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Photo: Ron Wyman

Becoming “Not You” in Action Theater: An Interview with Skye Hughes

by Brendan McCall

Skye Hughes found an anchor in Action Theater (AT) in 2012 after studying with the improvisational training system’s founder, [Ruth Zaporah](#) (1926-2025).

Below is an edited transcript of a virtual conversation with Hughes from July 28 about studying with Zaporah, what makes AT distinct from other approaches to improvisation, and some challenges of practicing this work today.

Brendan McCall: How did you discover Ruth Zaporah and her work?

Skye Hughes: I was at the University of Colorado at Boulder in the Dance program, and I had this wonderful improv teacher, Jeanine McCain. She pulled from lots of places—Viewpoints, Authentic Movement, Action Theater. She told me about Ruth, who lived in Santa Fe at the time, and said I should go down there. That spring (2012), I saw Ruth perform a solo, and I remember thinking, “This is the thing I have been looking for.”

BM: Tell me more about that.

SH: There's something about taking every moment, every impulse, to its natural conclusion in her work. In improvisation, we generally use movement and sound. Texture and feeling can arise, but I had questions around *how far do you go*? When I saw Ruth perform, I realized that fully inhabiting something can *take* you and completely envelop your being. Later, I learned that the practice of AT is to keep going into the unknown, and then go past *that*. This work is also about detaching from the "performance of being." In AT, it's not "you"—which in turn allows you to be *anything*.

BM: It opens up other possibilities because it's not just generating from oneself.

SH: Yes, it's not limited by who we think we are. For example, I'm Skye. I can be nice, but I can't be really *mean*, right? I can't be *cruel*. We all have insecurities that make it so that we don't want to be seen in a certain way. That all limits what the work can or cannot be. Ruth would say, "No content is off limits. Everything is accepted."

BM: A lot of the dance ideas from the 1960s and 1970s seem to be about eliminating individuality. Or creating a more process-oriented and collaborative authorship. Action Theater feels like such a different philosophy to making work than our current moment.

SH: True, it's outside the paradigm of identity or identity politics; but when reading an AT improvisation, one can apply any lens. Ruth was heavily influenced by Eastern Philosophy. She'd talk about subject-object, and then exclaim, "There is no subject-object; you are just *being* it." If there is commentary about, "I'm depicting a person," or "this is my personal feeling," then you get into like/dislike. All this commentary can exist, but her position was, "this is just about the *gesture of being*."

BM: Ruth wasn't the only one inspired by Eastern philosophy back then. Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton, Mary Overlie—a lot of dancers seemed to pull from those contemplative sources.

SH: It's all about the impermanence of fleeting feelings. You can't psychoanalyze something and improv it at the same time. AT is practical. Ruth was very systematic in her thinking, so everything felt comprehensive, pragmatic. I really felt like I found a system that was getting at the truth of being in an empty space. You are in a room, nothing is there; but *you* are there, so what now? The clarity of her thinking around that just demystified everything for me.

BM: Was there one thing in particular?

SH: My ability to relate to other dancers really changed after working with her because there's a certain set of limitations when dancing improvisation that are based in aesthetics. AT is so exaggerated, and that's the practice—to go as deep and far into this thing until it transforms your body and mind. The previous techniques I had learned were very shape-based—where are you located in space? How are you locomoting? Stuff like that.

BM: So you studied with Ruth in Santa Fe for the next six years, while still living in Boulder?

SH: I didn't have anyone to practice with between the intensives, so when I was in school I taught people AT. I needed to build a community. It was a sink-or-swim kind of thing every time, very high stakes. Ruth said, "It's going to be painful. You have to go into the studio, and dedicate thousands of hours until you get this." I eventually left Colorado in 2018, and moved to Philadelphia.

BM: That must have been a big change, being a part of a much larger dance community.

SH: It was so validating, seeing people who understood the history and value of Ruth's work. But I struggle now with how to structure teaching AT—how often is each class, and how long? Ruth did a lot of month-long intensives, some even up to six months, and that level of immersion is the way I would love to teach. But with my students today, a week can go by between classes, breaking up attention to the practice.

BM: We don't have the same relationship to time that we did in 1975. There's a kind of pressure now; everything's sped up.

SH: My undergrad program was like a sample platter, and only when I discovered AT outside of school did I feel like I learned something in a truly deep way. I wish more opportunities to immerse oneself in a subject were more available today. The other thing is that the '70s was maybe the last time people were working to develop systems. There's much less appetite for that now.

BM: How many artists have that luxury? It takes space and time to create a new vocabulary, and that takes wealth. And if you do have those kinds of resources, how many will devote their energies to dancing, to new ways of improvising?

SH: I think about those things a lot. The '60s and '70s? What a party! So much happening! The New York School of painters and poets, abstract expressionism, Judson Church, Anna Halprin, Contact Improvisation. Those artists had part-time jobs so the rest of their time could be spent doing their art. It's the economics of housing and cost of living, but it's also about having that mental space. Having lived in Philadelphia and now based in Seattle, I think about where the dialogue happens. Where's the bar that everyone gathers in after the show, to talk and share their opinions? If you think back to those earlier artistic movements, there was always some kind of in-person meeting place to socialize.

BM: We can connect online, but there's something about putting down the devices and getting into the same room.

SH: People are spread apart today because there's no central place where everyone can be; there's nothing affordable. Sure, we get some needs met in the digital world, in terms of artistic collaboration. But do we not try as hard to get together, because we have these online tools? Somatic practices like AT are part of our essential core, our "is-ness." This doesn't transmit through digital. There's all this somatic relational phenomena going on every day, and it helps keep us alive. We can't co-regulate with one another only online.

Brendan McCall in Conversation with Skye Hughes, Zoom, July 28, 2025.

Homepage Image Description: *Off center, an old woman sits on a metal chair in front of white curtains. Her hands sit comfortably on top of her stomach, and she smiles mischievously at the camera.*

Article Image Description: *On the left, a young woman twists to her right, her arms bent and her mouth open, while on the right, a much older woman gazes at her steadily, with her bent arms up. In the center, watching the two of them work, stands another young woman with her hands on her hips.*

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