

The Three Dimensional Diamond Model for Scenes in Playback Theater

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Intro

In the Playback Theater (PT) training community, there are certain techniques and guidelines to teach short forms. Yet, when approaching Scenes (Lubrani Rolnik, 2009; Salas, 1999), open long-form enactments in PT, clear guidelines are lacking and a deeper structure for teaching and enacting this important element of the PT ritual could be beneficial.

This paper presents a model of the long-form PT Scene. It begins with a general typology of stories that can assist in deciding which PT form best suits which story. Then The Three Dimensional Diamond (3DD) Model for Scenes will be presented.

Typologies of stories

Aviva Apel (Personal conversation, 2014) categorizes three archetypes of stories that can be told in PT gatherings. The first archetype is Aristotelian structure with a clear beginning, middle and end where the protagonist undergoes an emotional transformation. The second archetype, Brechtian story, is episodic, non-linear, associative story, or a sequential story without much internal change to the protagonist. The last archetype is the Monodrama, which is a story with a strong internal focus without necessarily strong external change. This categorization echoes the typology of stories that McKee (1997) describes: Archplot, Miniplot and Antiplot.

Archplot (McKee, 1997), also called classical design, refers to a story of a single, active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected reality to a closed ending of absolute irreversible change. Actions are connected through a series of cause and effects, expressing the interconnectedness of reality. This is the popular design of story we see in movies and in theaters. This design is also called the Hero's journey, an archetypal process described in many myths around the world (Campbell, 1949). Archplot is the classic model of the Aristotle tragedy, which emphasizes a story with a clear beginning, middle and end (McManus, 1999). An important Aristotelian element that is relevant for the 3DD Model is that of *Reversal*, *Peripeteia* (Lucas, 1962), which relates to a situation seemingly developing in one direction, and then "reverses" toward the end.

Miniplot (McKee, 1997), a form of minimalism of the Archplot, shrinks the elements of the Classic

design. A Miniplot usually focuses on an externally passive protagonist who is actively pursuing an inward desire while experiencing an internal conflict. Usually Miniplots have more of an open ending.

Antipplot (McKee, 1997) is a type of story led nonlinear time, skipping through time or blurring temporal continuity. It is usually led by coincidence, and less by [causality](#). It could include multiple realities, contradictions and divergent directions.

Another subtype of story is *Nonplot* (McKee, 1997), which is a story describing a feeling, situation or place, without advancement of action.

Most classic short forms (such as the fluid sculpture and chorus) can fit all types of stories due to their minimalistic, symbolic, archetypal nature. That said, there is a place to explore a more “specialized” form selection for different types of stories.

Therefore, below (figure 1) is a visual diagram of McKee’s (1997) triangle typology together with Apel’s (2014) terminology along with the author’s suggested PT forms for each type of story. This diagram represents a range where each story can be situated on a continuum between the three types of stories. Obviously, these are just recommendations and ensembles can choose to playback any story in any form.

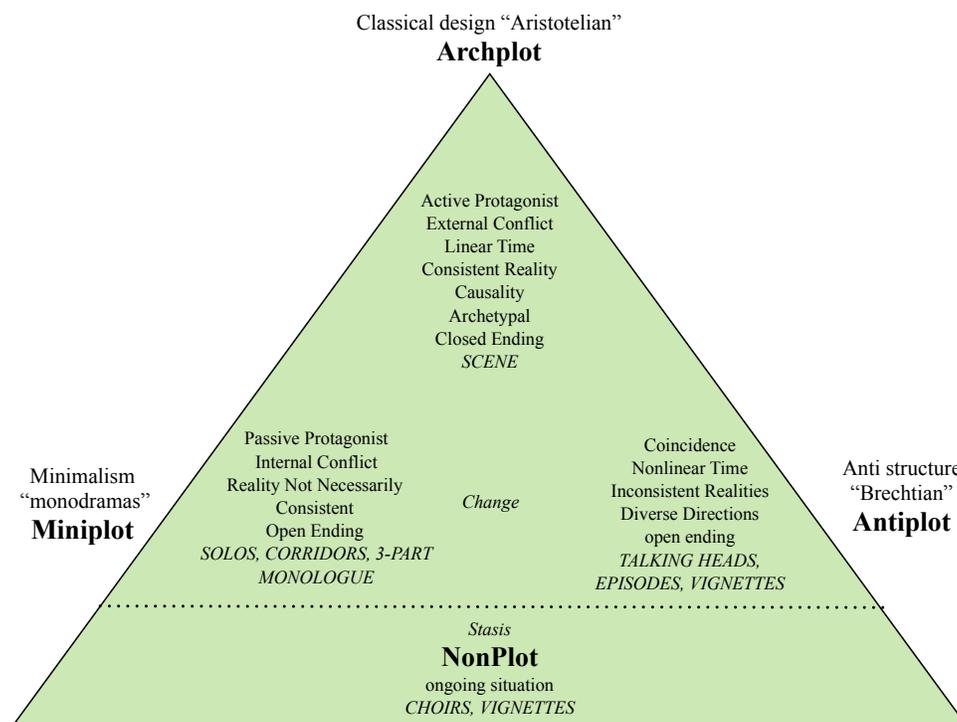


Figure 1 - Typology of stories (Apel, 2014; McKee, 1997) with suggested PT forms

The Three Dimensional Diamond Model for a PT Scene

The PT Scene can be appreciated as a long-form improvisation (Hauck, 2013) based on and guided by a teller's story. As such, it could be aided by using the same features, traditions and guidelines. The Three Dimensional Diamond (3DD) Model for a PT Scene has three dimensions: content, emotion and the intention. Each dimension has a different focus that enriches the other two. The three dimensions together create a 3D effect of depth and breadth in the PT Scene.

To demonstrate this model, we will use an example archplot story: *A woman, let's call her Ray, worked in a job she hated. She was treated horribly by her perfectionist boss and wanted to switch jobs desperately. Depressed, she waited a few years, too scared to leave the security of her job, quietly hoping to find a new job. Until one day an opportunity appeared when her friend told her they were looking for a professional with experience in computers. Ray wasn't sure that she was qualified enough for that job. Moreover, she was pregnant and was scared of making major professional changes during her pregnancy. In a moment of courage, she applied anyway. She ended up getting the new job. Her story ends a few months after the birth, in her new job feeling challenged, stretched and appreciated by her new boss.*

1. The content dimension

An efficient model for generating content in long-form improvisation is The Diamond Model¹ (See figure 2). The diamond is not even-sided. The typical Scene will sometimes spend more time setting up the problem less on the actual resolution. Therefore, the first/lower part of the diamond is longer than the second/top part.

The first part of the diamond is based on a process of *Ideation*, generating ideas through intuitive thinking, within and outside the circle of expectations. *In our example, this part will show Ray's hard times at work, with different offers being generated such as: a horrible boss, a cold colleague, a malfunctioning computer, no working pens at her desk, the song "nine to five" playing loudly on the radio and more.*

The turning point of the diamond is the point of no return, the point in the story where an event happens that makes going back impossible. This can be called the climax of the story (McKee, 1997), an event that is absolute and irreversible. This echoes *the crossing of the threshold* in the Hero's journey, the point of the story where the hero cannot return to her original reality, thereby bringing

¹ Several improv teachers including Alan Marriott, Dylan Emery, Mark Phoenix and Chris Johnston have taught the improvisational Diamond model. This article emphasizes an original application of this model to PT.

upon the emergence of guardians and antagonists (Campbell, 1949). From this point on, the protagonist is changed and the eventual end of the story is seemingly unavoidable.

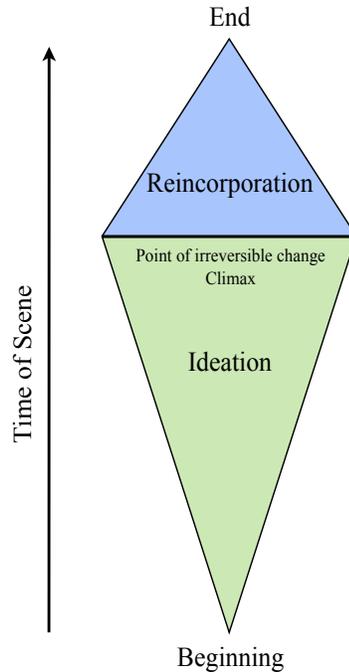


Figure 2 - content dimension of 3DD Model

In our example, applying for the job could be seen as the point of no return, since at that point Ray's feeling and opinion changed. Another possible point of no return could be her acceptance into the new job, as irreversible change in her story.

The end of the climax marks the beginning of the second segment of the improvisation. In this part of the diamond, ensemble mostly reincorporates previously generated material, which ideally should tie up all the story lines and not introduce new material.

The teller's actor, together with the ninja actors who are not chosen for a specific role in a Scene (Romanelli, 2013), would then start generating ideas through intuitive thinking until the climax is reached. Ideally, throughout the Scene, the teller's actor is more reactive, allowing herself to be in the here and now, while leaning on the ninja actors to guide the Scene.

Ideation could include a movement or sound theme that can later be revisited. The richer the ideation, the more options the ensemble will have to reincorporate later. The climax could be a clear emotional decision, not necessarily an external action.

Reincorporation, the process of incorporating ideas in the second part of the Scene that were originally generated in the first part of the Scene, rests at the core of the Diamond Model. Long-form improv trainers have always stressed the importance of *reincorporation* of previously generated material (Johnston, 2004; Johnstone, 1989, 1999). Zaporah (1995) describes the classic metaphor for the long-form improvisation: “*Improvising is like walking backwards. You can see where you’ve been, but you can’t see where you’re going. But what you see does affect where you’re going*” (Zaporah, 1995, p. 54). Reincorporation can be done without words, solely through movement, physicality or sounds of previously generated ideas. Earlier generated ideas could also be reincorporated as symbols, For example, if an apple was generated intuitively in the first part of the Scene, then the idea of apple as the tree of knowledge, or “fruit of our labors” could be later reincorporated satisfyingly for the audience. Reincorporation can include only a few main ideas from the first half in order to be effective.

In our example, the reincorporation part of the diamond would show Ray in her new work place, happy and challenged. Ideally early offers would be incorporated one way or another such as: a new boss, an open and funny colleague, a friendly computer, a stack of pens given to Ray, and perhaps Ray is humming the song “nine to five” and more.

This first dimension is the road map for the ensemble to know which content to generate and contribute to the Scene.

2. The emotional dimension

The second dimension to the 3DD Model consists of the emotional journey of the Protagonist (See figure 3 below). As described before, Archplot stories require the protagonist to undergo change. Aviva Apel (2014) emphasizes the emotional transformation of the protagonist as the heart of the archplot enactment. Thus in PT it is essential that the teller’s actor (undergo and) perform an emotional transformation from one feeling to a different one throughout the Scene.

Therefore, the conductor in her interview must be clear what the teller’s feelings were before and after the climax. Usually there is one major emotional transformation in stories, even when tellers describe several emotions during their story.

Consequently, through the emotional dimension, the first part of the diamond is “highlighted” by the first feeling of the teller. The teller’s actor along with the ninja actors, are generating offers that intensify that feeling (for example a feeling of helplessness).

The point of no return now includes the moment or incident that sparks the emotional transformation of the teller (for example, from helplessness to confidence). It is the teller’s actor alone who can actually

make the transformation, but the Ninja actors can create the atmosphere by putting emotional and physical pressure that can help her transform organically to the next feeling. It is important that the transformation happen organically and naturally onstage. Physical movement and touch with the ninja actors can help the teller's actor to embody the feeling and then the transformation.

The reincorporation part of the diamond is now highlighted by the second (major) feeling of the teller's actor, with the ninja actors assisting her in deepening her embodiment of that feeling.

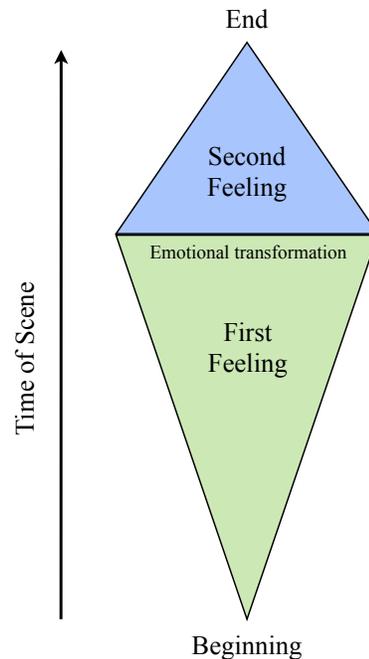


Figure 3 - Emotional dimension of 3DD Model

Combining the content and emotion dimensions delivers a deep and rich enactment. Yet by adding the third dimension of intent, we can better braid the red thread (Hoesch, 1999), the unconscious group process that connects different stories in a PT ritual, and ensure a deepening of the group process.

3. The intent dimension

This dimension of the 3DD model was built in cooperation with the scriptwriter Kate Stayman-London² and further developed by Gigi Romanelli. The intent of the teller carries the archetypal theme that is at the core of the red thread (Hoesch, 1999), and which can spark the imagination and curiosity of the next teller in the PT ritual. The heart of this dimension revolves around the pursuits of the external and internal goals of the teller (See figure 4 below for a visual representation of this dimension).

² More of Stayman-London's work can be found at: <http://www.katestaymanlondon.com>.

The external goal is the Want, the conscious desire or goal (McKee, 1999) the protagonist wants in the story. The external goal can change throughout the story. *The internal goal* is the Need: the archetypal, universal need of the protagonist. It is more often than not unconscious and does not change throughout the story. The internal goal is sometimes connected to the flaw or blind spot of the protagonist, and drives the external Want of the protagonist. Usually the teller clearly states the external goal, but rarely does she explicitly state her internal goal.

In our example it is possible that Ray's conscious, external goal was to change a job. Her internal goal could be to be appreciated, to feel fulfilled or to find expression of her (professional) potential.

In most stories, there is a discrepancy (or even conflict) between the protagonist's external and internal goals (McKee, 1997). *In Ray's story, even though Ray consciously wants to be somewhere else, she internally wants to be validated, regardless of where she is.*

In the 3DD Model, the first part of the diamond focuses on the pursuit of the external goal. In this act (composed of one or several scenes) the teller's actor deals with antagonism and conflict in relation to her external goal. This act ends with achieving or not achieving her external goal.

The climax is now characterized as the point of reversal in the story. This is analogous to the Aristotelian concept of Peripeteia (reversal) that must include a high moment of joy, from which there is the eminent fall to the tragic end (or a low moment from which there is a dramatic rise to joy in the end).

In our story, the reversal could begin with Ray deflated, sad and too scared to quit. The Peripeteia could be when Ray is devastated from another harsh criticism from her boss with no other job in sight. She is depressed and helpless without any hope.

The second part of the 3DD Model in the intention dimension is the reincorporation of previously generated ideas with a focus on the *internal* goal of the teller's actor. The Scene ends with a certain realization of the internal goal.

In our story, the 2nd part of the Scene includes reincorporated offers (as described above) while the teller's actor relates to the internal goal of feeling fulfilled. She may give a soliloquy on her current feelings of confidence, becoming the woman she wanted to be as a child.

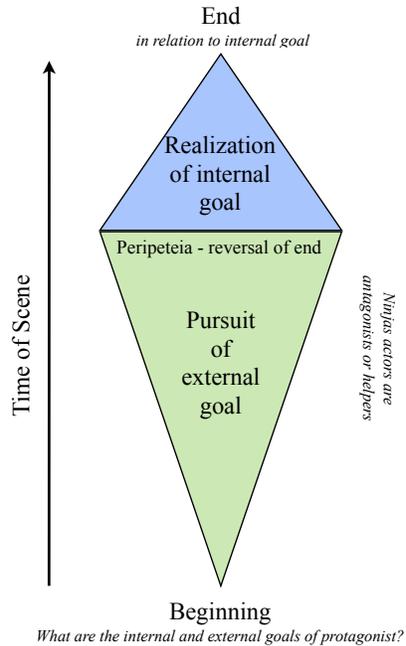


Figure 4 - Intention dimension of the 3DD Model

The way the teller’s actor relates to the internal goal usually colors the emotional meaning of the end of the story. Stayman-London (2014) recommends ending with engaging the internal need, since the internal need is a universal, archetypal need that echoes throughout the audience and thickens the red thread (Hoesch, 1999).

If the teller’s actor achieves her internal goal and external goal, then the story will have a “happy end” feeling. If the teller’s actor achieves her internal goal but not her external goal, the audience might still be satisfied and the story could still be a “feel-good” story. A tragedy could thus be defined as the teller’s actor not realizing, not achieving, or achieving too late her internal goal, regardless of the achievement of the external goal.

Before enacting the Scene, the PT ensemble could have a shared sense of the ending, especially in relation to the external and internal goals. Obviously there is no time to discuss the ending beforehand and the differences between individual actors’ perceptions will be negotiated throughout the Scene, sometimes adding *frisson* to the Scene (Veronica Needa, personal communication, 2014). That being said, ninja actors with a clear sense of the ending can help navigate the teller’s actor to the conclusion

of the story, mostly in relation to the internal goal, since the ending in relation to the external goal was just heard by the whole audience.

Conclusion

The 3DD Model has three dimensions: content, emotion and intent. All three dimensions are synergistic and collude organically. They also incorporate the dramatic, emotional and cognitive components of the story. Together, they can create the “3D effect” to the Scene, adding depth and meaning. See figure 5 below for a visual representation of the full 3DD Model.

The first part of the full 3DD Model uses ideation to generate offers in relation to the external goal, influenced by the first feeling. The climax of the Scene is the point of irreversible change as well as the moment of emotional transformation. The emotional transformation usually occurs organically in reaction to a clear moment of change in the story.

The last part of the 3DD Model focuses on the internal goal, through the prism of the second feeling, using the process of reincorporation of earlier offers. The end of the Scene is in relation to the internal goal of the teller.

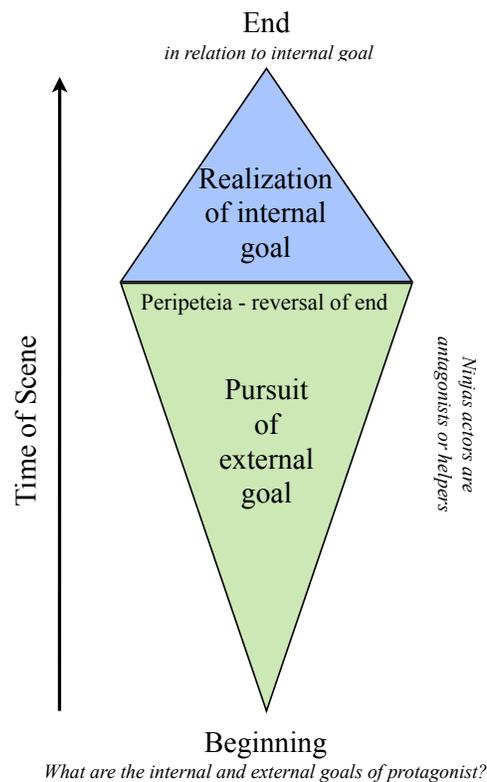


Figure 4 - Intention dimension of the 3DD Model

Initially, the 3DD Model could be quite difficult for the actors to grasp, with different dimensions and instructions. Through practice, the basic structure of the 3DD Model not only enables clarity and a shared understanding within the ensemble, but also produces a more satisfying Scene for the teller and audience.

There are many questions and areas still in need of further research, definition and experiment. The art of PT, like improvisation, is ‘easy to learn, difficult to master’. Some might say that, contrary to short forms, Scenes should be more open and less rigid. A possible reply to this is found in McKee’s (1997) principle of Creative Limitation: “*The principle of Creative Limitation calls for freedom within a circle of obstacles. Talent is like a muscle: without something to push against it, it atrophies. So we deliberately put rocks in our path, barriers that inspire. We discipline ourselves as to what to do, while we are boundless as to how to do it.*” (p. 91). Perhaps a model for Scenes, can provide not only a common language for the PT ensemble, but also be an “inspiring barrier” that can enrich the enactment.

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