wind made a noise in the chimney. Just like that” (Schmidt 35). And then Vershinin asks her if she is superstitious, and she tells him yes.

**BRI:** I find this deviation from the church in your work, and in your personal life for that matter, to have been a progressive attitude that was congruent with the mission of the MAT. Furthermore, removing religion from the lives of your younger characters reflects the beliefs and ideals of the working class in Russia at the time. The older characters who still seek solace and guidance from the church are portrayed as old-fashioned. Anfisa represents the obsolete, archaic era of serfdom, which is seen in act four when she attributes her good fortune to God’s grace. She exclaims, “When I say my prayers and go to sleep at night…My Lord! I’m the happiest woman in the world!” (Schmidt 87).

The young people on the other hand find comfort and purpose in the idea of working. Irina says in act one “Man must work, work in the sweat of his brow. No matter who he is, that’s the whole point of his life. And all his happiness…I want to work the way I want cold drinks in hot weather. And if I don’t do that from now on, get up and go to
work, then don’t you ever have anything more to do with me, Iván Románich” (Schmidt 7). I believe the younger characters represent the push for new forms that you and the MAT were striving for, and ultimately Russia’s push towards labor through the eventual formation of the USSR. But that’s all the time we have for this portion. We will resume shortly.

**THE PROBLEM WITH TODAY’S PRODUCTIONS**

**BRI:** It’s time for the third and final part of our discussion today. We have learned that *Three Sisters* is an ensemble play without main characters, and was written for a pre-existing ensemble of actors. Therefore, I think we can agree that disregarding the play’s nature and/or origin would bar a production from success. And this is the case with many productions of *Three Sisters* today. We are now going to discuss this common problem: the lack of an ensemble. But for those who are not familiar with this term and it’s usage in theater, what is an ensemble? It is the opinion of English actor and director Simon Callow that an ensemble is “something created and sustained by performers, live, each time they work together. It is a function of something performers *do*” (quoted in Britton 7). One might compare an ensemble to a human body; the human body is comprised of different, individual parts that each have a specific purpose—the mouth takes in sustenance, the legs allow for locomotion, etc.—that all serve the whole. Likewise, each actor in the ensemble is an individual who plays a certain role that ultimately serves the purpose of the whole group. This portion of our discussion will be conducted differently than the previous two. We will be taking Skype calls from theater critics on the projection screen behind me here (*gestures to screen.*) and our guests and I will make observations
and commentary. Any current or former theater critic from a reputable publication can now call in with Skype and tell us their experience of a production of *Three Sisters*. Our first guest was a theater critic for *The Los Angeles Times*, Sylvie Drake. *(Presses button on laptop.)* Hello, Sylvie…are you there?…*(SYLVIE’S picture appears on projector screen.)*

**S. DRAKE:** Hey, Bri! Yeah, I’m here.

**BRI:** Welcome! Thank you for joining us today. We’re discussing a problem that seems to occur with many of today’s productions of *Three Sisters*: the lack of ensemble.

**S. DRAKE:** I wrote a review of the La Jolla Playhouse’s production in 1991 that said, “the heart of the problem in this ‘Three Sisters’ is a company of actors that does not interrelate. Despite (or because of?) some stellar presences, each actor speaks the lines in a personal vacuum that rarely seems to address, let alone include, anyone else. The result is a production that consists of disembodied pronouncements. Never has the Jean-Claude van Itallie translation sounded more flat or impotently mired in repetitiveness, even gleaning a few unintended titters at Sunday's opening” *(Drake 1).*

**O. KNIPPER-CHEKHOVA:** That is awful. You can’t speak in a vacuum and expect to have a relationship with anyone. And having these relationships is the whole point! Masha can’t actually be in love with Vershinin if the two of them are speaking into vacuums.

**BRI:** Absolutely agreed. That word “disembodied” really stands out to me, especially after just comparing an ensemble to a human body. Thanks, Sylvie! Our next guest is
Walter Goodman, former theater critic for The New York Times. (SYLVIE’S picture is replaced with WALTER’S.) Hello, Walter!

W. GOODMAN: Good afternoon. I saw a production of Three Sisters at the Hartman in 1986 and wrote this: “The evening has moving moments, and Miss Booker [Margaret, the director] has caught the play's humor as well, but she seems to have chosen to accentuate the individuality of each of the sisters at the expense of their relationship to one another; the effect is something like a chamber group whose players come to life only for their solos, which proves a bit discordant” (Goodman 26).

K. STANISLAVSKY: Tragic. It seems they have lost the balance between the individual and the group, which was the entire goal of Anton Pavlovich’s play: creating a play without the traditional main characters.

BRI: Thank you, Walter. Now calling in is a critic from The New York Times, Ben Brantley. Hello, Ben. (BEN appears on the screen.)

B. BRANTLEY: Hi, Bri. I went to a production of Three Sisters at the Classic Stage Company in 2011, which featured Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard. I believe one of the biggest reasons why this production was a success was because there was in fact a functioning ensemble. In my review, I wrote “perhaps the show’s greatest achievement is that while some of the performances are more successfully realized than others, none dominates unconditionally. Even the minor parts have weight here, and we’re always aware of a multiplicity of lives before us, jostling and nestling and striking against one another” (Brantley 1).
A. CHEKHOV: “None dominates unconditionally.” I love that. That’s exactly what I wanted for this play. No character exists to supplement a ‘main character,’ nor are any characters more important than any others. All of the characters have developed lives and are merely existing and interacting amongst one another (Frisch, 2016).

BRI: Let it be clear that having a cast that operates as an ensemble does not guarantee success for a production. Rather, not having an ensemble makes success impossible. And operating as an ensemble before rehearsals for this specific play even begins is just as crucial. The ensemble must be forged and developed before any work is actually done on the play. Calling in now is Greg Evans, critic for Variety. Thanks for joining us, Greg. (BEN is replaced by GREG.)

G. EVANS: Of course. What you said about needing an ensemble before rehearsal begins is absolutely true. I saw Roundabout Theater Company’s production of Three Sisters in 1997, and it was terrible. I wrote in my review, “An all-star production in which all the stars seem to have been allowed to devise acting styles and characterizations without consulting one another (or the all-star director), the much-anticipated ‘Three Sisters’ is one of the biggest disappointments of the Broadway season to date” (Evans 1).

K. STANISLAVSKY: If the actors and director are not in agreement from the beginning, then the production is doomed. Seems in this production, all of the actors were in a different play.

BRI: Very true. When I was training at the SITI Summer Intensive in June 2016, I had the privilege of watching the SITI Company’s first run-through of Act One of their
production of *Three Sisters*. The presence of ensemble was apparent. Not one character outshone another, yet each had their own nuances. Even the few set pieces onstage were included in the ensemble and treated with the same attention and importance as the people using them. At one point, a few of the characters picked up a flat and moved it along with them as they spied on Andrei and Natasha. The relationships were clear and every character was necessary.

**A. CHEKHOV:** Excellent. The environment is just as important. Nothing is worse than actors who exist separately from their surroundings. The environment is just as present an acting partner as your actual partner.

**BRI:** I agree. This idea is something we’ll investigate more in Part Three. That is all the time we have for today, folks. Today we learned about *Three Sisters* and the necessity of an ensemble to have a successful production and that an ensemble includes not only human beings, but the environment as well. I’d like to thank our lovely guests for being here with us today and for sharing their wealth of knowledge and experiences with *Three Sisters*. *(Applause.)* Join us again tomorrow afternoon for Part Two of our “Messing with the Form” Series, when we will explore the Suzuki Method of Actor Training. Thanks again. Have a great evening.
Dramaturgy of a Practice: The Suzuki Method

BRI: Hello everyone, and welcome to Part Two of the “Messing with the Form” Series.
For those of you who are just joining us, we spent our last session exploring *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov. Today, we will be discussing the Suzuki Method of Actor Training, a physical acting training developed by Japanese theater-maker Tadashi Suzuki and the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT), as a way to create an ensemble. We will touch upon the physical form of the Suzuki Method, its philosophy and purpose, and other common acting approaches used to create an ensemble. Joining us today are Tadashi Suzuki and SITI Company members Will Bond (also known as Bondo), and Ellen Lauren. The SITI Company was co-founded by Tadashi Suzuki and has been faithfully practicing the Suzuki Method since its conception. The SITI Company has more experience with and dedication to the Suzuki Method than any other company in the United States. Anne Bogart of the SITI Company and Sanford Meisner will join us a little later to talk about the Viewpoints and the Meisner Technique. As in Part One, you will find short biographies of our guests in Appendix A. We came to the conclusion in Part One of our series that to produce *Three Sisters* successfully, one must have a preexisting ensemble. But that raises the question: how does one create this necessary ensemble? Today we look at the Suzuki Method of Actor Training as a way to efficiently and effectively do just that.
PHILOSOPHY

T. SUZUKI: The method I have created hinges on the “fundamental parameters of energy, breath, and balance” (Suzuki, 2015, 60). These are the “three essential needs” that must be achieved in order for a person to live. As an actor, one must fulfill these three needs, but also face the additional challenge of having to communicate, to speak. (Suzuki, 2015, 59-60). The Suzuki Method is, at the core, a method for instilling discipline of the mind and of the will of an individual through practical application. Yes, the physical form is difficult and sometimes painful, your body will say to you we can’t keep doing this, but you must exercise the discipline needed to persevere, to remain in the form, and continue to try and improve within that form.

W. BOND: The Suzuki Method’s purpose is to “train our bodies to hold an extraordinary breath” in order to “have and face relationships” (Bond, “SITI Summer Intensive”). The idea that you may be called to speak at any given time during the Suzuki training conditions you to always have breath available. Having a body that can hold an extraordinary breath permits relationships. What I mean by this is that having extraordinary breath allows you to be able to speak, and speaking is half of how we communicate with others. (The other half being through use of our bodies, of course.) If you can generate enough energy, reconcile yourself with gravity, and contain extraordinary breath, then you can speak optimally, to your full potential. This is what the Suzuki Method trains us to be able to do.

E. LAUREN: And training the body to hold this kind of breath and maintain balance is done by “tapping into our animal energy” which we do when we “ride on the edge of
failure” (Lauren, “SITI Summer Intensive”). And we are constantly riding this line because no matter what, you will always fail. Yes? In the striped shirt there. (*Gestures to AUDIENCE MEMBER IN THE STRIPED SHIRT*)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER IN THE STRIPED SHIRT:** I have two questions. First, what is animal energy?

**T. SUZUKI:** Animal energy is “the organic physical energy supplied by human beings, horses, oxen and the like” while non-animal energy refers to “electricity, petroleum, nuclear power, etc.” (Suzuki, 2015, 64).

**AUDIENCE MEMBER IN THE STRIPED SHIRT:** Okay thanks. Second, if you will always fail, why do it?

**THE FORM**

**BRI:** That’s a great question and a great way to get into what the form actually is. The Suzuki Method puts the actor through a series of physical forms that are humanly impossible to execute perfectly, however, one is always *trying* to do the form perfectly. So of course, you’re asking yourself: *Well, then why do it?* And rightly so. Bondo, would you like to take a stab at that one?

**W. BOND:** Sure, Bri. Well, knowing that you will never get it right, relieves the pressure of *trying* to get it right. The point of this practice is not about doing the form perfectly, okay? It’s about doing it *better*. Better than last week. Better than yesterday. You are always trying to do something just a little more accurately than the time before. This lets
you focus on one thing at a time. I’ll tell myself: Ok, today, I’m just going to try to relieve the tension in my shoulders. Or I’m going to try to only breathe through my nose. If you try to fix too many things at once, the work really becomes counterproductive. Just really go after one thing today, and then another for tomorrow. This process allows you to track your progress and leave your insecurities alone. Everyone is going to fail so you don’t have to worry about being embarrassed, you know? (Laughs.)

**BRI:** During Suzuki training, each person in the room is attempting to do the same physical form at the same time, while realizing and embracing their own physical and mental limitations. The physical bodies are in sync, but each person is mentally focused on something different. While the body is put through this extremely taxing duress, the mind is focused on an *image*. This image is imaginary and specific to each person. The goal is to mentally stay in relation with your image while you move through the different physical forms. Eventually, a speaking element is introduced and at any time the instructor may ask the group to speak. They will then immediately speak a memorized piece of text (usually from a play they’re working on) in unison with predetermined places for breath. You speak to your *image*. Yes? You, sir, with the beard. You have a question? *(Points to SIR WITH THE BEARD.)*

**SIR WITH THE BEARD:** I have no experience with the Suzuki Method at all. What are these “physical forms” you keep referring to? What do you actually do?

**E. LAUREN:** Right now, the Suzuki Method is just coming out of a transition period. Mr. Suzuki and the SCOT have evolved and restructured the traditional form. The SITI Company is teaching and practicing that new form, which we call *new school*. There are
six “basics.” You ideally move from Basic One to Basic Six in a fluid progression (Lauren, “SITI Summer Intensive”). We will now give you a rough description of each basic and show a short clip of each on the screen behind us to give you a visual of what they entail. They can be quite difficult to explain.

**BRI:** For those of you at home, you can follow along with the videos at https://vimeo.com/album/4300884. I recommend hearing what our guests have to say about each basic and then watching the corresponding video. The links to these videos can also be found in Appendix C. Each basic has its own video. We will begin with Basic One. This basic is referred to as Stomping and Shakuhachi. For the length of a specific piece of music, about three minutes, those participating stamp their feet in time with the beat of the music, traveling around the space at random. When the song ends, each person collapses to the floor upstage of where an audience would sit were this a performance. Then when the next piece of music begins, the participants rise and walk slowly downstage ending in a line facing the imaginary audience. During the walk, they execute a 360 degree turn and continue walking. This turn is indicated by the sound of horns in the music. They may also put their upper body into a structure, or a shape, you could say. Once the line formed downstage is still, the basic may end here or the instructor may ask the group to speak (Lauren, “SITI Summer Intensive”). Let’s watch. (Plays clip.)

https://vimeo.com/195704132

**W. BOND:** Basic Two is often referred to as Slow Ten Tekka Ten. Two lines of people face each other, one line stage left and the other stage right. A specific piece of music plays and the lines move toward each other. The speed and rhythm of walking is set in the cadence of the music. The lines meet at center and then continue on to the other side,
passing through each other. Once they’ve reached the opposite side of the stage, a cue in the music signals them to turn 180 degrees and resume walking back to where they came from. There are three passes like this. The second 180 degree turn is not cued by the music but rather must be collectively and silently agreed upon by everyone in the line. (Bond, “SITI Summer Intensive”). Here is a clip of Slow Ten Tekka Ten. (*Clip plays on screen.*) [https://vimeo.com/200563693](https://vimeo.com/200563693)

**E. LAUREN:** Basic Three is divided into three parts—Three A, Three B, and Three C. The first two involve stomping similar to what you saw in Basic 1 and movement from either left to right (Basic Three A) or forward (Basic Three B). The third part of Basic Three has the participant starting in a squatting position with their back to the audience and then turning and rising simultaneously. The participant turns over his right shoulder first, landing in a wide stance, then does the same thing turning over his left shoulder. The sequence is repeated with the feet landing together. These basics are easier to explain with a visual aid. Here, let’s watch the Basic Three videos. (*Videos play.*) [https://vimeo.com/200577515](https://vimeo.com/200577515)  [https://vimeo.com/201347690](https://vimeo.com/201347690)  [https://vimeo.com/206747315](https://vimeo.com/206747315)

**BRI:** Basic Four, also referred to as Standing Statues, begins with the participants in the same squatting position as Basic Three C, but now their backs aren’t toward the audience to start. There is no turning involved in this basic. You start in the squatting position with your head and neck released. Then when the instructor says “up,” you spring upward and land standing straight, with your heels off the ground. So you are essentially on your tip-toes but your heels don’t need to be as high up as you can get them. Then the instructor will say “back” and everyone drops back down into the first position (Lauren, “SITI
Summer Intensive”). This sequence is repeated, with varying heights, as you will see here. There are also freestyle statues where the participant chooses for himself what height, facing, and upper body structure to do. (Shows clip.)

https://vimeo.com/206752332

**W. BOND:** Basic Five is called the Walks. This basic operates on an imaginary diagonal line that runs from one corner of the space to the opposite corner. All of the participants will line up at the starting corner and perform the walks along the imaginary line that crosses the space. When one reaches the other corner, he will quickly get back in line to do the next walk. There are eleven walks. The order in which they are done isn’t set or imperative, but they can be and often are done both forward and backwards and at varying tempos. Also, the music in this basic can be anything with a good beat. This video shows all eleven walks going forward and at the same tempo. (Plays video.)

https://youtu.be/UWbxB4SD8C8

**BRI:** Each walk is referred to as something different depending on who you talk to, so the names in the video are just what I personally have learned them as.

**E. LAUREN:** The final basic, Basic Six, is one that is not often widely taught. It can be challenging for beginners to learn. Participants move from one side of the stage to the other, all facing the same direction, on a continuous six-count. It is extremely choreographed in terms of movement and breath pattern. The sequence is made up of fourteen six-counts and is repeated until you have made it from one side of the stage to the other. It can be done with or without music. In this clip, it’s done without music (Lauren, “SITI Summer Intensive”). (Clip plays.) https://youtu.be/56-1NDv6LW1
BRI: The link to the Suzuki Basics videos and the music sound tracks are in Appendix C. Yes? The guy in the front row? (Points to GUY IN THE FRONT ROW.)

GUY IN THE FRONT ROW: So, what’s the point? How do these specific forms make it so that you can communicate better?

T. SUZUKI: With this practice, “I focus on the lower body and especially the feet, because I believe that consciousness of the body’s perceptive communication with the ground is a portal into greater awareness of all the physical functions” (Suzuki, 2015, 65). Shoes are absolutely not worn when doing this work, nor are the participants barefoot. Participants wear Japanese tabi, which are bifurcated socks made of canvas (see FIGURE 1). Or regular socks will suffice when tabi are unavailable. In theater, no matter what an actor is doing onstage, whether he is moving or still, his feet are always the main interest. Wearing tabi allows the actor to maintain his relationship with the floor. This relationship gives the art its life. Actors wearing shoes lose this relationship because “the movements of his feet are limited” (Suzuki, 2015, 67). “One reason the modern theatre is so tedious to watch, it seems to me, is because it has no feet” (Suzuki, 2015, 67).

BRI: Why do participants wear tabi instead of just going barefoot?

T. SUZUKI: Tabi are deeply rooted in the Japanese culture and are often seen in more traditional forms of theater such as Noh. Tabi promotes “the expressiveness of the feet” and always suggest “a certain level of formality” (Suzuki, 1995, 67). The Suzuki Method operates under this sense of formality through the precision and discipline of each.
movement. The connection between the earth and the feet permits the generation of animal energy and the support of breath (Suzuki, 2015, 67).

**BRI:** Mr. Suzuki, could you explain to us how your method lends itself to fostering ensemble among a group?

**T. SUZUKI:** Certainly. Something I became interested in years ago was “in what form personal experiences can be incorporated into the structure of a group” (Suzuki, 1986, 47). Ellen mentioned earlier that we tap into our “animal energy” when practicing the Suzuki Method. Well, I believe that “such animal energy fosters the sense of security and trust needed for healthy communication in human relationships and the communities they form” (Suzuki, 2015, 63). In our modern world, “most people would automatically consider the society reliant on non-animal energy to be the more civilized. For me, however, a civilized society is not necessarily a cultured one” (Suzuki, 2015, 63). Within our societies, we are constantly developing new ways of lessening the amount of animal energy exerted. For example, “the automobile replaces the act of walking, in vitro fertilization eliminates the need for sexual contact, the computer takes the place of directly seeing and hearing,” etc., and “as a consequence, the potential of the human body and its various functions has undergone a dramatic downsizing, weakening the communication between people that is based on animal energy” (Suzuki, 2015, 65). The Suzuki Method creates “an opportunity to reconsolidate our currently dismembered physical faculties and revive the body’s perceptive and expressive capacity” by tapping into this overlooked animal energy (Suzuki, 2015, 65). With a reawakened sense of expressivity and perceptiveness, real human bonds are able to form, allowing for a community, or an ensemble, to form as well.
**BRI**: I’ve also discovered in my own work with the Suzuki Method a feeling of solidarity that lends itself to forming an ensemble. While practicing the method, one takes solace in the fact that everyone else in the room is undergoing the same physical duress, which creates a supportive environment. Anne Bogart, one of the founding members of the SITI Company, whom you will meet shortly, told me once that when you are feeling overwhelmed or stressed or when you are in a bad place, look to your neighbor, your partner, your colleagues, and ask yourself: what can I do to help them? One finds relief and comfort in helping and supporting others. This is true in the Suzuki work. One specific example that comes to mind is during the Stomping and Shakuhachi, which you saw in the video of Basic One. During the stomping portion, every time I pass someone there is an exchange of energy. I mentally give all of the energy I have to them and they return the favor. This metaphysical transfer of energy creates solidarity, a real feeling of *we’re in this together.*

**OTHER APPROACHES**

**BRI**: I’m sure some of you in the audience are wondering: *Why the Suzuki Method? Why not something else? Surely there are other ways to create an ensemble.* Well, you are right. There are other ways. This portion of our discussion will highlight two other popular acting methodologies used to create ensemble. We will look at the Viewpoints and the Meisner Technique. Joining us now are Anne Bogart and Sanford Meisner, the developers of these acting techniques. I am choosing to discuss these two methods in particular because I have trained in them and practiced them just as much as the Suzuki Method—Meisner technique at Ohio University and the Viewpoints at Ohio University.
and with the SITI Company in New York. We are very lucky to have these two great artists joining us for our series today.

**A. BOGART:** It’s wonderful to be here. I believe it’s safe to say that Sandy and I are more than happy to share our work with all of you.

**S. MEISNER:** Yes, we are most happy to do so.

**BRI:** Well, we are eager to learn. Could you both tell us what your methods are and what their purpose is?

**A. BOGART:** “The Viewpoints are a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage” (Bogart 7). Well, the Viewpoints truly started with a woman named Mary Overlie, a postmodern theater artist and choreographer. For those of you who aren’t familiar with postmodernism, Merriam-Webster defines postmodern as “of, relating to, or being a theory that involves a radical reappraisal of modern assumptions about culture, identity, history, or language” (“Postmodern,” 2017). She worked with six viewpoints—time, space, shape, story, movement, and emotion (Overlie). Out of this work, I developed the Viewpoints further into nine different concepts—tempo, shape, architecture, gesture, spatial relationship, kinesthetic response, repetition, topography, and duration. These nine concepts are referred to as lenses. At any time during the Viewpoints work someone could say “oh, what lens are you working through?” The Viewpoints operate as a vocabulary for artists that’s used to describe action within space and time—work they see being made and work they create themselves. This gives us “a language for talking about what happens onstage” as it is happening (Bogart 8).
BRI: How does one use Viewpoints to create an ensemble?

A. BOGART: All of the people in space create performance material as a group. Working with the Viewpoints acts as an open improv session of movement that includes the bodies and the space they inhabit. Everyone is free to choose how they move and when and where, but one must constantly be aware of the group and how one exists within the group. The vocabulary of the Viewpoints allows one to be aware of what one is doing and articulate it in real time.

BRI: Thank you, Anne. Now let’s hear about the Meisner Technique.

S. MEISNER: My technique is based on the idea of listening and responding. Sydney Pollack writes in the introduction of my book that the purpose of my method is to create “real and truthful behavior under the imaginary circumstances of the theater” and that is absolutely correct (quoted in Meisner xiv). The technique moves through a progression of different exercises that train an actor to have a distinct point of view on what happens in front of them and to fully express it. These exercises are done between partners.

BRI: How does the Meisner Technique foster ensemble?

S. MEISNER: The technique is usually taught to a group of at least ten. When one pair is doing an exercise, the rest of the group observes. To do these exercises fully, one must be extremely vulnerable. Therefore, ensemble is created among the group in the sense that they go through this journey together. The Meisner Technique breaks down the walls and insecurities that society has made within us, allowing people to respond truthfully to one another. This experience forges bonds between people.
**BRI:** Thank you. Both of these approaches are useful and valuable tools. But the Suzuki Method strikes a needed balance between form and freedom—a strict physical form with complete imaginary freedom. This disciplined form is missing from the Viewpoints. The use of the Viewpoints alone lacks the focus needed to create an ensemble in a short amount of time because they are without specific form. Even when a theme or idea is introduced, the Viewpoints lack the structure needed to foster ensemble efficiently. Also, because Story and Emotion have been left behind in the evolution of the Viewpoints, there is no conscious focus on relationships between people at an emotional or intellectual level. The actors participating or the audience members watching may paint a story or relationship onto what is going on in front of them, but these relationships are not predetermined, nor are they fixed. In my experience, this practice is used more for compositional purposes rather than to create ensemble.

Meisner does not allow for the entire group to participate at once. Nor does it allow for the building of ensemble around a specific idea, like the play being worked on. Also, Meisner builds bonds between actors but not characters. I wanted a method that could maintain the balance of the individual and the group, while also keeping a focus on development of character. Suzuki proved to be the best option; however, it also lacked the ability to develop character as it is currently practiced. And so, as you will see in Part Three of our “Messing with the Form” Series, I messed with the form a little. (*Laughs.*) I pulled some elements from the Meisner Technique and the Viewpoints to rework and repurpose the Suzuki Method for *Three Sisters.* But all in good time. I’d like to thank our guests for offering their knowledge and time. And thank you all for joining us today. Come back tomorrow for the third and final part of the “Messing with the Form Series.”
Dramaturgy of an Ensemble: Reifying the Suzuki Method to Foster an Ensemble for *Three Sisters*

Reification, for our purposes, means to strip something of its existing labels and usages and then repurpose it to serve as something else. Like when you were a kid and you used a banana as a phone.

---Barney O’Hanlon, SITI Summer Intensive 2016
*(Quote projected on screen.)*

**BRI:** Welcome to Part Three of the “Messing with the Form” Series. Today we will be discussing how the first two portions of this series were manifested in an experiment with the Suzuki Method and then a performance of the end of act three of *Three Sisters*. This exploration was done over the course of about six months by me and four of my colleagues at Ohio University, all of whom are here with us today. Please welcome Dr. Daniel Dennis, Lecturer of Voice and Movement, Ellie Clark and Bruce McGlumphy, both second year graduate candidates in the M.F.A. Acting Studio, and Claire Autran, a senior in the B.F.A. Acting Studio. As in the previous two portions, you will find short biographies of our guests in Appendix A. During our time here today, we will discuss what our experiment with the Suzuki Method was exactly, including its purpose and goal, the success of the experiment, and the longevity and evolution of the experiment beyond this thesis. For those of you who were unable to attend the thesis production, you will find a video recording of it at this link: [https://youtu.be/xkTnwKi7B_0](https://youtu.be/xkTnwKi7B_0). You will also find the link in Appendix C.

I would like to take a moment to explain what you will see in this video. The first half of the video is an insider’s look at our Suzuki experiment. This part is not to be thought of as a performance of any kind. In this first part we are simply training in front of an
audience, not performing. The purpose of including this in my thesis production was to allow people to see our process. The second portion is a performance of the end of act three of *Three Sisters*, in which our process from the first portion is manifested in performance. This scene featured Dan as Tuzenbach, Ellie as Olga, Bruce as Kulygin, Claire as Irina, and me as Masha. The program from this production can be found in Appendix D. If you did not see the live production of this thesis, watching this video recording before continuing is crucial, as it provides the necessary context for everything that will now follow in our discussion. Alright, let’s begin. First question: What was the experiment?

**WHAT WAS THE EXPERIMENT?**

**DAN:** To put it simply, what we did was “change the Suzuki Method to get at the play in a way that allow[ed] us to really focus on the ensemble” (Dennis, “Thesis Reflection”).

**BRI:** From mid-August to early December of 2016, the five of us met every Sunday, with a few exceptions, for two hours at a time. These Sunday sessions served as a laboratory for the Suzuki experiment. As we discussed in Part Two of the series, the traditional way that the Suzuki Method is practiced calls for a fictitious mental image with which one is in constant relation. This mental image is different for each person. With this experiment, however, we replaced this mental image with actual people. So instead of everyone being focused on the imaginary, now we were in relation with another person in the room. This changing of focus altered the physical form as well. For example, while doing Basic Three A, instead of all facing one direction, we were facing
one another. Half of us were facing downstage, the other half upstage. In Basic Five, instead of doing the walks on the diagonal across the space, we all started in a different corner of the room and walked towards each other and then away from each other. The differences in the form can be seen clearly by watching the videos from Part Two and then watching the video recording of the thesis production mentioned above. At the beginning of December, when our Suzuki sessions were at an end, we worked for four hours to do table work for *Three Sisters*. We spent Ohio University’s winter break on our own, learning our lines and doing our acting homework. Then in the second week of January 2017, we reconvened to rehearse and stage the end of act three of *Three Sisters* as a way to test this experiment’s effectiveness and viability. Yes, you there? In the green jacket. *(Points to AUDIENCE MEMBER IN THE GREEN JACKET.)*

**AUDIENCE MEMBER IN THE GREEN JACKET:** Why did you choose these four people specifically to be a part of this with you? Why them?

**BRI:** I chose Dan to be my advisor because he teaches the Suzuki Method at Ohio University and he introduced me to the practice. Dan is also the only professor at Ohio University whose Suzuki experience and knowledge is at the caliber necessary to help me develop this experiment and thesis. So, I wanted his expertise and experience in going forward with this process. And then for the others, I wanted to work with people who had prior experience with the Suzuki Method and who fit the roles in the scene I was doing. Yes, sir? Yes, you in the vest. *(Points to SIR IN THE VEST.)*

**SIR IN THE VEST:** I have a few questions. Sorry. *(Laughs.*) How does the Suzuki Method, as it is, relate to *Three Sisters*? And then why did you change the form in this
specific way? How did the other methodologies you mentioned in Part Two affect your experiment?

THE PURPOSE AND INTENTION

**BRI:** Great questions. After reading and researching *Three Sisters*, it became clear to me that in order to successfully produce this specific play, you need to have a cast of actors that already functions as an ensemble. And it is my opinion that the Suzuki Method is an effective and efficient way to create an ensemble for this specific play, which served as the grounds of my experiment. I think Suzuki as it is actually fits really well with the nature of the Chekhov work.

**ELLIE:** I agree. “I wouldn’t, as someone who’s been doing the Suzuki work for a really long time, have thought *oh Chekhov and Suzuki, that’s a great pairing*. I never would have thought it until it was the most obvious pairing.” What I discovered was “the amount of stillness that can be so captivating, while you have an inner conflict going on in your body” (Clark, “Thesis Talk Back”).

**BRI:** And this concept of physical stillness with an inner conflict is inherent in both the Suzuki Method and Chekhov’s work. Especially for the scene we performed. The characters are exhausted, there’s been a fire in the town, it’s 3am, and nobody has really slept in days. The physical duress of the Suzuki Method is not far from what the characters are experiencing.
As for your question about changing the form in this specific way, training with the Suzuki Method in general will foster ensemble among a group. But I wanted to create this ensemble through the lens of this specific play, and that’s where the traditional form was lacking. I wanted to cultivate an ensemble of actors informed by the context and relationships the play presents. And by placing the focus on another human, everyone is instantly brought back to the here and now, the present moment. My goal was to build relationships on an actor to actor level and also on a character to character level by speaking and training within the context of the play.

ELLIE: The way I think of it is that “we were creating a solid foundation for our work as it began with the play, building relationships based on who we are as people to then bring to the scene work.” (Clark, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRI: Exactly. Now, for your question about the other methodologies influencing the experiment. I drew from the Viewpoints. I drew from Meisner. Replacing the image with people and having the focus be on the relationship that develops is basically what Meisner is. (Laughs) It’s moment-to-moment work. And by that I mean each person spoke as a result of their point of view of what was going on in the room—the environment, the other people’s actions. And that’s what Meisner is—listening and responding based on your point of view of what is happening. The Viewpoints also affected the process. Much of the form now operated more consciously through the lenses of the Viewpoints. In particular, kinesthetic response, spatial relationship, and architecture were much more influential and present in the room during this experiment than they normally are with the traditional Suzuki Method.
SUCCESS

**BRI:** So, would we call this a success? Did we successfully create an ensemble for this specific play by altering the form of the Suzuki Method?

**BRUCE:** I think “this was really building an ensemble. There’s something about Suzuki that’s almost traumatic when you go really intensely into it like on a physical level. Explicitly sharing that kind of physical trauma with all of you, there’s something to be said about the ensemble it builds because it starts to bring rigor into the room as a very tangible element. It changed the dynamic of the room” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

**ELLIE:** “I feel like everyone in this process I got to know a lot better by training with them.” We became bonded together through a “common training.” “I think we all had a certain style to us by the time we got to the performance. I think we had a common style to the way we were moving and I wouldn’t call it contemporary” (Clark, “Thesis Reflection”).

**BRUCE:** “It really built a group. I mean it was astounding how close it kind of felt, you know? Like I would see you guys in the hallway and it would be like, *I feel so much closer*” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

**BRI:** I agree. I feel that we were able to create an ensemble through this work on an actor to actor level. On a character to character level, however, our bonds and relationships weren’t quite as strong. So if I were to continue with this experiment, there would definitely be changes I would make, different ideas I would try, things I would go further
with, etc. And I’m sure the four of you would agree with that and have your own qualms and suggestions.

THE LONGEVITY AND EVOLUTION

BRUCE: “One of the things that I wish would have been elaborated on, especially with the Suzuki work, is I wish there would’ve been more active consciousness brought to relationship work within the actual Suzuki work. I feel as though we spoke about it, but we never actually elaborated on what we meant by it. There was nothing specific in just seeing somebody across the room. We needed to really define specifically what those relationships were and then go into the Suzuki work” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

DAN: “This is really interesting. Can you give us a specific example of how that might have played itself out? If consciousness had been brought to it. You and another character perhaps” (Dennis, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRUCE: “Going deeper into the relationships, you know, especially with Ellie and I’s characters, I had always seen Ellie’s character in the script as the kind sister, the kind sibling. The one that understands me and actually empathizes with me” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRI: And by “me” you mean you as Kulygin, right?

BRUCE: Yes, that’s what I mean. “I think that Ellie and I actually communicating: Okay this is our acting relationship, and then going into the Suzuki work,” would have helped us. “I would have been curious to see what happened. With the Suzuki Method you have
a very clear image, so in place of that I needed a very clear relationship” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

CLAIRE: “I wonder if it had almost been more effective to do table work first, so that it was the foundation, that we had established the world before. I think it would have changed the room if we had really known specifically what was in the room when we were coming into it” (Autran, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRI: I completely agree. I think that if this experiment were done again, the table work for Three Sisters should be done before the Suzuki work instead of after. This way, the specifics of each character to character relationship will already be discussed and agreed upon when you begin the Suzuki, which will then cause the Suzuki training to be more focused and fruitful. I mean, not that our sessions weren’t focused or fruitful, on the contrary, but I think they would have been more so if tablework had been done beforehand. The character to character relationships would have grown to be just as strong and complex as the actor to actor relationships, in my opinion.

BRUCE: Yeah, I mean, “to put it very simply, I think we needed the context of the play to inform…we needed the context of the play first before we came into the actual Suzuki work and we needed that to be a thread through all of the work” (McGlumph, “Thesis Reflection”).

DAN: “What I seem to be hearing a lot, and I’m in agreement with this, is more of the world of the play was needed, right?” (Dennis, “Thesis Reflection”).

CLAIRE: Yeah.
ELLIE: Mmhm.

DAN: “So that it wasn’t just I’m working with Ellie, right? But I know where I am in this imaginary space, and it’s the same imaginary space that you are using, and so when I’m working with you, I’m working with Olga and not just Ellie. And that allows us perhaps a little more freedom to find ensemble, not just by staring in one another’s eyes, but by having a shared sense of who we are within this world that we’re all living in together.” (Dennis, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRI: Yes. This is good stuff. I definitely agree. Going forward, I would establish more of the world of Three Sisters as a jumping off point for our work with the Suzuki Method. This would allow us all to exist and train in the same imaginary space. Okay, so far we’ve discussed clearly defining the character to character relationships and establishing a space that included more of the world of the play, all before the Suzuki training begins. What else would we change or add or do differently going forward with this?

BRUCE: “This might be something you could experiment with: possibly dealing with the text from the scene in some way within the actual Suzuki work. Maybe using the scene” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRI: The scene we performed, you mean?

BRUCE: Yeah.

ELLIE: “What if we had done the scene during Stomping and Shakuhachi?” (Laughs.)

CLAIRE: “Yeah that would have been cool. What if our shared text…what if we had, you know, five shared texts that were each from each other’s dialogue from the scene. So
we all do a piece of my monologue and Masha’s monologue. I think that would have been really cool to do each other’s dialogue too.” (Autran, “Thesis Reflection”).

**BRI:** Oh yeah, that would have been really interesting to play with. That would have allowed us to experience the other characters’ thoughts and actions through our character’s point of view.

**DAN:** I wish we’d been able to “spend more time in the play, and not just in the scene, but I wanted to do more of the play. And of course, some of that is I was in that scene for about six lines and then I’m out. *(Laughs.)* But it’s hard to pick up at that point. There’s so much about our relationships that we didn’t really get to actually explore in a lived way. Right? We could talk about them, we could do that scene, but it might have been a different experience if we had rehearsed the whole play and then just shown that one little piece” (Dennis, “Thesis Reflection”).

**BRI:** Well, in a perfect world, we would have been able to do the entire play. There just weren’t enough actors with Suzuki experience who were available at the time. When every actor in the performance program is already cast in a show for the semester, myself included, it’s nearly impossible to reconcile schedules. Ideally, we would have enough actors for each character in *Three Sisters* and actually produce the entire play, because the argument in my thesis actually pertains to producing the entire play, not just one scene. So, if I were to do this experiment again, I would definitely do it with enough people to do the entire play because that was the whole point. So, basically, if we could have, we would have. *(Laughs.)*
CLAIRE: “I would love to do this again five years from now and do the whole play. You know what I mean? It does feel like a process, and an idea, and a thesis that, for me, is so worth exploring again” (Autran, “Thesis Reflection”).

ELLIE: Yes, I agree, “but I think it’s really easy after a process to say What if? What if? What if? And it can get really frustrating, but I do think it serves as a tribute to this is definitely something successful because all of us have a clearer idea of how potentially to take our training in the Suzuki work into the world of a play and how to attempt to use it. And I think [this] thesis was successful in this way because we all are just churning with ideas of how potentially we could continue the work that Bri started with this project.” (Clark, “Thesis Reflection”).

DAN: Mmhmm.

BRUCE: “If there hadn’t been successes in this, we wouldn’t be sitting here going, Oh what about this? We could’ve done this. It opened up an entire world of ideas, you know? And since we’ve finished this, my head has been churning because of it. There’s something so powerful in this and, you know, even just the idea of an image being an objective, bringing over that Meisner element. There’s so much that this opens up for me. It helps me think of it in a different context” (McGlumphy, “Thesis Reflection”).

BRI: This idea of bringing Meisner into the Suzuki work is really interesting and I think something that I would definitely explore more actively and consciously moving forward with this, since Meisner Technique is all about your relationship with your partner and being there in the moment together. And I agree with you guys. I think this thesis is just the tip of the iceberg. There are endless possibilities going forward with this, which really
excites me. And we could keep jabbering on about these possibilities forever. But I believe we’ve talked about a lot of the major ones here today. Our experiment was successful, at least partly; we were able to create an ensemble. However, the ensemble we created wasn’t as strong or complex on a character to character level as it was actor to actor. So there is definitely room for improvement and further exploration, which I hope to do in the near future. And with that, I would like to thank the four of you for taking on this project with me. And thank you all (motions to audience) for coming out and for being so supportive of the “Messing with the Form” Series. It’s been a real pleasure.


APPENDIX A

Biographies of Guests from Part One of the “Messing with the Form” Series

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: Born January 29, 1860 and died July 15, 1904. Due to financial hardship, Chekhov’s family moved to Moscow when he was only fifteen, but he stayed behind in Taganrog to finish his studies. Chekhov led his life as both a writer and medical doctor, the latter often influencing his writing. In addition to his famous plays, Chekhov also wrote numerous short stories from which he made a steady living. His most famous works are four plays: The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard. He is well known for working with Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. He spent much of his life suffering from tuberculosis, of which he died at just 44 years old.

Olga Leonardovna Knipper-Chekhova: Born September 21, 1868 and died March 22, 1959. Knipper-Chekhova was one of the 44 original members of the Moscow Art Theatre. Growing up she always wanted to be an actress, but her parents disapproved. After the unexpected death of her father, she decided to pursue acting anyway. Knipper-Chekhova studied at the Philharmonic School in Moscow with Nemirovich-Danchenko. When the Moscow Art Theatre was created, Nemirovich-Danchenko took her with him. She became famous for her roles in Chekhov’s plays, such as Arkadina in The Seagull, Yelena in Uncle Vanya, and Masha in Three Sisters. She married Chekhov on May 25, 1901.

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky: Born January 17, 1863 and died August 7, 1938. His given surname was Alekseev. Stanislavsky was his stage name. Stanislavsky was born into a wealthy family that encouraged and prized theater. He spent most of his young life as an actor and director. In 1896 he cofounded the Moscow Art Theatre, which became a world-renowned company. He is most famous for his groundbreaking acting method known as the “system.” His acting system pioneered the way for new, more realistic, approaches to acting, leaving behind the traditional, grandiose methods. His system took hold in Russia, Europe, and the United States at the turn of the century and completely changed acting in the theater.
Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko: Born December 23, 1858 and died April 25, 1943. Nemirovich-Danchenko was the son of Russian officer and an Armenian woman. He started pursuing a life in theater when he was only thirteen. He taught at the Moscow Philharmonic School where he met Olga Knipper. Nemirovich-Danchenko is known for his work as a director, critic and playwright. His plays include The New Undertaking, Gold, and The Worth of Living. He cofounded the Moscow Art Theatre with Stanislavsky in 1896 where he served as literary manager.

Biographies of Guests from Part Two of the “Messing with the Form” Series

Tadashi Suzuki: He developed the physical theater practice known as the Suzuki Method of Actor Training and founded the Suzuki Company of Toga. Suzuki also started the first international theater festival in Japan. His method is practiced all over the world and the Suzuki Company of Toga continues to develop it under his guidance. He lives his life as a theater director, writer, teacher, and philosopher. He has taught at the Moscow Art Theatre and The Julliard School in New York.

Sanford Meisner: Born August 31, 1905 and died February 2, 1997. Sandy Meisner was an American actor and one of the original 28 members of the Group Theatre. He studied piano at The Julliard School and then started acting. After the Group Theatre, Meisner taught acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. He drew from the work of Stanislavsky, Lee Strasberg, and Stella Adler to develop his own acting method known as the Meisner Technique. The Meisner technique is widely taught all over the country.

Anne Bogart: Anne is one of the developers of Viewpoints. She is a founding member of the SITI Company with whom she currently serves as a co-artistic director. She has directed all over the country and the world. She studied at Tisch School of the Arts at NYU and at Bard College. Anne teaches directing at Columbia University. She has received two Best Director Obie Awards.
William Bond: Will is a founding member of the SITI Company. He has trained with Tadashi Suzuki and the SCOT. He studied at Albright College and the University of Pittsburg. He has worked in film and worked with the Bill T Jones Dance Company.

Ellen Lauren: Ellen is a founding SITI Company member and is serving as a co-artistic director. She has worked with theaters all over the world, in films, and with the Bill T Jones Dance Company. Ellen has also worked with Tadashi Suzuki and the SCOT on many productions. She has taught at The Julliard School, Columbia University, and Fordham University.

Biographies of Guests from Part Three of the “Messing with the Form” Series

Dr. Daniel Dennis: Dan is from Mount Horeb, Wisconsin and is the son of two music teachers. Dan received his undergraduate degree in Acting from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1995, his M.F.A in Theater Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2008, and his doctorate in Interdisciplinary Arts from Ohio University in 2013. He currently teaches voice and movement in the theater department at Ohio University. He has worked with the Seattle Children’s Theatre, Seattle Shakespeare Company, Village Theatre, and many others. Dan has trained with the SITI Company, Phillip Zarrilli and Patsy Rodenburg. In 2015, Dan became the founding Artistic Director of Tantrum Theater in Dublin, Ohio. Dan is also an accomplished sound designer.

Ellie Clark: Ellie is from Lexington, Kentucky. She received her undergraduate degree in theater from the University of Kentucky in 2001 and is currently pursuing her M.F.A. in Acting as a part of the Professional Acting Program at Ohio University. Ellie has worked with the SITI Company, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Tantrum Theater, the Human Festival, South Carolina Repertory Theatre, and many others. She is a co-founder of both The Girl Project and Project SEE Theatre.
**Bruce McGlumphy:** Bruce is from Hundred, West Virginia. He received his undergraduate degree in theater from Fairmont State University in 2012 and is currently pursuing his M.F.A. in Acting as a part of the Professional Acting Program at Ohio University. He has worked with the Wallman Hall Theater, New Mystics Theatre Company, and Vintage Theatre. Bruce has trained with Jeffrey Ingman, Charlie Dillon, and Cathy O’Dell.

**Claire Autran:** Claire is from Cincinnati, Ohio. She is currently in pursuit of her B.F.A. in Acting at Ohio University. She has worked with the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, Cincinnati Playhouse, and Forestburgh Players. She has trained with Wendell Beavers and Alex Torra from Pig Iron Theatre Company. Claire is both an actor and a sound designer.
APPENDIX B

Notes on Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*

PLOT SUMMARY:
*Three Sisters* follows the Prozorov siblings—Irina, Masha, Olga, and Andrei—and their friends over a period of four long years. These four years are filled with the deep longing to return to Moscow, unrequited and forbidden love, dissatisfaction with employment, regret, resentment, and the unfailing, burning desire to live, to be happy. Masha and Vershinin are both trapped in loveless marriages and ironically fall in love with each other. Irina, the youngest sister, yearns to return to Moscow because she is convinced her true love (whom she hasn’t met yet) is waiting for her there. Olga, the oldest sister, stuck in a job she hates, regrets not getting married when she had the chance. Andrei marries Natasha and finds she isn’t who he thought she was. Solyony and Tuzenbach are both pining fruitlessly for Irina and end the play in a tragic duel. Natasha tries to gain respect in her own house despite class barriers. Kulygin is hopelessly devoted to his wife Masha even though he knows she does not reciprocate. Chebutykin wishes to return to his younger days, as he still in love with the Prozorov siblings’ late mother. Yet, amidst this anguish, each character is forever hopeful and cheerful towards the future. They are able to appreciate the absurdity of life and themselves, crying one minute and laughing the next.

CHARACTERS:
- **Olga**
  - The oldest Prozorov sister, late 20’s/early 30’s
  - Teaches at the high school
  - Not married
  - Practical
- **Masha**
  - The middle sister, mid 20’s
  - Married disdainfully to Kulygin
  - Has an affair with Vershinin
  - Plays piano
- **Irina**
  - The youngest sister, turns 20 at the start of the play
  - Not married
  - Dreamer
  - Loves no one, yet is loved by many, including Tuzenbach and Solyony
- **Andrei**
  - Their brother, age unclear
  - Marries Natasha in between act one and act two; has two children with her in the acts that follow
  - Becomes a member of the county council
  - Gambling addiction
  - Plays violin
- **Vershinin**
  - A lieutenant and battery commander in the Russian army
  - Married to “a wretch of a woman” with two young daughters
  - In love with Masha, has an affair with her
- **Tuzenbach**
o Baron
  o First lieutenant in the Russian army
  o In love with Irina
  o Is killed in a duel by Solyony

- Kulygin
  o Devoted husband of Masha
  o Teaches at the high school
  o Loves his job
  o Likes order, form, and routine

- Natasha
  o Provincial, local girl
  o Marries Andrei
  o Doesn’t fit in with the Prozorov family

- Chebutykin
  o Older, 60’s
  o Alcoholic
  o Doctor in the Russian army
  o Was in love with the Prozorov siblings’ mother

- Solyony
  o Captain in the Russian Army
  o In love with Irina
  o Socially awkward/inappropriate/abusive
  o Always putting perfume on his hands

- Ferapont
  o Older, late 60’s
  o Hard of hearing
  o Janitor at the county council

- Fedotik
  o Second lieutenant in the Russian Army
  o Takes pictures
  o Likes to give presents
  o Singer

- Rohde
  o Second lieutenant in the Russian Army
  o Talks loudly

- Anfisa
  o Much older, 80’s
  o Servant to the Prozorovs
  o Mother hen to Irina
  o Likes routine
  o Liberated serf

SETTING:
Small military town resembling Perm, Russia, the house of the Prozorov family

TIME:
Act one- 5 May, 1900; noon
Act two- A little over a year after act one; 8pm
Act three- Almost 4 years since act one; a little past 2am
Act four- Not too long after act three; noon
APPENDIX C

Suzuki Video and Music Links

Link to my videos for Suzuki Method Basics 1-4: https://vimeo.com/album/4300884

Links to my video for Suzuki Method Basic 5: https://youtu.be/UWbxB4SD8C8

Link to my video for Suzuki Method Basic 6: https://youtu.be/56-1NDv6LWI

Link to my thesis production video: https://youtu.be/xkTnwKi7B_0

Link to music for first half of Suzuki Method Basic 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irJYnqizFwA&t=7s (From 3:27-6:13)

Link to music for Suzuki Method Basic 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEvfmCO12V0&app=desktop

Link to music for Suzuki Method Basic 5: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8afAMPRhJQ
APPENDIX D

Program Layout for Thesis Production

A Piece of Three Sisters

Part One
An inside look at a repurposed Suzuki Method influenced by Meisner Technique and Viewpoints. Our experiment with the form and how we used Suzuki to create an ensemble for Three Sisters.

Part Two
Putting the ensemble into production. The end of Act Three of Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov.

Kulygin Bruce McGlumphy
Tuzenbach Dan Dennis
Olga: Ellie Clark
Masha: Bri McCabe
Irina: Claire Autran
Sound/Camera: Sam Fisher

This Thesis
The argument of this thesis is two-fold. First, to successfully stage Anton Chekhov’s Three Sisters, a pre-existing ensemble of actors is required. Second, an effective and efficient way to foster this ensemble is a repurposed Suzuki Method. This performance is a culmination of my research and experiment. Thanks for supporting us and enjoy!

-Bri McCabe