

The Four Elements: New Models for a Subversive Dramaturgy

Judith Rudakoff

Feminist psychologist Nor Hall, in *The Moon & The Virgin: Reflections on the Archetypal Feminine*, writes of those who bear the burden of doing “cultural labour” to bring forth “public fire” (86).

That’s how I characterize dramaturgy, and where I, as an artist and as an academic, locate myself: I conceive and germinate individualized artistic process to facilitate and even instigate the transmission of creativity.

I have been working for the past ten years on crafting a non-prescriptive method for initiating and evolving artistic work across disciplines that may or may not be text-based, and is always informed by cultural diversity and individual voice and experience. I have also discovered that this method can be useful as an alternative to conventional play analysis techniques.

While I resist the idea of formalization or codification, I also have learned the value of being able to repeat successful exercises and having the vocabulary to explain the goals, criteria, and simple ways and means of doing these exercises. The only non-mutable, indisputable fact in all of this work is that we are our own best resource.

I have evolved this work with actors and directors in a remote mountain colony in the Sierra Escambray,¹ emerging playwrights and dramaturgs in urban centers such as Montreal, Quebec; London, England; Cape Town, South Africa; visual artists and puppeteers in a bustling city in central Cuba (under the auspices of the Union of Writers and Artists in Cienfuegos), and a dancer/choreographer in Toronto, Ontario.² In each of these diverse contexts, I re-discovered the same basic principles:

1. Expression of artistic voice is the last line of defence in the war against cultural obliteration.
2. We carry our artistic obsession within. Whether or not we recognize or accept that obsession, it informs and infuses every work we create.

This, then, is my work, here and now. It will change. It must change. You will change it by reading it. You will change it further by doing it.

Stages in the Methodology: The Four Elements³

Whether used to create new work or to analyze existing plays, this process begins with a detailed examination of The Four Elements: Air, Earth, Fire, and

Water. The Elements provide a template for examining characters and understanding their relationship to each other and to the world of the play.

My distinctly non-scientific guides to The Four Elements, detailed below, have been developed from a multiplicity of sources, including empirical observation, orally transmitted, non-attributed neo-pagan teachings, the study of earth-based spiritual belief systems and mythological references from world cultures.⁴ These element guides provide a starting point for individualized application: the key to this work is personalization and adaptation. The guides pertain both to the element itself and also place the element in particular power relationships with the other elements.

WATER

Water is transparent in its pure form

Water can carry very heavy objects.

Water reflects things. It was used as a mirror in ancient times.

Water can't be made smaller than it is.

Water will expand to fit or fill any space or shape it is given.

Water will take the shape of whatever surrounds it.

Water flows smoothly (but less smoothly than air).

Water reacts to fire (but less than Air does).

Water can be changed into other forms (like ice or steam).

Water keeps people, places, or things warm or cool, but less effectively than Air or Earth do.

Water won't move by itself.

Water will absorb things (including Air and Fire).

Water is the only element that can penetrate Earth easily, no matter what the condition of the Earth is.

EARTH

Earth cannot be changed into another element.

Earth's strength is based on its solidness, its endurance.

Earth lasts and lasts.

Earth is solid. You cannot make it smaller or greater than it is.

Earth doesn't move unless something makes it move.

Earth can keep people, places, things warm or cool.

Earth will resist attempts to move it.

Earth is receptive to other elements, but mostly to Water.

FIRE

Fire cannot be changed into another element, but it can change from one form of energy/Fire to another.

Fire's strength comes from movement.

Fire makes other people, things, even places move, change or get going.

Fire gives off heat.

Fire is not heavy, but that doesn't mean it is not strong: its strength does not come from size.

Fire can destroy Water or Earth when it attacks directly.

AIR

Air is clear in its natural state.

Air carries energy and light things.

Air reflects objects, like a mirage.

Air can occupy whatever space is available. It can be compressed or expanded.

Air reacts to energy, so can become hot or cold depending on what's influencing it.

Air flows easily, even more easily than Water.

You can change the "shape" of Air by surrounding it with a frame, case, or container.

Air, under specific conditions, can be changed into either a liquid (liquid oxygen) or a solid (dry ice) substance. The status depends on external circumstances.

Air can keep things, people, or places warm or cool.

Air doesn't move unless something moves it.

Air is necessary for Fire.

Air is light in weight, but has great power.

Applying the Elements: Beginning Exercises

To begin, invite participants to recognize and identify aspects of The Elements in their own personalities, behavior patterns, likes and dislikes, and also in each other, friends, and family. Once participants become familiar with this stage of the process, learning and internalizing what the elements are and what they are capable of doing, ask participants to transfer their observations to examples in theatre. Locating and sharing phrases, expressions, and statements that reflect The Elements in common, daily speech is surprisingly helpful to beginners: thick as a brick (Earth), air head (Air), going with the flow (Water), burning up with desire (Fire).

The Four Elements can also be applied as a method of text analysis for existing plays. Hamlet can be characterized as Water in a world of Earth (and therefore muddy in his thinking). The twisting, dark passageways of Elsinore Castle indicate mostly Earth characteristics: a lasting and immutable fortress, insulating inhabitants from the outside world. In this landscape of Earth, Hamlet carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, tries at first to reflect the world around him, but ultimately, cannot maintain the façade, and returns to his natural state, which is wishy-washy and also reflective of the world around him.

Hamlet, a moody Water, floods his environment with emotional explorations. He is transparent and guileless when in an undisturbed or neutral state. He tries to live up to expectation, filling the shape/role he is offered, and also tries to absorb as much of what is happening around him as he possibly can. Ophelia, on the other hand, is Air. She is open and trusting in her natural state, but strongly reactive to the energies around her.

In Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, the interaction between Miss Julie and Jean is a relationship between her Water and his Fire. That relationship implies the possibility of either being destroyed, depending on the shifting balance of power between Water and Fire. Jean might evaporate Miss Julie. Or Julie might douse Jean.

Hamlet personifies Water as a stagnant pool. Julie is a torrent, a deluge, a downpour. Exploring the individual ways in which they are both Water can help to understand the varied interpretations and applications of the Elements.

In *King Lear*, participants can examine Lear's realm, which presents a dry, dusty backdrop for the action of the play, as an externalization of his inner turmoil and addled brain. The world of this play is solidly Earth: it doesn't change unless someone forces the change; it is insulated from most external impulses; it resists any attempts to change it. Lear's longevity as a person and a monarch are also Earth characteristics.

No matter how parched and unyielding Earth is, though, it can still be penetrated by Water. Or eroded by Air. Deciding the element of each of Lear's daughters will create relationships that can then be described according to the interaction of the elements. For example, Cordelia is Water, able to penetrate the driest landscape. She is able to find the father she once knew, now buried under stone and hardened earth. Water penetrating Earth can create growth and new life. Alternately, this elemental interaction can lead to flooding and devastation. Regan and Goneril display Fire characteristics, alternating in their tactics and moving from one form of energy to another. They keep trying to influence their father, to make him active. They manifest extreme passion and try to destroy the status quo, attacking directly when necessary.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche (Water, drenching all in her presence with overwhelming neediness and loss of connection to Earth, or reality) is poured onto the Fire that is the home of Stanley and Stella. Not only is the outcome steam, but also, at given points in the action of the play, we can discern boiling water. The play repeatedly evokes the image of a pot of liquid boiling over or plumes of steam pouring out of an open window.

Directors can apply these behavior patterns and traits when working with actors, both in interpretation of text and also in the physicality and gestures for

each character. Designers can incorporate element correspondences into their work, from lighting choices to costume colors and textures to building materials and set concept. Actors can use this technique to understand the way in which a character interacts with the world of the play.

Exercises for Applying the Elements

I have developed a series of dramaturgical exercises primarily aimed at initiating new work. These can also be adapted for application to already realized plays, as exercises in character or text analysis for actors, directors, designers, or dramaturgs. These are examples of some of the exercises.

Element Monologue

Participants write a monologue in a character voice that represents one of the elements. For example, Michael Rottman, a theatre student at York University wrote this piece in Air:

Do you remember what Reagan said way back during the shuttle accident? The Challenger explosion, yes . . . Reagan gave a speech after and they all made fun of him, the press gave him a hard time cause he used that poem about leaving the earth, I forget the poet . . . “loose the bonds of earth,” or . . . “slip the bonds of earth and touch the sky?”

I don't know, thinking about you way up there, I thought of that poem. I know it might be out of date, they probably don't teach it anymore, except as a museum piece. Look what they used to do with words, they say, look at the words closed up in an airless shelf. I was rather moved when he said it, but, well.

Those pictures just made me dizzy. Sometimes you couldn't even see the ground you stood on. Tricks with the lens and such, I know, but it looks like everyone is just hanging there, walking on air. Just the sheer space between the earth and the sky, the sky seemed tangible, and I know it wasn't such a high cliff, but golly! There had to be a limit, it couldn't go on forever. I can't even comprehend it. Must have been clean to breathe, wasn't it?

In addition to the obvious Air references, the rhythm of this piece flows easily. Following the thoughts, which shift frequently, is like feeling a breeze that is constantly coming from a different direction. The piece turns like a weather vane in a strong wind. The writer focuses on being ungrounded, and on Ronald Reagan becoming an object of ridicule when he should have been an anchor to the nation. Air reacts to the energy around it, becoming hot or cold depending on influence. The writer's imagining of how it must have felt to be “hanging there, walking on air” and his envisioning of the “sheer space between the earth and the sky” evoke Air as well.

The next stage for the writer would be to take this monologue and ask questions such as, who is the speaker and to whom is he talking? Why is he telling this particular story at this specific moment? What has just happened to necessitate this story being told? Where is the speaker? What is the element affiliation for both the character and the location or world of the play and how

do they interact? The monologue often ends up as part of a play, or provides detail for a character biography.

For actors beginning character work, this exercise would take a slightly different form. The first step would be to identify the element of the character in a scene, then to focus on the element manifested in world of the play, and then write a monologue or descriptive piece in that element.

The Image Flash

The Image Flash requires the participant to choose a moment in her life, or in the life of the character she is creating or studying. The exercise generally begins with writing the words, “There are stories about . . .” or a comparable opening sentence chosen by the participant. For approximately fifteen minutes, writers pour out images that capture quick, undetailed flashes of events, feelings, thoughts, actions, people, or whatever evokes an instant connection to the moment they’ve chosen. Throughout the Image Flash, writers are encouraged to use a refrain, such as, “All I can think about is Fire” (or, if more appropriate, “Earth,” or “Air,” or “Water”).

The refrain can act as a pause, a moment to process internally without breaking rhythm or losing momentum. It can also reinforce the passion driving the writer, or even function like the blink of an eye as the image cataloguing moves across an internal panorama. The writer must, in the midst of the cataloguing, make a decision as to the element of the piece. At this stage in the work, the element affiliation is generally obvious.

These are two very different examples of Image Flash. (The first example uses a refrain of, “Sometimes I am still four years old,” and the second uses no refrain. As mentioned above, this method evolves with each new application, to better serve the individual process: this exercise is highly personal and my description of how it can work is meant to function as a template, not a prescription.)

There are visions of winged babies, there are visions of bearded faces, there are visions of fighting bulls, there are of earthshattering dragons, there are visions of *Mae*, there are visions of *Pai*. Sometimes I am still four years old. There are visions of roses, there are visions of logs burning, there are visions of hot bread, there are visions of long, black hair, there are visions of strong, battered hands, there are visions of swinging nooses. Sometimes I am still four years old. There are visions of bloodied eyes, there are visions of blue, ocean foam, there are visions of a bald, freckled head, there are visions kneaded dough, there are visions of sweaty bodies, there are visions of flying knives. Sometimes I am still four years old. There are visions of ballerinas, there are visions of dolls, there are visions of unicorns, there are visions of cherry trees, there are visions of orange trees, there are visions of burns. Sometimes I am still four years old. There are visions of boys, there are visions of girls, there are visions of angels, there are visions of spirits, there are visions of caves, there are visions of crosses. Sometimes I am still four years old.

Lena Ourique, Canada/Portugal

The element of this Image Flash is Fire. The images that suggest the untold stories contain heated passion, implicit anger and frustration, strength that comes from movement, actions that instigate people to move, change, or get going. Fire doesn't have to be big or heavy to be strong as exemplified by a four-year-old child's survival of childhood filled with challenges.

The Image Flash allows the writer or artist examining a set text to explore the work without consciously processing ideas and images intellectually or academically. Cataloguing images is similar to randomly snapping photographs of a location or event. This shorthand of images becomes a litany, a shower of sparks, an album of memories that can be accessed in longhand later on. It's a way of remembering without exhausting creative possibility, and of listing without losing creative connection to material.

When deciding on inspiration for an Image Flash, writers often choose a moment in their character's life, especially if they are in the middle of the writing process and experiencing a classic "writer's block." At the start of a new project, writers can use the Image Flash to explore character and world of the play by placing their newly created character in a place and experiencing, along with the character, what is around them. Next stages in the writing would include either incorporating the monologue into the action of the play, or using it as previous history or character delineation.

Another example:

There are stories about farmlands; not the green ones of English novels but red-earthed African ones with miles of banana trees and snakes in the sugar cane. There are stores of gardens planted by foreigners; of avocados and acacias and litchis in the evening. There are stories of women, whose hands I have touched, standing on red balconies and watching for the cloud of dust from a car on a road that leads to Kwambonambi. There are stories about children sent off to boarding school and mothers crying and fathers asserting that it's all for the best. There are stories of fathers working on the land, and working to forget on the land. There are stories of Mothers who watch the horizon and dream of the children in the cities of Natal. There are stories about tea time. There are stories about Victorian relics and African handicrafts. There are stories about white people in large houses and black people in small houses on land they have lost. There are stories of power and concealment, and of the land. And of the land. There are stories of heat and hate and afternoon rain. There are stories of regret.

Juliet Jenkin, South Africa

This example focuses on location, on the world of the work. The element of this Image Flash is Earth. It speaks of stability despite the passage of time and a changing world, the security of people and places as anchors and the recognition of the importance of having a home base even if that home isn't particularly happy or safe. Earth doesn't move unless something forces it to move: this is a piece that identifies home.

An actor beginning work on a new role could achieve a deeper understanding of a scene or a moment by writing an Image Flash in character voice. For example, the actor playing Ibsen's Master Builder Solness could create an Image Flash for the scene when he is talking with Dr. Herder about the

younger generation knocking at the door . . . and a knock is heard at the door heralding the arrival of Hilda Wangel. The Image Flash could start with, “There are stories about . . .” and use as a refrain, “Sometimes I’m still young,” or “Sometimes I am old,” depending on what the actor wanted to focus.

A director exploring the world of a play already written could write an Image Flash inspired by the given circumstances of the world. For example, an Image Flash of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* could begin with:

There are stories about trees and there are stories about roads, there are stories about family and there are stories about strangers, all I can think about is Earth.

Image Containers

The goal of this exercise is to build a container and fill it with images to create visual and iconographic links between an idea and realizable action. Either as a new work development exercise, or as a means of play analysis, this exercise can be realized in three different ways.

1. *General Exploration*: Offers a world of images housed in a container that exemplifies the state of mind, the state of artistic being of the person creating it.

This type of Image Container is very useful at the beginning of element work as it allows participants to realize different aspects of the elements in a tangible form. This type of Image Container works best when it is not affixed to a particular project. It is the least defined of the containers, encouraging exploration rather than definition.

2. *A Snapshot*: Offers an opportunity to look in a specific and targeted way at one bounded experience, one time or one place in the life of the person creating it.

This type of Image Container is the most focused, allowing for examination in great detail of a specific moment or part of a world, event, or person. It is best used to explore one scene, or one event in a character’s life.

3. *World of the Work*: Offers the opportunity to encapsulate the world of the creative work and all that is currently within that world. It will contain artifacts of the world of the play.

This type of Image Container examines the world and its inhabitants as a totality. It is most useful when trying to grasp the play’s larger environment, or when attempting to gain familiarity with a world in an in-depth way.

Each type of Image Container has an element correspondence, either the element of the person creating the container or the element of the work.

Here are examples of one type of Image Container:

Examples of Snapshot Type of Image Containers

Alison Ramsay is an emerging dramaturg who grew up in northern Canada, in a small mining community called Marathon, Ontario. Her mother, a nurse, moved to an entirely different environment—the Bahamas—to work. While Alison was visiting her, she constructed an Image Container that encapsulated the experience of being with her mother—a familiar experience—in a completely foreign culture and climate, chronicling and cataloguing the huge amount of sensory experiences that filled her three weeks. The container that she chose was a conch shell from the beach outside her mother's apartment in the Bahamas.

The Water affiliation of this Image Container was clear. First, it used the shell of an animal that lives in the water that had been washed up on a shore. Alison wrote poetic images on tiny pieces of paper, which she then inserted into the conch. All of these written mini-poems evoked aspects of Water, including the need to reflect the experience through the filter of her own experience; the resilience of her mother who was adapting to a new and different home; the reactivity of her mother and herself to the heat, the sun; the malleability of her mother in learning to work and live in a new culture; the necessity to earn a living and the lack of work at home that drove her mother to move so far away.

Nichola Sawyer is from the small English town of Swindon. Her Image Container was a pair of men's boot-cut blue jeans, initially folded into a square and tightly sealed in cellophane wrap. When the jeans were unwrapped, the air was filled with the scent of a men's perfume called "Addiction." All over the jeans were pinned, on small torn pieces of white paper, and affixed with straight pins, written messages and descriptive images: in the pockets, along the seams, at the crotch, on the knee. These images acted as stimulus for emotional memory of a relationship that this writer had with an abusive partner. In one of the pockets there was a taped cassette of music (by Radiohead and Beck, from 1998) that the writer associated with the relationship. The images included a hand-drawn picture of a house and a car, which were the tools of seduction. Also included were a package of cigarettes and a lighter. Some of the shreds of paper bore the following words: Addiction, Dependency, Tolerance, Alcohol, Cannabis, Amphetamine, Ecstasy, Cocaine/Crack. Nichola pinpointed the time of this Snapshot Image Container as March to July 1998, locating it on Colchester Road, Toothill, Swindon, Wiltshire, England.⁵ While a specific time and place are not mandatory, in the creation of a Snapshot Image Container, they further encapsulate the experience by locating and framing it in space and time.

The scent of perfume and cigarette smoke notwithstanding, the need to wrap and insulate the transient memories in cellophane and the ephemeral moments of this relationship identify this Image Container as Air.

By now it may well be apparent that as people filter processes and ideas through the individual unconscious, if you have a strongly defined and manifested element, everything you create may work through or in relation to that element.

Conclusion

Like all good subversives, I prefer not to categorize, not to formalize. There are stories about change and there are stories about r/evolution. The strength

and universality of application and use of this methodology is in its specificity. Each time through this process, the circumstances of here and now, the particulars of the material being developed determine the route taken. At its core, this work is predicated upon and dedicated to facilitating creative expressions of voice and identity to artistic purpose. And ensuring that artistic voice is always connected to and working within community. We do not simply ask, “Who am I?” in this process. We ask, “Who am I and where is here?”

Judith Rudakoff, Associate Professor of Theatre at York University in Toronto, Canada, has worked as a developmental dramaturg on three continents, winning the Elliott Hayes Prize in Dramaturgy in 2000. Her most recent book is *Between the Lines: The Process of Dramaturgy* (co-written with Lynn M. Thomson).

Notes

1. Such as *The Garden*, an interactive installation/performance that included approximately 60 Canadian and Cuban participants and took place on February 18th, 1999 and again on February 15th, 2000 in La Macagua, Cuba.
2. For Sampradaya Dance Creations multimedia production *Revealed by Fire*, instigated by the choreographer Lata Pada's loss of her husband and two daughters in the terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182 in 1985, and inspired by her subsequent reclamation of individual identity.
3. While there is a link between my application and interpretation of the elements and the LeCoq inspired movement work with the elements, these are distinct methodologies. I have worked with several people who have undertaken both courses of study and the creative outcome tends more towards hybridizing the influences than any type of conflict or competition.
4. For an excellent introduction to references from world cultures, see Walker, who cites a multitude of correspondences from a diversity of cultures and eras, for example, the Indo-European cultural reference to the goddess Kali “organizing [the four elements] into letter mantras carved on her rosary of skulls, to form the Sanskrit alphabet, which she invested with power to create what it expressed. Elemental sounds were divided in four categories: Va, water; Ra, fire; La, earth and Ya, air” (273). Walker also refers to the Tantric Tibetan custom of sky burial (air), Hindu disposal of bodies into water, European tradition of burial in earth and cremation (fire).
5. During the initial presentation of this Image Container, physical vocabulary, text, and performance style began to emerge, and Nichola is working towards developing the piece into a performance.

Works Cited

- Hall, Nor. *The Moon and The Virgin: Reflections on the Archetypal Feminine*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Walker, Barbara G. “The Elements.” *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983. 272–276.