

Four Elements – Voice and Movement Workshop  
Adapted by: Marco D. Munoz  
from Judith Rudakoff's  
*"The Four Elements: A New Model for a Subversive Dramaturgy"*

*"We do not simply ask "Who am I?" in this process. We ask, "Who am I and where is here?"*  
-Judith Rudakoff: *The Four Elements*

**Moving with the Elements Exercise** – (adapted from Rudakoff's Guide to the Elements).  
Actors will occupy the space and move through it, embodying each element in an attempt to explore emotional depth, energy through physical movement and vocal variety, and spatial relationships between themselves, the other performers and the given environment.

**PHASE ONE**

**Step 1:** the actors will walk about the space, coming into the environment, allowing themselves to concentrate only on the moment at hand, on their breath, and the space around them.

**Step 2:** the instructor/director, will at any time announce "hold" or "pause" which will direct the actors to stop/halt wherever they may be. Students will first adjust to a neutral or centered position (feet shoulder width apart, hands hanging loosely at their sides, head centered on the spine) and then close their eyes. Actors will then proceed to take three deep breathes (in through nose/out through mouth – remind them not to lock their knees). Actors will do this altogether as a group and with each breathe the actors should try to release tension in places throughout their body where they may be "holding" or "tightening".

**Step 3:** As the actors continue to keep their eyes close and breathe with ease, the director will then name an element and proceed to read through the "Elements Guide", having the actors focus only on the element being described. The instructor may choose any element to begin with as there is no set order for this exercise. The actors should visualize each element as they are being described and allow themselves to "embody" or "charge" their physicality with that particular element. (Actors should be encouraged to begin moving in their own space, where they are standing, and possibly even begin vocalizing with vowel sounds, if need be.)

**Step 4:** After the element has been described the director may say for example - "You are free to ***move as fire*** through the space.". The actors are then released to move through the space "charged" or "embodying" the element. The actors may at any time voice how they are feeling with short phrases such as. "I feel on fire" or "I am powerful" "I am explosive" etc. but must be encourage to play with range, topography, and tempo in their movement. From extreme and aggressive to soft and subtle. Do this for a several minutes then repeat the process with a different element.

*(Before the introduction of a new element, have the students "hold" or "pause" and take three deep breathes with their eyes closed, allowing themselves time to "release" the previous element and return to neutral. Then repeat Steps 3&4. This process will be repeated for each element.)*

## **PHASE TWO**

Step 1: Repeat the process for *Phase 1: Steps 1-2*. Actors must be reminded to strive to return to their neutral selves.

Step 2: Repeat the process for *Phase 1: Step 3*, only this time the actors should begin to envision and imagine their surroundings/environment/given space, being engulfed or consumed with each element being described instead of themselves. The elements are now “charging” the space itself and the actor must strive to remain their neutral selves for now. The director may then say for example -“ You are free to ***move through water***”. The actors are then released to move through the “charged” space. The actors should be encouraged to vocalize how they feel in short phrases or words as they maneuver the space. The actors should allow the elements to take the many shapes, forms, or states of matter, that each element may go through. (Water can be ice, and steam, Earth can be mud, clay, granite, and even sand, air can be cold, damp and wet, or dry even, while fire can rage or smolder, engulf, and consume or burn out quickly.) Actors should allow themselves to be affected by their surrounding both internally and externally and once again play with extremes and subtleties.

Step 3: Remember before the introduction of a new element have the actors “hold”, and take three deep breathes with their eyes closed, allowing them time to “release” the previous element from the space.

*(At this point, each actor should be familiar or have an idea or feeling as to how each element manifests itself both within them and as their environment around them and how they specifically react to each element - or at the very least understand how each element is described and their traits according to the Elements Guide.)*

## **PHASE THREE:**

Step 1: Return the actors to a neutral position.

Step 2: This time the process is streamlined by simply giving the actors a combination of elements that will charge both themselves and the environment simultaneously. For the sake of exploration and experimentation the director must be sure to name two different elements each time. For example, the director may say: “After returning to neutral, at your own pace, ***move as water through air***” or “***move as fire through earth***”. This can continue as long as the director chooses while creating different combinations for the actors use.

Step 3: Free form. Allow the actors to, on their own and at their own pace, charge with themselves and the space with the different elements that have been described to them. Actors should each time return to neutral before moving on to another combination of elements. This should be done with a sense ease and play. Actors are encouraged to explore all and as many possibilities as they can.

**Elements in a Scene:** Based on and inspired by Rudakoff's script analysis work with the *Four Elements*. This exercise is meant to help apply the work and exploration used in the *Moving with the Elements Exercise* to scene work in order allow the actor to enter a scene emotionally charged and aware of their place or role within the given environment. This work should activate the actor both physically and emotionally.

**Step 1:** Actors will be given an open scene and be asked to memorize the lines. They should try to refrain from using any inflections at this time but if they begin to form naturally then the actors should be open to shifting with a change in the given circumstance. In other words, do not make any concrete decisions, allow yourself to be affected by what happens in the moment.

**Step 2:** Actors will then rehearse the scene with their partner(s) and create a given circumstances, finding relationships, as ifs, actions, objective/intentions, etc., making sure to give the scene a clear ending. This process should come naturally, and actors are encouraged to play with a variety of scenarios until they come upon a circumstance which really affects them. (Actors should spend more time on their feet playing, rather than sitting and talking about the possibilities.)

**Step 3:** The Actors will then run their scenes. After they have performed it at least twice, as rehearsed, with all script work done, the actors will then allow themselves to enter the scene "charged" with an element of their choosing. (They do not have to tell each other their own elements and in fact are encouraged not to do so until they have gone through the scene *once* with a specific element living within them.) This should not be at the forefront of the actor's thinking throughout the duration of the scene, rather this "charge" should do just that – charge the actor emotionally so they are entering full of life, as opposed to warming up within the performance of the scene.

**Step 4:** The Actors should continue to play with any element(s) which suit them for their particular scene and then come together to decide which element their environment or space is charged or engulfed by and how does that affect their character's relations, movements, emotions. (The actors are encouraged to share their choices with their partner as the combination of elemental energies and elemental environments can lead to new ideas, or moments through this exploration.)

**Notes to think about:**

*Actors should reflect upon real spaces that exist in the world and what elements they may possibly embody or be charged by and how those spaces, in turn, charge the actor themselves, or affect them enough to embody an element of their own – even unconsciously. Is a large city an environment of Earth with its population being Air as they swiftly sweep and weave throughout the stone and concrete pillars and towers of the landscape or do you as a person become more like water or fire when you are there? Is your bedroom engulfed by the heat of the past and therefore charged with flames of memories and history and how do you fill that space? As water? As air? What about a boss's office? When you walk in, is your flame extinguished by the rising pressure of the heavy, water-like environment? Explore and experiment but most importantly play with these ideas and images. Feel free to take these exercises, adjust them to your own style or circumstances, play or scenes and add on what you feel necessary to make them work for you.*

# GUIDE TO THE 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.

**PHASE ONE ORDER ex:**

Move as Fire

Move as Water

Move as Air

Move as Earth

**PHASE TWO ORDER ex:**

Move through Fire

Move through Water

Move through Air

Move through Earth

**PHASE TWO ORDER ex:**

Move as Fire through Air

Move as Air through Water

Move as Earth through Fire

Move as Water through Earth

## Works Cited

**The Four Elements:** New Models for a Subversive Dramaturgy. **Judith D. Rudakoff.** Theatre Topics, Volume 13, Number 1, March 2003, pp. 143-152 (Article).