



SMALL WOODEN SHOE ~~THEATRICAL SOCIETY~~

# Workbook

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Small Wooden Shoe Theatre Co. Workbook  
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# Introduction

This workbook is an on-going project. I use it to clarify my thoughts and to act as an introduction, if not to the company, then to much of the inspiration for the company. I acknowledge and accept contradictions within the workbook.

For work since 2002 - please see  
<http://smallwoodenshoe.org/performances.html>

## Small Wooden Shoe production history:

*No Secrets. March 25, 2002 + June 2002*

Solo show performed and conceived by Dustin Harvey. Presented at the 2003 SoloCentric Festival in Calgary Alberta, Festival Five in St John's Newfoundland and in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

*Co-created by Dustin Harvey and Jacob Zimmer*  
*Directed by Jacob Zimmer*  
*Performed by Dustin Harvey*

*Quartet. March 14-17 2003*

Heiner Müller's provocative and explicit adaptation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Presented at the Pit at the University of King's College.

*Written by Heiner Müller*  
*Directed by Jacob Zimmer*  
*Performed by Sue Snyder and Dustin Harvey*

*The Mysterious Death of WB. November 17, 24 & December 1 2002*

A classic hard boiled detective story for radio. Presented with Radio Ballroom and the Khyber Centre for the Arts.

*Written and directed by Jacob Zimmer*  
*Performed by Jesse Lund, Nate Crawford and Sue Snyder*

*The Orchard v.1. May 23-June 2, 2002*

A new play using Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* as source material. Presented at the Turret Room of the Khyber Centre for the Arts.

*Assembled and directed by Jacob Zimmer*  
*Performed by Simon Henderson, Elizabeth Elliot, Jocelyn White, Sue Snyder and Dustin Harvey*

*Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction IV: Failing History. March 23, 2002*

Created and Performed as a solo show. Presented at the Khyber Club. Part of the Howl Festival of Art and Revolution.

*Created and performed by Jacob Zimmer*

*Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction III: In a Rogue State of Mind February 27, 2002*

Created and Performed as a solo show. Presented at the Khyber Club

*Created and performed by Jacob Zimmer*

*Hold on Tightly, Let Go Lightly February 16, 2002*

Co-created with Dustin Harvey. Showcased at the SoloCentric Festival in Calgary Alberta. Using text from Einstein, Newton and others.

*Co-created by Dustin Harvey and Jacob Zimmer*  
*Directed by Jacob Zimmer*  
*Performed by Dustin Harvey*

*Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction II: Taking Measures December 17, 2001*

The second in the series. Using more contemporary playwrights (Cixous, Stein, Gambaro and more) and original scenes. Performed in the Ballroom Gallery of the Khyber Centre for the Arts.

*Assembled and directed by Jacob Zimmer*

*Performed by Sean Passmore, Simon Henderson, Jocelyn White, Kersti Tacreiter, Sally Morgan, and Dustin Harvey*

*Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction. November 20, 2001*

Produced as a response to September 11, Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction was a combination of new scenes and “classic” anti-war plays (Shaw, Brecht, Aristophanes, Euripides) Produced as “rough cheap and fast theatre” *Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction* was performed at the Khyber Club.

*Assembled and directed by Jacob Zimmer*

*Performed by Sean Passmore, Simon Henderson, Sue Leblanc-Crawford, Kersti Tacreiter, Beth Van Gorder, and Dustin Harvey*

*Chalk Circle Trial. September 2-9, 2001*

A play of contemporary parables and anti-parables. Using Brecht, Kafka and original writing. Created for the 2001 Atlantic Fringe Festival. “Hit of the Fringe”.

*Assembled and directed by Jacob Zimmer*

*Performed by Simon Henderson and Jocelyn White*

Other new plays conceived and directed by Jacob Zimmer

*Other Than War (created with sabotage group). April 20, 2001. Toronto*

Starting with Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* and Germany’s anti-capitalist terrorists the RAF, *Other Than War* examines violence and alienation. In the spring of 2001 we came together with six performers to do a first workshop of the play. Funded by the Toronto Arts Council and the Laidlaw Foundation. Produced by sabotage group.

*...Open Wound. February 2000. Toronto*

Assembled and created out of the writings of Justin Evan and Amanda Watson and others, *...Open Wound* was presented at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto as part of the Rhubarb! New Play Festival. Produced by sabotage group.

*Pleasure is So Hard to Remember. April 1999. Vancouver*

Six women and a ghost in a bomb shelter. Based on Euripides’ Trojan Women. Using text by Justin Evans and Noah Drew. Produced by sabotage group.

*WasteLand: A Jason and Medea story. December 1998. Vancouver*

A retelling of the Medea myth. Co-produced by Simon Fraser University School for the Contemporary Arts and sabotage group

# All Statements Are Insecure Questions: Eight Words toward a Theatre

by Jacob Zimmer

## INTRODUCTION

There are eight words I return to. They are words I heard and haven't been able to stop hearing. For the past three years, while I have been director of Small Wooden Shoe Theatre Co. in Halifax, they have been touchstones. I see them in the work I did with sabotage group before I heard them; I see them in all my plans and hopes for the future. So, eight words toward a theatre ...<sup>1</sup>

### 1. FAITH

Without faith, it is impossible to please. Faith that permits risk, grace, digging deep and true questions.

Faith that the work is important and worth doing and will find the resources it needs. Faith gives us a reason other than money.

#### 1.01

I have faith in Britney Spears dance numbers and Skid Row lip syncs. In a good story and a great rock 'n roll kick. In pratfalls and slow waltzes with dialogue no one can hear. In eating fried chicken from a bucket stage left and funny hats. That a clock radio has the power to redeem theatre, if only for a moment.

#### 1.02

*The Mysterious Death of WB*, a live-to-air-pirate-radio-detective serial about the death of philosopher Walter Benjamin was performed in a kitchen for a live audience of nine. The three actors, despite being jammed against the wall by music stands, microphones, a soundboard and a Foley door, were somehow able to execute costume changes and fight scenes. I felt a joy and pleasure that is rare for me in theatre (especially at one of my own shows). We were intimate and immense. We had faith in the smallness, the minority of the work, and so became big.

It is time to enjoy and find the freedom and strength of working in a minor art form. Theatre has lost its space in society's consciousness. Instead of fighting to restore a former (and probably fictional) importance, we find ways to embrace this minority, to have faith in ourselves and the work despite all the evidence to the contrary.

### 2. OBEDIENCE

Faith without obedience is an empty promise.

We give obedience to the space, to the work, to the audience, to history, to ourselves.

This word is problematic. I know that, and like to wrestle with the problem it creates. Investment and commitment have been suggested as alternatives, and while those are included in what I call "obedience," they don't make me squirm as much. They don't demand the existence of something bigger than me.

#### 2.01

At Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts, working in the beautiful, dilapidated, two-portables-knocked-together Black Box theatre – which, days before rehearsal started, had lit itself on fire – I realized that there was no hope of a clean, seamless, Robert Wilsonesque show. I knew that, no matter what I did, the audience would smell the recent fire;

they would see the buckets hanging from the ceiling to catch the eternal drips, hear the raccoons under the stage. I could choose to ignore the space, to push ahead with a vision that no one would see, or I could be obedient to the roughness of the space. So I lit the buckets, I staged scenes around the hole in the wall caused by the fire. We left technical material (ladders and wrenches) around, used them when possible, and always acknowledged they were there.

This changed my work from the beginning. As a young director, producing my own shows with no money, engaging with the space and using its faults and strengths has become essential. When I don't have the money for a "real" theatre (let alone a "real" set), the location becomes the set.

This initial understanding has now moved beyond the necessity that invented it (though I am still a young director producing my own shows with no money). For design, for dramaturgy, for performance, it has become a way of looking at theatre. The obedience has become an ethic.

## 2.02

The *Knee Jerks*<sup>2</sup> were necessary. Needed. I needed them in a time when I could no longer submerge politics below layers of form and distance. And finally, in III and IV, I needed to stand in front of an audience and speak clearly about my politics. I was clear about the ego involved, which is the same ego involved in every work before an audience. That ego is also what we call "artistic responsibility." To think that I have responsibility is both ego and obedience.

## 3. GENEROSITY

We give of ourselves. We give spirit, thought, sweat, blood, time, space and (lastly) material.

We are generous with our faith and obedience. We have faith that "whatever resources there are, as long as they are shared, are sufficient" (Ehn).

### 3.01

I wanted to include a thank you list to everyone I have ever worked with, who inspired me, whose words I used, who supported my work, who read drafts of this article; all those who have shown generosity and faith towards me. But I grew so paranoid I would leave someone out or misspell a name that I decided to cut it. Please know that I am grateful and owe you everything and I apologize for not keeping in touch. I hope you are well.

### 3.02

How do we, despite the overwhelming time commitment and struggles, look beyond the needs of our own theatres and find ways to respond to the needs of others? It is easy to become self-involved and to forget even our most immediate communities. Generosity starts with the ability to stop, see and listen to others. This is also the beginnings of theatre.

## 4. RIGOUR

To be obedient to faith requires rigour. To be rigorous requires faith and obedience. Rigour keeps laziness and impatience at bay. It is impossible for the individual to be constantly rigorous, so the company works with rigour. We, together, are rigorously mindful.

### 4.01

Rigour does not mean precious, but preciousness threatens at every turn. What we do may be important but should not be precious. The audience senses preciousness and thinks we are self-important navel gazers. When we can also be loose, allowing space for ownership and

enjoyment for others, we step back from preciousness. I have been guilty of preciousness on more than a few occasions and regret it each time the audience walks in the door.

The balance between rigour and looseness is an ongoing conversation. Rigour prevents looseness from being sloppy; looseness prevents rigour from being precious.

#### 4.02

Working on the second draft of this article, I came to the pain of rigour. It is selective and restricting. I know that to be faithful to my structure there are sections I must cut – things I would like to say but can't fit. Already I've expanded five words to eight to allow for big cheap theatre, and there still isn't space for everything. I am reminded that rigour is difficult and can result in headaches and that it is necessary.

#### 5. RISK

Working with rigour is not always safe – sometimes it's safer to let it slide. Faith and obedience are rarely safe – they are both leaps without assurance of landing. Those who have been betrayed will tell you that generosity is not always safe. Safety is the mantra of the status quo. Risk allows us faith, obedience, generosity, rigour.

Risk is the willingness to follow something to the end. It is when you fear you may fall but continue on faster – to risk embarrassment because we went too far, thought too big. To fail. And, we hope, to fail better next time.

#### 5.01

*Other Than War* is simultaneously the largest train wreck and the most successful show I have been involved in. Researching and creating *Other Than War* nearly drove us mad, with the disturbing interpersonal identification between the characters of *Uncle Vanya*, the Red Army Faction (German, anti-fascist terrorists), and sabotage group (Canadian art collective). We ended up with an unformed, deadly, three-hour reading; strained relationships, debt, and finally, the end of the company. But we attempted something worth trying. We may have failed in many ways, but that we tried at all makes it the most important show I have been involved with. The success is not the size of the failure (I'm not that masochistic), but the size of the attempt. I am working up the courage to try again.

#### 5.02

There is a moment I look for – the moment when everything is on the border - when the entire production is frail, when the insecurity of the theatre is exposed. To admit and celebrate the frailty of the work is to embrace risk. To be frail on stage is risky for the actor; when the dramaturgy is delicate and exposed, the playwright is at risk; when the staging and tempo might collapse, the director has taken risks. To be frail also asks the audience to risk, since they are needed to hold us up. It is impossible to stand without them, and when we ask them to help, they engage with us differently than when we simply ask them to watch us be strong.

#### 6. BIG

Faith, obedience, generosity, risk and rigour are big concepts. To be big I require faith, obedience, generosity, risk and rigour.

Big is not only a measurement of size or length. I find bigness everywhere - especially in the minutia.

## 6.01

There are things that we cannot understand. By their nature, we cannot wrap our heads entirely around them. Shakespeare understood this and included bigness in his plays – it is why they last so well; we are compelled to keep digging.

This is why simple transposition is never sufficient. Transposition implies everything in the script can be moved without loss. Shakespeare’s plays create a world, complete with mysteries and metaphysics.

## 6.02

From the fourteen-year-old who loved football and *Phantom of the Opera* to the twenty-year-old who disavowed both and turned to postmodern theory and Robert Wilson, I have been attracted to big things – things that could take the breath away with epic scale.

History does that for me. It is too big – there is no way to comprehend it all, no hope of getting it right. It is impossible as theatre and therefore a fruitful subject.

## 7. CHEAP

Cheap insists on faith. It does not mean stingy. Cheapness demands generosity from all sides. Cheapness requires phenomenal rigour. It is easy to spend money and difficult to find alternatives.

Because we don’t risk money, we are able to risk what matters. Cheapness includes a different relationship to the audience and box office. Cheap is an ethic not a bank balance. It allows us to be fluid, to change locations and styles, to be nomadic.

## 7.01

As a technician, I repeat the mantra: Good Fast Cheap, pick two. Cheap requires time – endless phone calls and emails; it requires humility; it can be difficult to ask for what we need. This rigour creates a new field of imagination. And like other imaginations, the more we use it the sharper it gets.

## 7.02

In Argentina with the Rat Conference,<sup>3</sup> I saw the Poor Theatre – theatre groups from around the world performing with almost nothing of what we “require” for a production. These shows were cheap in many ways – lighting, props, costumes were minimal; the seats, uncomfortable; aesthetics, born out of bodies on stage. They were also among the richest performances I have ever witnessed. The abundance of imagination, faith, rigour was overwhelming.

We mouth platitudes to the effect that theatre can be two people in a room but cancel our shows because the money didn’t come through for the video projections. It was good to be reminded.

## 8. THEATRE

A conversation not a building. Theatre is what happens between people sharing space for a time. The theatre I work towards is big with faith, rigorous with obedience, cheap to enable risk, and generous with our community.

## 8.01

The theatre is no longer the site for the creation of seamless, whole universes. I see no shame in leaving those priorities to the cinema.

We are in a room together. It has walls and a floor and a ceiling. There are lights, speakers, rough edges. There are people in the room who speak. What excites me is the ability to smell

each other, to hear the lights and see the speakers, to reach out and touch an actor on stage (though I never have, the possibility sends my heart racing.)

I want that reality – I want the audience to feel that reality. I don't want to hide the edges.

This can lead to deadly theatre (any methodology taken to dogma). It must be done with care and dynamic range. It does not preclude illusion and wonder. I try to have at least one moment of “technical brilliance” in each show – “How did they do that?”

## 8.02

The *Knee Jerks* were written and pieced together in the moments before and during rehearsal, rehearsed in the moments before and during performance.

The process was necessary and potentially deadly. Necessary, because theatre needs to respond quickly. It is possible to make a play in less time than it takes to perform it. This is a vital ability. But deadly, because the world seems to run on knee jerks. To enter that mental space seems wrong. Theatre must also be complex and deep. Reveal the layers and dig for better questions.

Should theatre respond quickly, or take the time to consider? Both. How then do we reconcile deep questioning with the need to act in the moment? The ideal might be a standing community of collaborators who work on projects together for months or years and also, if needed, create a play in twenty minutes to be performed that night. The rigour of the long projects would inform the knee jerks, and the energy of knee jerks would inform the deep questions.

## 9. AFTER WORDS

I fail these words everyday. I keep trying.

## NOTES

1 These words come to me by way of playwright Erik Ehn (faith, obedience, generosity); musician, writer and collaborator Justin Evans (risk, rigour); and the Rat Conference, <http://www.ratconference.com> (big, cheap, theatre).

2 *The Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction Series I-IV* (November 2001–March 2002) were produced as a response to September 11 and the war in Afghanistan. Performed as readings in a bar and a gallery, they were made by combining new material and scenes from “classic” anti-war plays. The first two were performed by six actors; the final two as solo pieces for myself.

3 The Rat Conference is an affiliation of theatres exploring alternative ways to collaborate, produce work and share resources. It was inspired by a 1992 article by Erik Ehn in the journal *Theatre*. The Rat Conference comprises an e-mail list, a Web site (<http://www.ratconference.com>), annual large meets and frequent conversations. In December 2003, the ninth annual Rat Meet took place, as part of the Experimenta 6 Festival in Rosario, Argentina.

## Some Quotes

I've been thinking about  
please send more.

Toward what I call: the truth, toward what calls me, attracts me magnetically, irresistibly. Of course, I circle “the truth” with all kinds of signs, quotation marks, and brackets, to protect it from any form of fixation or conceptualization, since it is one of those words that constantly crosses our universe in a dazzling wake, but is also pursued by suspicion. I will talk about truth again, without which (without the word truth, without the mystery truth) there would be no writing. It is what writing wants. But it “(the truth)” is totally below and a long way off. And all the people I love... are beings bent on directing their writing toward this truth-over-there, with unbelievable labour; they are fighting against the elements and principally against the innumerable immediate exterior and interior enemies. The exterior is very powerful at the present time. We are living particles, fireflies in the world, and around us resounds an enormous concert of noise-and-rumour-producing machines, creating a din and rumours destined to ensure we don't hear the voice of truth. But the interior enemies are just as numerous. It concerns our fear: this is what we are made of: our weakness. Kafka told us: paradise is not lost. We are the ones who haven't yet regained it, and if we haven't regained it, it's because we are suffering from two vices: laziness and impatience. As a result we do nothing and don't advance, we stop out of laziness and hurry from impatience. Between the two, the work of descending isn't accomplished. Paradise is down below. According to my people, writing isn't given. Giving oneself to writing means being in a position to do this work of digging, of unburying...

**Hélène Cixous**

I hope you will forgive me if I use the “truth.” The moment I say “truth,” I expect people to ask “What is truth?” “Does truth exist?” Let us imagine that it exists. The word exists, therefore the feeling exists.

**H. Cixous**

What comes back to us, no matter what our place, is a duty to truth, to know what is at stake and not deny it.

**H. Cixous**

The only book worth writing is the one we don't have the strength to write. The book that hurts us (we who are writing), that makes us tremble, redden, bleed. It is combat against ourselves, the author; one of us must be vanquished... I don't want to write the true book; it's the one I want to write. I tear it from myself.

**H. Cixous**

We can hope to move closer to everything we can't say without dying of fright... What makes us flee, what makes us come running down the mountain, what no man, no prophet could ever do, is look straight at G-d, look him in the eye. This is a metaphor. It's looking at what would prevent us from existing, from continuing our ordinary domestic lives, and what I call for better or worse: “the truth.”

**H. Cixous**

I think we ought to only read the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we are reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy...? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. This is my belief.

**Franz Kafka**

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad... In this structure [we] recognize the sign of Messianic cessation of happening... [We] takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of an era or a specific work out of the life work.

**Walter Benjamin**

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as the historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

**W. Benjamin**

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one picture the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed, but a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

**W. Benjamin**

Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.

**Bertold Brecht**

The accountant is the new censor. The accountant claps his hands at the full theatre. The official socialist also hankers for a full theatre. But full of what?

**Howard Barker**

In an age of populism, the progressive artist is the artist who is not afraid of silence.

**H. Barker**

There are more people in the pursuit of knowledge than the accountants will admit.

**H. Barker**

The opposition in art has nothing but the quality of its imagination.

**H. Barker**

The theatre must start to take its audience seriously. It must stop telling them stories they can understand.

**H. Barker**

A theatre which honours its audience will not therefore make an icon of clarity. If a scene means two things it should not be reduced to one. If a speech contains its opposite it should be played for its opposites. This is not to say a new theatre will 'see both sides of the question', which is impotence and stagnation. It will rather emphasize the essential instability of character and the untrustworthiness of opinion. We need a theatre of Anti-Parable, in which the moral is made by the audience and not by the actor. Naturally, this means the parable will be interpreted differently by different individuals. A good parable should provoke an argument and not a submissive nod of the head.

**H. Barker**

Theatre of Catastrophe takes as its first principle the idea that art is not digestible. Rather, it is an irritant in consciousness, like the grain of sand in the oyster's gut...

**H. Barker**

They brought a woman from the street  
 And made her sit in the stalls  
 By threats  
 By bribes  
 By flattery  
 Obliging her to share a little of her life with actors  
 But I don't understand art  
 Sit still, they said  
 But I don't want to see sad things  
 Sit still, they said  
 And she listened to everything  
 Understanding some things  
 But not others  
 Laughing rarely, and always without knowing why  
 Sometimes suffering disgust  
 Sometimes thoroughly amazed  
 And in the light again, said  
 If that's art I think it is hard work  
 It was beyond me  
 So much beyond my actual life  
 But something troubled her  
 Something gnawed her peace  
 And she came a second time, armoured with friends  
 Sit still, she said  
 And again, she listened to everything  
 This time understanding different things  
 This time untroubled that some things

Could not be understood  
Laughing rarely but now without shame  
Sometimes suffering disgust  
Sometimes thoroughly amazed  
And in the light again said  
This is art, it is hard work  
And one friend said, too hard for me  
And the other said, if you will  
I will come again  
Because I found it hard I felt honoured  
**H. Barker**

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or audience no to style no to camp no to seduction or spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.

**Yvonne Rainer**

# Rat Conference

[www.ratconference.com](http://www.ratconference.com)

## A Proposal and an Alarm: Toward Big Cheap Theater

Erik Ehn

Spring 1995 *Theater* (Volume 24, Number 2)

It's not that there's not enough good work out there; there's not enough out there out there. Experimental theaters, geographically and financially isolated from one another, struggle separately when they could be struggling together – not in less pain, perhaps, but in a common and revivifying pain. Strong progressive companies start from scratch again and again, only to disband in frustration on the same scratch plain. We need to share the work – the labor and the ways of laboring. We need to distribute the consciences. We want an engine, outside the marketplace, built low enough to the ground and out of such measly materials that repairs are worked in a wink.

### THE NEED

We are learning again that the inside can't survive without the outside. In the case of theater, the inside is a set of retail outfits, whose efforts at cooperation are designed to abet individualism first. In many such organizations, the staff's tacit hope is for a middle-class life, a decent wage. I am defining middle class as that layer of earners whose passions to run from poverty and towards wealth cross at an "x" and mark a stasis: the population that runs in place. Cynically, it is the hamster that powers the market's wheel; better, it is capitalism's mandala: energy in a fixed pattern.

There is room for the new in a middle-class aesthetic, but every new thing must be new in roughly the same way. Institutions are built on a faith in a resting place, in safety, in a stable home as a happy place for art. These wants are to be celebrated; they're Chekhovian: they're comic and tragic at the same time, and can allow much of consequence to take place. Many regional theaters have long histories of remarkable work. They have initiated and supported the careers of a number of out-of-bounds artists. But institutions on the inside have trouble making mistakes. Since continuance and accountability are built into their missions, they come to crisis when the world stops or skips. Nature, however, is not continuous and is never accountable. Institutions are stuck on money and time: money and time can allow art to happen; they cannot cause art. Larger theaters that have lost grip of their spirits allow art, without causing it. They are liberal, static, and sad.

America has applied its ingenuity to theater and has found its masterpiece. This American masterpiece is the means of selecting masterpieces. Theater institutions have chosen a range of themes, a degree of physical intensity, a measure of topical relevance; they have dropped a ceiling on invention. We can move Ibsen, we can move Shaw, we can even move the occasional

anomaly. America's signal achievement is accessible theater, affordably priced, driven by advertising (reviews included), and sustained by name recognition (where "anomaly" is also a name).

Our way of play-showing is mastering our play-makers. When talk is about survival instead of subversion, when managers and boards convene meetings independently of artists (and hold authority over artists), the soul of a theater is effectively divided. The experiment has stopped.

So-

To repair and revivify itself, the inside refers to the outside. Outside is poverty and wealth. The wealthy are not financially invincible, but they are not at an "x"-marks-the-spot; they have superior freedom of movement, and their independence needs no detailing.

It would take too much ink to discuss the values that partner, but don't relieve, the terrors of de facto poverty: The poor are concentrated into a caste that is relentlessly damped, fucked-with, shredded, destroyed; escape from this caste is rare and tentative. The merits of voluntary poverty (in Dorothy Day's sense, in Tolstoy's sense) are clearer. I know some good poor theaters, but I know more good broke ones; the latter are without money by design; they pursue a spiritual poverty by exploring broke-ness as a value – a freedom, a witness.

I don't know how to get or stay rich. I have some thoughts on how to get and stay broke, and reasons for settling there.

Theaters that choose to operate under radar, below the market – the pushcart robbers, the fools for God's sake, the creeps, the busted alchemists, the trolls – have crisis, not continuance, built into their missions. They can stop, and they can move ahead.

Theaters outside the circle are phenomenal, not institutional. They exist from incarnation to incarnation; they are in and out of chaos.

## LIGHT AND AIR

While it's always necessary to look to the rich and beg a measure of their strength, it's at least equally important to look to the poor for their real, concrete, and enduring gifts. As often as we theater artists think about what we require, we should consider what we can give away; when we demonstrate the moral usefulness of theater, we represent resources the rich covet. The rich want to come begging to us. It's spatially impossible for money to follow you if you're reaching towards it; better to go where the money isn't, and lure it after you.

Theater is radically free – free in terms of expressive rights, and free in the sense of no money. The essential transaction – a gesture traded for a community's response – happens in light and air, in any light, in any air. We choose to put ourselves in spaces that cost us, for the privilege of making more considered and complex gestures towards larger responses. The cost of theater is a penalty we pay for living prior to fellowship. We will always be selling a commodity that is ideally not a commodity and not for sale.

Theater is having trouble communicating its purpose to a result-oriented crowd. Who is materially better on account of the theater? What new resources are uncovered by the theater? When your pipes are busted, you can go to the library and check out a book – libraries are funded and free. When your ethics are busted, you can go to the theater. How do we make this known?

Build a national theater from a foundation of ethics, of assembly, of no-money. Call together artistically independent theaters, make their experiments in poetry and reproach better known to one another and the country. I believe strongly in the loaves and fishes economic model: when you gather those who have nothing, on the assumption that this gathering of the incomplete is sufficient, then you will discover that you have all you need, materially. It was made plain to me in a sermon: even without a "magical" division of fish, when you tell a crowd who understands hunger and interdependence that there is only enough for some, others in the crowd will come forward with their very last resource. There are countless cases where the just

and needy gather and die; there are as many cases where the just and needy gather and, so, survive. The gathering is the claim of inheritance.

#### NITTY-GRITTY: AN ART WORKERS' HOSTELRY

The old guard is known to the nation. It is insulated from change. Rather than try to reform the old, secure a national reputation for the new. Suppose an Art Workers' Hostelry.

Understanding that the first resources are will and sensibility, the AWH is constituted to facilitate the sharing of labor. AWH is a national service organization that provides art exchanges between small non-profit theaters. These exchanges include observerships, but are focused on transfers of productions, and seed teams of artists travelling to restage productions in cooperation with local groups.

#### MISSION:

To bring longer life and wider audiences to experimental new work.

To further the development of a critical vocabulary responsive to new work.

To foster collaboration between like-minded and often marginalized companies, with the aim of creating an organic national repertory company for experimental theater.

#### SERVICES:

Food, shelter, and transportation for visiting artists. Communications between member theaters – subsidizing phones and mailings, defraying costs of script reproduction, underwriting a video library with tapes of performances from each member theater.

Financial responsibility for staging and publicizing shows in AWH repertory rests with individual companies. AWH is not artistically prospective; choice of shows to send and accept also rests with individual companies.

#### FUNDING:

Officers of AWH (drawn from the staffs of member theaters) raise funds nationally from the government, foundations, and individuals. But priority is given to grassroots fundraising done locally under the AWH umbrella. Barter is better than money (Tolstoy). In-kind contributions of food, shelter, and transportation are preferred to cash; the trade of art for goods (vs. art for money) promotes greater artist-community intimacy, and a clearer sense of peer status on both sides.

#### ADMINISTRATION:

Once facilitator; a steering committee with a representative from each member theater; a board with 50% artist representation. The rest of the structure (volunteer coordinators, fund raisers) abides in the separate theaters as they already exist.

Organizational flow charts are traditionally pyramid-shaped, with power dropping down from a single point, through descending, multiplying, and discrete compartments. There is lately a reformed practice that charts organizations as sets of overlapping circles. In such a view, AWH places artists at the center. The board is the first circle out, connecting with artists, but not obscuring them. The board is made up of those people who can help make art happen, but are not necessarily artists themselves. They have other lives, and their otherness is their gift. Board members are interns: they serve AWH on a volunteer basis and are accountable to the steering committee. The audience (committed receivers, signal boosters, re-broadcasters) is the larger circle. It includes the board and the artists but lacks sufficient specific gravity to disproportionately influence inner workings.

The facilitator serves as the contact point, seeks out donations, is the mission mnemonic who draws attention to root principles in matters of dispute, helps find resources on a scale beyond the local theater. The facilitator serves for two years and may be, probably should be, more than one person. The gadfly burdens shouldn't be split apart from the administrative burdens, but the overall load can be divided.

#### ALL MEMBER THEATERS ARE:

- a. Not-for-profit.
- b. 150 seats or under.
- c. Committed to experimental work (new plays, multidiscipline collaborations, new approaches to established works).
- d. Committed to community outreach.
- e. Committed to hosting at least one visiting company, and to sending at least one team of artists per year.
- f. Membership- vs. subscriber-based (subscribers own theaters; theaters are in league with members).

#### SWEAT-EQUITY OPTIONS:

Theater is social, theater serves the society it makes, and theater naturally serves the wider society. But to demonstrate the usefulness of theater by broadening its metaphor, and to gain access and powers available to community groups, cooperating with other meat-market organizations is encourages.

For example, visiting artists could get room and board through local service organizations by providing labor in free kitchens, shelters, or educational programs.

I like Helen and Scott Nearing's 4/4/4 division of daily labor: four hours for private work, four hours for the farm, and four hours for the greater community. Translating this for the theaters: four hours for writing/research/memorization; four hours for rehearsal; four hours for performance, teaching, or other forms of services.

#### PREDECESSORS:

The problem with the Federal Theatre Project was that it was federal. The aesthetic was grassroots, but the funding was from the top down. AWH is Big and Cheap – big because its theater is unalloyed, and because to remain cheap it has to involve the good will of a huge circle of collaborators. Some of the 60s groups are exemplary, but a number have become rugged individualist. AWH is meant to work like Viking society at its best – as a democratic union of clans and cults. The aesthetic models are various; the structural models are more political: the Greens, ancient and modern; the Wobblies; the Homeless Union in Oakland; the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center in San Francisco. (A lot of my lingo is old left; I don't care. The language was never given its day anyhow.)

#### E.G. —:

A proposal deadline comes around. Member theaters lay out what shows they want to send, and where Maybe everything schedules out perfectly by accident, but maybe there's a glut. Everybody might want to go to Tampa in the winter, for example. It could be that I've made a play at Intersection that I want to send to BACA; it's got a Mason in it though, and BACA's just done a bunch of plays all about the Masons. Steering committee gets together by phone and tries to sort it out. Turns out that Theatreworks in Tulsa is dying to get to SF and they haven't

done a Mason play in a while. I haven't been to Tulsa since my sister's wedding. A trade is arranged – a team of three goes to Tulsa, a team of six goes to San Francisco. A theater can't send a show without receiving one; the trade doesn't have to be between the same two theaters (Intersection could end up sending to Theatreworks, while Theatreworks sends to Annex). AWH has foraged frequent-flyer miles plus ticket donations from some airlines; everybody flies for free. Some friends of Intersection offer couches, but there's no free board this time around without sweat-equity at St. Anthony's soup kitchen. Two guests have burnt out on kitchens and decide to pay their own way; four others decide to go for it. Out in Tulsa, I work with a local sculptor on a new set; two of the five parts in the play are cast locally. We all participate in a theater-arts workshop organized by the Tulsa Indian Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. A Theatreworks board intern has an in with the hotel commission; the SF team sleeps two-to-a-room in a nice place for two weeks; in a dorm room at TU for the third and final week. The Intersection project culminates in an open rehearsal for free for Theatreworks members, and Theatreworks mounts a full production.

All this is hypothetical. All possibilities hang in a saturated solution ready to precipitate.

There's not much political theater in America for the same reason there's not much myth: consumerism separates and involutes; consumerist theater teaches audiences how to watch TV. We have no sense of the world. We have miles of ocean on either side of ourselves, and benign neighbors to the north and south. We don't believe other countries/cultures/histories really count, so we're lazy about defining our own country (we stop with sentiment, which is the most self-referential of emotions). Our country advertises itself as a haven for self-determination; myth goes as far as a generation; we get dysfunctional family plays, or political plays that are about headlines (about advertisements for horror). Kroetz, however, can write a dysfunctional family play that is also political and mythical, because he has a political understanding of morality, of a national soul, and of individual choices reflecting on a collective condition. In the American tradition of script development, we ask: "What is this supposed to mean to me. Why should I care about these people? What is the psychological subtext?" (As if there were no radical truth in text.) Properly, a play should bring audience members into the question: "Where are we?" And that question, unanswered, is the sufficient experience of drama.

Or: our theater is already political, because of the act of making theater is inherently political. It organizes people socially around abstract principles; it proposes that there is action in assembly, in focus on an infinite present tense, in the making of nothing but assembly and a present. Theater, forcefully executed, is a form of reproach; it is utopian. When theater fails to recognize this potential, and turn its back on its charge to resist the market's necropolitan obsessions with past (nostalgia) and future (pie in the sky), then it is left with no option but to whine, "Nobody cares; it's so hard to earn a living..." It's supposed to be hard. – E.E.

## A Gargle of Rats

by Erik Ehn

Being a brief account of the formation and first meeting of the Rat Conference in eastern Iowa: a pestilential association find its (many, tiny) feet.

### WHAT HAPPENED

An assembly of small, broke theaters was convened, after an article proposing such a congress appeared in *Theater* in 1993. The intention: to assemble like-minded theater workers who labor outside or at odds with the mainstream in order to create mechanisms for communicating, establish a collective identity, and exchange work and ways of working.

On splitting the money and assigning the pillows, it looked as if there were resources enough to accommodate representatives from six groups. The dates were announced: December 2-4, 1994. A team drove up from Omaha, another from Austin; frequent flyer miles were begged, board members were cajoled; students and alums put out the cots. The lack of money created a pool of participants who would not allow poverty to inhibit artistic impulsiveness. By December 4, 30 organizations stood together in the room. Loaves and fishes.

### WHO WE ARE

Some groups are built out from individuals (e.g., the lone wolf producer nimble enough to infiltrate schools and government-subsidized programs); others are created and driven by duos (life partners and art partners), or egalitarian partnerships of three or four. From these central authorities, crews are created project by project, or ensembles ranging in size from 11 to 11 hundred (the latter the international membership of the Living Theatre). In a few cases, there's a more traditional ordering of roles into directorships, etc. Not everyone has a board, not everyone has not-for-profit status. Many of the theaters are in the process of finding themselves in the shifting of shapes. All hold to the notion that everyone does everything. Budgets range from a literal zero to \$900,000. Financial deficit is not so pressing a problem overall as physical and emotional exhaustion. The principal drains are overwork and the sense that the various strengths of one's life are not allowed to collaborate (i.e., that work as a mother, a businessperson, and a director pull in three different directions).

Many of the companies are working in a site-specific vein: with an architectural/ archeological emphasis – warehouses, wharves; a social purpose – shelters, prisons; and ecological sense – bars, clubs. Bonnie Marranca's understanding of theater "ecology" informs virtually all the work: producers are searching out performance spaces that more actively engage the audience.

### WHAT WE BECAME

We became aware of one another. This, on its own, relieves the pressure. The labor is not concentrated, but is widely spread over time and space. The work we are doing becomes a national chore, with a historical context.

One of our great wounds – the difficulty of integrating our lives as artists with our lives as whatever else – is actually a symptom of our mission. Everyone at the table put forward the idea that theater is not meant to be a constituent part of one's life – rather, it is a way of seeing or behaving; it is an ethic. An ethic is not a business, and the unlimited growth model doesn't serve it. An ethic that builds on itself, that locates itself, is prudery; it spoils. An ethic properly infiltrates. Good ethics can be compatible with a good livelihood, but ethics can't be

handled like goods. A sale yields estrangement: there's a new owner. An ethical theatrical contract demands co-ownership; money is parallel (not irrelevant, but alongside; not a consequence).

The rat became our totem; we all squeezed through drainpipes to get to the Iowa idyll (to find its corn). We looked for a name. We became the Rat Conference.

#### WHAT WE'LL BE

We met each other, we identified our separate missions, we took steps towards giving to our shared mission; lastly, we committed ourselves to building on the serendipity of our collegiality. Some people have computers, so we're online now, thanks to Theater E (naturally enough) in San Diego. Jim Leverett once said if you leave two theater people alone for more than a minute, they right away want to put out a newsletter. Accepting this as a caveat, we are putting out a fanzine instead – produced with as much monstrous, smelly ugliness as a lack of time and compassion will allow. (Versions are already moving: contact Annex, Sledgehammer, Thieves Theater, Salvage Vanguard, Public Domain, me). The object is to fill the publication with as much arcania, compulsive ranting, self-immolating rhetoric, t-shirt advertising, and mendacity as possible. We're aiming to get together again in June, with more rats and more corn – an even more eclectic set of theaters, more food. We're looking to stage a festival, perhaps in New Mexico, within the next two years. Subplots were announced: smaller exchanges will take place over the next few months (e.g., in Austin in April, at the University of Texas, Austin groups and Undermain will be converging). We are not getting a 501c3, we are not forming a board, we are not electing officers. We are working. Karl Gajdusek (Theater E) recommends that we be weakest when together, strongest when apart.

Our purpose, then, is tactical over aesthetic. Too much attention is paid to aesthetics in the lively arts anyway – the dialogue's off track. The lively arts live in the live. I can't even say that the Rats all like new plays. My hope is that the plays between us will become neutral and our virtues will be exercised in the way we handle them and their spaces, and in the way we discover one another (courtesy) and discover ourselves to each other (virtuosity, poverty, ecology). A Müller-heavy theater will host a Gilbert and Sullivan project – in an ideal world, we'd end up with a Mikadomachine or Landscape with Yeomen, but if we don't get to have that much fun right off, we are still in a position to infest an infinite variety of forms through a common ethical vocabulary. Morality/amorality, anarchy/utopian collectivism – these don't matter, are impossible grounds for debate. However one gets there, the ante is an obligation to divide resources equitably, to reserve the need for food, shelter, and labor as the standards behind money, and to work with audiences as intimate collaborators in search of innovation.

The will to infest, raid, and interfere is more powerful than the impulse to interrupt (or otherwise deconstruct), so maybe we're more neo-bop modernist (Balu plus Gillespie) than post-structuralist. Who cares. I'm not so good with "isms" and we'd all rather work. Definition is historical and we're just now present. Brochures are way down the pike.

We move from small and broke to big and cheap in order to cop a deeper future, in good company. Our ability to flourish is not tied to dominance or status. We will thrive by eating through insulation and scurrying across the tops of beams. We will not influence our environment through leadership; we will infest. Leave the old structures in place; we need to breed in the linen closets; we need to steal xerox. We want to stay small and grow to many.

#### REDUNCANCIES AND CLARIFICATIONS

Since the 1993 article, some terms have been floating around. Following is my view of their meanings:

**ART WORKERS' HOSTELRY:** An earlier name for this project. An organization meant to facilitate the movement of artists, projects, and methodologies between small and like-minded theaters. Some of my biases: a) that priority be given to the exchange of ways of working over tours of finished pieces; b) that in-kind donations of goods and services be given priority over cash (we don't want to expend the resources of our imagination sussing out routes to money vs. routes to art; if we offer up our unity – the unity of this conference – to the mercies of concentrated capital, we submit to the same model of dependency that chronically invalidates our field); c) that a means of interweaving services theater offers with other forms of service (such as the provision of food and shelter) be discovered and explored (understanding that such service isn't theater, but is like theater, and compatible with it).

“Hostel” is in the title because I think maybe one way of getting free room for circuit members would be to cut some kind of a deal with the international hostels some towns have.

**BIG CHEAP THEATER:** An aesthetic, common to some of the member theaters; interpreted broadly enough, it might serve as a rough embrace for our collective.

**BIG** – in several senses, not all of which need be maintained at once: theater that invites the transgression of social borders through the asking of favors; that finds new means of distributing authority in the rehearsal process; that poses challenges to audience/actor boundaries; and that encourages the cooperation of several communities – weight lifters, morris dancers, Rosicrucians. Theater that is too various to see at once (producing a high volume of work, or works of such density they require more than one viewing, or work in context of a company's history). Theater that's geographically broad (pulling together workers and audiences from remote places), hybrid (expanding notions of form by combining disciplines), and spectacular (favoring enormous gestures of goodwill and imagination over technical finesse).

**CHEAP** – no money (poverty of spirit and the hubris it suggests are our genius); tawdry. Big without cheap leads to enormous and ancient frustrations. Cheapness as a guide suggests all along the way that we already have what we need (outrage, language, and vulnerability).

**THEATER** – at minimum, a person taking care of a space on behalf of another; live stewardship. When the caretaker is an artist, point of view is introduced, and with it the possibility of giving offense. Theater = love of neighbor expressed through acts of corporal mercy, in which love maintains its power to offend.

**POVERTY:** In the spiritual sense – a root reliance on grace. Distinct from destitution – a chronic and unwanted condition of insolvency. With spiritual poverty, one opts to accept a lack so as to make an empty space (a theater) serve as a field for a community's play.

**SERVICE:** There's a widening gap between the rich and the destitute, between information (controlled by the rich) and knowledge (information's underclass). Theater seems to be drifting away from self-knowledge specifically from a sense of its usefulness, and from a vocabulary for communicating its usefulness to its audiences (its collaborators). Abundant money doesn't need a reason for art – it can have it when it wants; all is leisure. The destitute have pressing material needs. Of what use, immaterial and material, is theater? One way (one of many ways) to [cut off on web. j.z.]

## The Rat Conference: An Assembly, a Network, a Movement, an Argument, a Rave, a Celebration

by Mary DeDanan

December 1995, *American Theatre*

I walk in on a collaboration in progress. It's a sunny Friday afternoon in a bright yellow kitchen crowded with copper pots and tchotchkes, a refrigerator covered with photos of family, friends, and stage productions. Allison lives here. She, Erik, and Chris sit on stools sipping potent coffee (this is Seattle, after all). They brainstorm a new musical.

"It's site specific," says Erik, "and the site is all of America."

The kitchen collaborators are Erik Ehn, avant garde playwright, original instigator and philosophical mage of the Rat Conference; Allison Narver, also an early Rat organizer and artistic director of Seattle's Annex Theatre (a post she will hold for another five days, after which she will disappear into the maw of Yale's MFA directing program); and Chris Jeffries, local playwright and composer with an enviable number of successful new musicals on his vitae.

The storyline flirts with ancient goddesses in tap shoes, while the practicalities focus on trains. The musical-to-be will travel from small theater to small theater, interactively changing in each town. Ordinary stamped mail and whistlestop marketing, painted props and traveling bands, sleeping bags, sofas loaned for the night and boxes of pizza: it's a vision that relies on personal interaction and creative delights.

Will this traveling extravaganza ever sing and dance its way into your burg? Maybe. Maybe not. More to the point is that this is the Rat Conference in miniature. The gathering itself has yet to begin, but already, as we toast old bread heels to go with our coffee and dig out the last of the butter from Allison's fridge, as laughter and ideas pop like campfire sparks on a summer's night, the basic Rat operating principles are at work: The concept is big, imaginative art, produced on a tiny cheap-o budget that relies heavily on hospitality, barter, and grace. The audience is assumed to be part of the collaboration. The show itself is imagined less as a goal than a process. The whole thing is the essence of rat-ness.

It's late August. The kitchen glows with this impromptu ceremony of theatrical faith, a simple working of inventiveness, anticipation, and caffeine. We are here for the Rat Conference--an assembly, an exchange, a network, a movement, an argument, a rave, a celebration--the-atremakers with little to no money and immoderate visions.

We brush off the bread crumbs and pile into Allison's car, rolling down hills and slipping around tight corners, down to the Annex Theatre for the opening session. The Rat Conference. We're ready.

### ON SNEAKY LITTLE FURRY FEET

Truth is, Ehn suggested names with considerable more poetry when he first called for a network of "below radar" theatre artists and operators on the pages of Yale's Theater magazine in late '93. As the idea caught on, several working titles were tossed around, cheerfully and interchangeably, from "Art Workers' Hostelry" to "Big Cheap Theater" to "Assembly of the Wondrous Head" to "A Vaudeville of Cheap Theaters." In fact, at the first national meeting at the University of Iowa in December of '94, the 20 or so theatre artists who showed up resolved not to name themselves at all.

But in the eight months since, the name “Rat Conference” has stuck, referring not to a single event, but to a totem-esque state of being. Alternative theatremakers across the nation easily identified with the image of the rat: wily, indestructible, pestilent, squeezing through impossibly tight places, sneaking into the xerox room at the day job, using up all the toner, then sneaking out. The rat doesn’t seek to change or reform the dominant structures and forms, but to infest them. And too, R.A.T. lends itself to plentiful acronyms, including Regional Alternative Theatres, Raggedy-Assed Theatres and/or Rogues in American Typecasting (mix and match your own).

Names aside, it’s the ideals of the Rat Conference that have caught the fancy of small theatre companies and independent artists. While there is no Rat manifesto, no single party line, there are a number of principles held more or less in common—or at least discussed a lot.

For instance, radical rats hold to the notion that theatre need not be a commodity to be produced and sold retail. Instead, theatre is an ethic, a human value, a habit of seeing, behaving and interacting with the world, a way of treating people and spaces—even a kind of morality. Theatre is more than entertainment, more than education. Theatre is spirituality (not to be confused with humorless, self-important dogma).

Another extreme idea: Small is a good thing to be. Expectations of unlimited growth are outmoded and dangerous. “The new model of growth,” said Narver, “is doing less.” Rats are resolved to stay small, alternative, decentralized, fully in and of their communities. “Growth is an assumption,” said Ehn, “it’s not a necessity. A function of the conference is to question every single assumption.”

Or try this on: Extraordinary, heart-catching theatre has nothing to do with money. Spiritual poverty is a powerful force for innovation because it allows a clear, empty space within: both the wellspring and staging ground of art. Celebrating cheapness allows/requires theatre artists to tap their true tools: “outrage, language and vulnerability,” as Ehn put it.

Note that the concept is about spiritual poverty, a deliberate choice of grace over materiality, not chronic destitution, an inability to pay the rent and fill the stomach. This leads to the question of how does one make a living doing theatre in the Rat mode? Often one doesn’t—or does so very creatively. As Nick Fracaro (Thieves Theatre, Coney Island, USA) said, with some frustration, “A life in theater and a career in theater are whole different things.”

## EMBRACING BROKENNESS

Is theatre without money possible? Ask that of a typical Rat and she might say, “Honey, if you don’t think so, you’ve been employed at a LORT theater too long.” Theatre without money reinstates the human element in basic transactions. A good part of the Rat discourse centers on hospitality and barter, ancient cornerstones of human interaction.

These ideas meet in the concept of Rat banking, the pass code of which might be “giving is as valuable as what you get back.” Sample “currencies” are pooled labor, leads on good scams and freebies, recycled equipment and costumes, in-kind donations, shared resources and information. “It isn’t that we exchange models,” said Ehn. “I haven’t pitched money out the window. I believe it has a use.” But whether with bumper-crop prop tomatoes or ten ways to make dirt-cheap, sophisticated lighting systems, the idea is to circumvent capital as much as possible, and so avoid the chronic dependency on cash that often shortchanges the art.

If the foundation of Rat banking is helping each other with material, information and services, the overlay is swapping ways of making theatre. “We can find ways of giving things to one another that absolutely require a sacrifice on the part of the giver and the taker,” said Ehn, “which goes to issues of ownership. When I give you my play, I give up ownership of that play. When you give a production of that play to someone else, I own it even less, until finally I’m thankfully stranger to my own play and I can see it again. Theater is most itself when it’s appropriated, most exciting when it’s deforming something or reforming something. We need

to learn how to appropriate from each other, not just share information. That's what makes this better than e-mail."

The emphasis in the Rat credo is on principles and tactics. An artist's aesthetic is presumed to be as personal as his or her underwear. But one overarching aesthetic ideal--Big Cheap Theatre--comes up again and again, even from independents doing one-person shows. Big refers to an expansiveness of imagination, to pushing boundaries and including larger communities, to broad geographies and new audiences, to multi-disciplinary work, to sharing power in the rehearsal process, to daring. As for cheap, well, you got the picture. As Katherine Owens (Undermain Theatre, Dallas) put it, "Big means possible, cheap means unpreventible."

Finally, consider the distinctive fact that the Rat Conference is a non-organization. As far as a structure exists, it's egalitarian and anarchic. Rats are self-selecting, and all are equal partners. Steve Cosson (Smart Mouth Theater, San Francisco) described it this way: "There's no way to be a member or nonmember. If you want to be there, you're a member." There are no officers, no dues, no board, no 501c3, no logo. "The world doesn't need another institution," said Narver. "The world does need a group of people who know how to talk to each other." More than anything, the Rat Conference is a movement.

These ideas, with all their permutations, varied understandings and occasional misunderstandings, have been expounded on in a couple of theatre articles, fleetingly flashed through the Internet, and buzzed over by the curious and the committed in coffeehouses and small theatres nationwide. Thus when the handful of early Rats announced a second conference in Seattle, theatremakers from scattered parts of the country came to be part. Numbers varied throughout the weekend, but a fair guess puts 130 people as part of the conference at one time or another, including 24 theatre groups, plenty of independents, lots of Seattlites, and dozens of gracious Annex hosts (aptly demonstrating hospitality in action).

#### EXPOUNDED, FLASHED, BUZZED

The Annex occupies the top floor of an older downtown retail building, above the local Harley-Davidson shop--a decent neighborhood that encourages good audiences. It's a shoe-string company, "a highly functioning collective" (Ehn) and/or "an aggressive democracy" (Narver), with a lively production schedule (a mere 14 shows a year, down from 22), and a company of 110 people (believe it).

What a conference site! A lobby filled with years of Annex posters; a black-painted mainstage bright with pseudo-Victorian scenery for Jeffries' neo-burlesque musical, *I See London, I See France*; an elegantly gold- and coral-colored gallery with a concessions bar and life-sized canvases of women in quaintly teasing poses; a tiny rooftop garden in back, roses in bloom, instantly commandeered by the smokers.

On Friday's early summer evening, just-arrived conferees mingled in the lobby, checked in with the Annex welcome wagon gals, wrote their names on over-sized baggage tags, shook hands, put faces to names. Most were strangers to each other, but there was an instant feeling of camaraderie; people were excited, chatty, cool. Many were in their 20s or early 30s, with an encouraging sprinkle of gray-haired veterans with chic wrinkles. For the opening session, about 70 Rat conferees settled in a circle around the mainstage to speak, roundtable-style, of who they are, how they see their work, and the thrills and problems of being small-time operators.

What are those problems and concerns? Some are ancient, chronic, recognizable to every theatremaker in America. Some are new, emerging with the changing times. Some are idiosyncratic, some universal. Many issues came up again and again throughout the conference, restated in terms of personal experience, like endless ghosts of Christmas Carols past. (Carol, that easy mark, was oft invoked at this gathering.) Most often heard:

Burnout.

- Isolation.
- Marginalization.
- Changing the art form itself.
- Political Context.
- Community.
- Audience.

Cosson easily summed up burnout: “Every experience is very positive, but I feel like I’m going to die at the end of it.” Conferees applauded.

Mark Lutwak (Rain City Projects, Seattle) put it in terms of theatremakers who hit the wall, or worse, push on when passion has fled. “Generally they hit about 5 years and they go under—they burn out—or they find a way to institutionalized themselves. But inevitably, when they become a professional theatre, instead of doing 10 shows a year, they have to do 5 shows a year, and one of them is Christmas Carol, two of them are A.R. Gurney plays, and one of them is a one-man show, and maybe they can do one new play a year and it’s directed by the artistic director. It ceases to have the kind of spiritual democracy that the theatre once had. All the reasons people do the work get swept under the rug.” His interest was in “seeing how groups have successfully stayed small without getting mean.” Models and ideas for getting smaller remained a leit motif for the gathering.

Several hoped to find new survival tactics. While magic bullets were scarce, Karl Gajdusek (Theater E, San Diego) noted that survival is more the accounting. “It’s really good just to look at each other. That’s a huge survival mechanism. Finding ways in which you spend time together, going to Disneyland, is really healthy.”

K. Ruby (Wise Fool Puppet Intervention, San Francisco) observed the sense of support she felt from “being in a room full of other ‘survivors.’ All of the people in this room are making art against all odds. That’s an inspiration.” She put survival questions in a larger context of marginalization: “How do we exist in a corporate world? How do we keep going with our visions?”

Said Mitchell Gossett (Bottom’s Dream, Los Angeles), “We slip into the empty spaces.”

Some felt the malaise that Margery Segal (Nerve Dance Company, Austin) touched on. “I feel I need to do something so I don’t get depressed.”

“It’s really easy to think that you’re alone,” agreed Narver.

Many were concerned with the current political maelstrom. “Do we go underground, literally underground,” asked independent Susan Fenichell, “or do we seize the flag from the Right?” Gerry Stropnick (Bloomsberg Theatre Ensemble, Pennsylvania) said, “Theatre is political by its existence. We have a patriot’s responsibility to survive.”

But in the midst of our angst, some concerns were refreshingly basic. Said D.J. Hamilton (Theatre Babylon, Seattle), “I’m tremendously looking forward to the day when the performance space and my home are not the same thing.”

With 70-some people, the opening session was long. Those of us sitting in folding chairs found our backs getting stiff. A little of the bounciness wore off. Folks riffed off earlier remarks, jumped from point to point. Somehow the discussion kept a certain coherence. We listened. We laughed or sighed in recognition. We passed around a big basket of candy, a mid-session birthday surprise delivered to Stropnick from his family. We stayed focused. We came at last to the end, hurried along by a reminder that there would be a show on this stage in less than an hour and the actors needed to warm up.

As a quick wrap-up, Ehn focused on the need for transition for theatre as a whole. He articulated the tension between growing smaller without losing out, and growing larger without losing heart. He spoke of why it is we do theatre—the ever-fresh question—and the nature of what it is to do theatre at this time in history. He compared our times to the cultural tidal wave

that hit an unsuspecting pop music industry in the mid-'60s, when the Beatles first came on the scene: "The plane is landing and all the crooners are going to be out of a job."

### REHEARSING A VARIETY OF DISCOURSE

We zipped down to the theatre Saturday morning, Ehn (up since dawn and already washed towers of dishes from last night's pizza party), Narver (who was driving remarkably well for someone who just woke up) and I. Ehn grabbed an agenda off me and the two of them, co-moderators for the morning session, figured out what they were going to say. The topic for the group: "What We Want and Need Rat to Be."

"We can't go around the table," said Narver.

"No, gotta be a discussion," said Ehn. He scanned the agenda, reading it to Narver. It's a day of concurrent workshops, Jeffries's show in the evening, and a big party after. "It's such a long day!" he said. "Way too long."

"I'm happy to cut anything," said Narver.

But in the end nothing was cut. The morning session was lively and articulate, expanding on the territory of the previous night and adding many colorful new threads: what are the bonds between us, how is theatre an expression of ethics, the trick of staying small, finding our ecological niche in the audience/artist relationship, letting things die their natural deaths, Rat diversity or the lack thereof, how we learn from our failures (such a hot item that we clamored to devote an entire session to it later). The workshops were meant to be concentrated information sharing, and they went on all afternoon. Financial management for the raggedy-assed theatre, script self-publishing, audience development and guerrilla marketing, touring, communications, models for growth, site-specific work, a hands-on "theater of the oppressed." The seminars were intended to be practical, and most were—but Rats are an analytic bunch.

I wandered into the site specific workshop, half-way through. Faces here were skeptical. Those talking had left the practical long ago and were well into the aesthetic stratosphere. A small sample: Is site specific work meant to increase focus or to have an element of circus? We should, someone said, take locations that are ordinary and invest them with meaning. Couldn't we do that by altering our own theaters, making them new? But when the fourth wall disappears, another law of physics comes into play. Ah, but the experience of the site can overwhelm the play. What then is the character of the theatrical event?

It was now early Saturday evening and people were getting tired. Half a dozen Annex members lay in the hallway, half-listening to bits of the talk, limbs entwined affectionately like puppies. I was a little cranky myself; the discussion sounded increasingly self-congratulatory to me, nor, it seems, was I alone. "This conversation's become so esoteric I don't think I can follow it any more," said Jason Neulander. The guy wanted tangible and who could blame him? Earlier this summer Salvage Vanguard, his cheeky upstart company from Austin, Texas, had toured the West Coast from San Diego to Seattle, hosted by fellow Rats, gathering favorable reviews like sugarplums—one of the first fruits from the Iowa Rat Conference eight months before.

Ehn stayed with it, contributing humor, ever patient, helping the facilitators focus the talk, managing to validate all the diverging view points. At the end he noted, "We've been rehearsing a variety of discourse. Not each experiment is going to be successful." Howard Shalwitz (Woolly Mammoth, Washington D.C.) also took a philosophical view. "All of us are here because we're looking for new ways of engagement."

### ONE ANARCH TO GO, PLEASE, HOLD THE MAYO

For those who hadn't had enough, dinner was announced for a local laundromat/sandwich hangout. Designated subject for discussion: anarchy—defined as taking out the mediator and focusing on direct experience—and how it might work in a Rat context. Ruby and Ehn had

put this one out, and eventually about 15 people were there. It was a smoky, noisy cafe with, yes indeed, people fluffing and drying their laundry on the flush side of the place.

Ruby was very sincere, talking about anarchy as taking self-responsibility (although possibly she had something more along the lines of feminist consensus process in mind). Fracaro, who described himself as a true anarchist, dominated the conversation without listening much—anarchy in action. Isabel Sadurni, Lauren Elder (both independents from the Bay Area) and Christine Murdock (Road Company, Tennessee) broke off to discuss the process of discussion, and half the diners joined in. The procedure we'd been using in the large groups, we decided, where the moderator took names of each person who wished to speak and called on them in turn, allowed everyone a voice, but lacked a certain continuity and spontaneity. In opposition was the dialogue approach, seen at a number of the workshops, where spontaneity reigned, and the loudest had the most fun. Once again, Ruby and Fracaro were at odds, and Ehn had the knack of validating all. Since anarchy didn't seem to be going all that well, talk veered to the just-concluded Alternate Roots conference, which Murdock had participated in. Shalwitz, Neulander, Gajdusek and Gossett huddled at a corner table, possibly intent on a new collaboration. Murdock shared the last of her home fries with me. Hospitality in action.

#### WITH BLACK LIGHTS AND TWIRLING SPARKLE BALL

It was a groggy Sunday morning, with considerably fewer people at starting time. No crumbly, delectable pastries or fresh coffee waited for us this morning. Perhaps the Annex welcome wagon gals had had enough and packed it in. "Great party," people greeted each other, trying not to mumble. Black lights were still on from the midnight mainstage disco dancing, and the sparkle ball still twirled slowly overhead. Harsh stage work lights accentuated baggy eyes. Folks wandered in late, 7-11 coffee in hand.

Co-moderators Narver and Ehn ran through an agenda changed and adapted to reflect people's desires. Instead of breaking down into small workshops, we stayed in one big group the rest of the day. We kept the deliberation of big cheap aesthetics and big cheap how-to's (lights, props, sets), added time for sharing our favorite scams, and segued into confessing big, and often expensive, failures.

Failure is a fascinating thing, people agreed. Still, at first folks were philosophical, discreet and just a little shy, focusing on the lessons of failure. But Gajdusek wanted the dirt—what really happened—and many were happy to comply. The fundraiser that lost thousands. The sure-thing hit-show extension in the nation's capital that coincided with the outbreak of the Gulf War. The challenging and intellectual holiday alternative to A Christmas Carol that bombed (moral: don't mess with Christmas). The dissed actor's revenge. Ah, we can laugh about it now.

The final wrap up started easily enough. Logistics, contact sheets, web site on the Internet, talk of a new works festival in new Mexico, loose plans for Rat Conferences/adventures in Vermont, Las Vegas, Denmark, Minnesota's Mall of America. "It's a matter of individuals taking responsibility for any next step," said Ehn. "What's next and who wants to do it?" "Every person in this room is a leader of the Rat Conference," said Narver.

Gradually, and naturally enough, conferees started to talk about forming committees, contributing dues and expenses, a logo. Some remembered earlier notions of resolutions they had desired to be passed. One gent offered to start grantwriting.

But among long-time Rats, the idea of such standard organizational frippery was downright abhorrent. "I think there is something ephemeral, valuable and productive about keeping a financial exchange out of this equation," said Mike Shapiro (Annex) gently. "The longer we can avoid organizing along those lines, the longer industriously, fruitfully Rat-like we can be."

Ehn concurred. "There is no Rat piggybank. To centralize it, we'd need to elect a treasurer, and that implies a kind a structure, and a kind of growth model, that I think might be prema-

ture. One way that guarantees that we continue to deconstruct and fail in a productive manner is that every time the Rat conference comes together, it has to be put together on completely new terms.”

Added Lutwak, “There’s no sense of consensus about an organizational structure should be except that we’re all wary of it.”

Gossett put it more forcefully, “It’s as though [some of us] are heading toward the TCG of the year 2005. The last time we met, we knew we were Rats but we didn’t even want to use the word, because we didn’t want people to know we existed. I feel we’re going to leave here and start this ego thing, like we’re important. I reject this organization. I piss on this organization. I don’t want to be TCG, I don’t want to be an organization, and I don’t want to be a part of one. The day there are any funds collected in a safe will be the last day I participate.”

Well, that started a small ruckus. “No one handed me the tenets of the organizations when I came in,” said one, “and if you’re afraid of someone new coming in and challenging it, then I piss on you. Because that’s stagnation.”

But most people cheered these arguments as healthy. “If somebody comes in new,” said Fracaro, “you have to catch up.”

Ehn’s final windup addressed the drive to be unstructured and deconstructed while still being ourselves. The trick, he said, is to “be who we are in each other’s company.” He likes to say things like that. As the Rats filed out and lingered in the lobby, hugs, goodbyes and a shared sense of exhilaration and exhaustion smoothed over any hurt feelings—except, perhaps, for the guy who offered to grant write, who really seemed at a loss.

#### ALWAYS RENAMING ITSELF

Later, on the phone, Ehn and I debriefed. He was delighted, overall. The Rat Conference, he said, “was not a serum, but the petri dish, years before the serum is figured out. So there are little blossoms of fungus and bacteria in this petri dish. It’ll take a lot of processing to turn it into something.”

He cheered on the arguments that marked the close of the conference. “Already we’ve got, within a very short time, the bones of an organization and the self-critique of that organization. Both are new enough that they both retain equal status.”

He imagined that eventually there in fact would be a structure to the Rat Conference, as well as a smaller subset that existed without structure. “We wouldn’t want to trade one for the other—you got to have both going on simultaneously. There is a version of Rat which I think will have some kind of committee, which will have a logo. I don’t know if it will ever have 501c3; I don’t know that it will be a service provider so much as an event and a procedure. It’ll live on the idea of Rat banking, and barter, and big cheapness. But it will have some kind of identity. That’s important too, because one of the positive functions of our getting together is the ability to represent ourselves to a larger community. It’s not just about theater artists communicating to theater artists. It’s about theater artists representing their work to their audiences, as part of a national phenomena. So you’ll have the logo ‘The Rat Conference,’ and then you’ll have an aspect of a shadow organization within it, that will always be logo-free and completely unnamed, always renaming itself.”

“It would be very disappointing if there were not a schism within,” he said. “If there weren’t that schism, it would imply that people were uninvolved. You are not investing yourself if you find yourself in harmonious agreement with everyone around you.”

He added the cincher: “We have to remain effective critics of ourselves.”

## AWH (Art Workers’ Hostelry)

Erik Ehn

August 1996

## NEW WORK

Is directed like dance, acted like music.

Is distributed like gossip.

Uses language as a spectacle, spectacle as hypnotic trigger.

Brings that which is accidental to the perfection of the essential.

Depends for quality on duende, which restores, in its moment, experts to their inexperience, decisions to their propositions.

Demands expertise, precision (is too mortal to afford any imprecision), but defines expertise in immanence, in courage.

Hides nothing/reveals nothing/is nothings/is.

## AWH

Is an empty site: the ground of invitation.

Is an anarchic composition of broke theatres (theatres rooted in brokenness) committed to sharing work and ways of working.

Presses beyond exchanges of work: advocates moving work in need, work that requires its new situation to complete it.

Expands neediness, not accomplishment.

Promotes interdependence over geographic distance.

Relies and is dependent on hospitality.

Accepts no money.

Discourages money as an organizing or causative principle in general.

Considers goods and services to be more efficient and substantial means of exchange than money.

Does not control member organizations.

Is not organized/identifiable. (No manifestos. Continual manifesto. Reactionary.

Details what we've just gotten away with, after the fact. Misdirects understanding of what we've just gotten away with.).

## MONEY

Is a neutral sign system, neither inherently evil or good. Theatre relies on symbol and substance (partisan and concrete) and is improperly guided by and improperly controls a neutral concept.

Is invited, not commanded.

Is provided hospitality: is a stranger passing through.

## POOR THEATRE/POVERTY

Spiritual poverty is an immaculate attribute of holiness.

Spiritual values may be discovered in and practiced through voluntary material poverty.

Except for geniuses of sacrifice, there are no values to be discovered in involuntary material poverty. (Any pain may be offered up, but the offering and not the pain identifies grace.)

### BROKE THEATRE/BROKENESS

Relies: moves. Improvises. (A hallmark of the difference between AWH theatres and accomplished, institutional theatres: the latter are unable to do as they will - they must do as they should.)

Fears no fall because it is already destroyed.

Is complete at nature, is in love with impossibility.

Makes of its very cheapness, high hospitality.

### PLEDGE/PLEA

I will no longer accept compensation for pretending actions.

“Quit dreaming. Quit desiring. Love.” Lorca.

### FUND RAISING/DEVELOPMENT IN THIS CONTEXT

Ask for that which precedes money, and is bigger than money. Solicit peace.

We don't need money (first) or audience (first): we don't need witnesses. We need to witness. We are not selling to audiences or funders. We are not working for audiences or funders: they are not our fascination. We are working for that which we witness: audiences must be fully guilty of and haunted by our fascination. Audiences must be made artists.

A ticket is not admission, it is digression. Admission = confession = a calling to mind of sin (a public acknowledgment of the degree to which one has not been an artist involved in the process; the degree to which we consider ourselves peer artists is the degree to which we feel ourselves entitled to comps). A donation is not a gift, it is a memorial, a loss.

### THE RAT CONFERENCE IS

“A decentralized international assembly of performing arts organizations sharing work and ways of working, as peers.”

A rhythmically occurring disgrace (not a collective, not a consortium - a disgrace).

A scam.

The self created (requisite) enemy of our own ideals.

Love of neighbor expressed in acts of corporal mercy (where love includes fury).

## Room And Transportation

Erik Ehn

July 1997 *Salvage* Published by Salvage Vanguard Theater Austin, TX

Theatre's means is its meaning.

Theatre's means of distribution is its appropriate subject (fate).

A hyperbole of it: Theatre is the moment of transition from fuel to ash in the fire of the present; the furniture of our days burned to lighten forced march to new exile.

Commonly held potential passes through complicit action (no ownership of action) into audience-owned evidence.

Theatre begs martyrdom at attention on time and space.

Food, lodging and transportation (attention to bodies, time and space) are the appropriate stipends. All plays are about food, lodging and transportation, about laws of hospitality and the stranger (estranged).

The little house of la dee dah: I don't trust any flower from me but the esthetic rose.

I don't trust anything I make but plays. I don't trust any valuation of my plays as much as I trust the plays themselves. I trust money valuations least; am least comfortable squaring text with cash.

I want a direct exchange of art for food, lodging and transportation. It's what I write out of and about; it's what I want to write into.

Because I don't trust something doesn't mean I don't want it or can't use it. I don't really trust the idea of linear time, but I wear a watch.

There are always obstacles; money will always be involved; money is not the appropriate obstacle (its pursuit and exchange do not satisfy the laws of hospitality cogently – we don't give dinner guests money to buy their meal); money is not the first or last gate.

Spiritual poverty addresses, but is not defined by detachment from money; it's about detachment from created (from all) things (as the thing). Theatre has things in it, but imitates only automatically and shallowly the transactions that define a commodity economy. Theatre is built on opportunities for self-absenting; opens that field in which one is owned by the event of the field.

Creation is that which God is not. Creation is God's act of self-cancellation. Art adores God insofar as it imitates God's continuous self-absenting.

Involuntary material poverty is always a great evil. Voluntary material poverty can sometimes serve as a meditative tool, but is no guarantor of virtue. Spiritual poverty is a practical tactical ground for theatrical exchange; endorses giving over, over acquiring (go-giving versus go-getting – Maurin).

I'm only talking about what I see at work, what I see as sustainable: an art organized according to the rule of hospitality (welcoming the stranger, becoming the stranger). These observations are epidemiological. Material failures and struggles inflict deep, debilitating wounds and shape our self-perceptions; material failures are not our defining failures, struggles towards and with material are not our essential struggles. Money can't consume us - the art consumes us; money helps art but doesn't supersede it. If art is hospitality and hospitality is a position (an attitude and geography; the glory of the word "here," as in "here is what I am and have," and: the present, the presence), then who we are, in openness to each other, is our capital. Our wealth is here; we already have what we've been asking for. If what we are left with is our weakness, if all has been stripped from our hands, then, standing open-handed, we make the complete requisite gesture: offering all, all open ("through weakness, power reaches perfec-

tion” 2Cor12). An offer of money is a desperate appeal; a greenback is an application. The bearer of the note asks for access to the rewards of hospitality (movement through fire from self to nothing), without having to invest the actual labor of hospitality (wanting to have self and selflessness too).

Recipe: as an experiment: the next time you are offered a commission, ask for a loaf of home-made bread instead of a thousand or five hundred or two hundred dollars (ultimately, you should be able to do much better... bed, bread and bus... but the bread-limit clarifies the test). Someone at the institution has to bake the bread personally. The more heavily bureaucratized the outfit, the less likely you are to eat. State institutions seem the least able to make the adjustment. The state’s hands are too big for the intimate touch; bureaucracies are our least natural partners in hospitality. The worst that’s going to happen: you’ll get a loaf of bread. Or ask for a bus ticket instead of bus fare. Privacy and a bed in lieu of and not out of salary. Days and not per diem.

Movies are more like money. A dollar and a frame of film share properties; they stand in for remote realities (gold; collaboration). They are documents, and promises; they are debts that invite debt (recreational bet-losing; I like to gamble sometimes). Advertising too. Movies, money and ads are efficiently transferred; widespread; take the place of culture; we operate a promissory culture, a debt culture; keep our gold (collaborations) rare and locked away. Moving people around, versus images of people, is slower, more difficult. Hospitality culture (artists and their art in transition, in all ways, moving; bodies in space, cared for) increases the reach of our disciplines without promoting sameness (hospitality is not fast enough to achieve standardization). We need less theatre (more constant, as in constancy, more foolish).

## REHASH HARANGUE

This barter system doesn’t get you dental (although, Elvis used to trade Cadillacs for crowns\*. Hospitality doesn’t work as a day job any more than love or happiness work as jobs. Theatre is all means, the discovery and rediscovery of common, fragrant zone; it’s not a transaction and has no serious artifacts (its scripts enter literature; video documentation enters history). Against logic, some creative artists are able to make a decent living. But the number of such positions is severely limited; theatre’s nature won’t admit for much more. The set of artists able to profit a) consistently and b) on their own terms is a fraction of a splinter. Neal Simon can’t produce at will in the theatre named after him; Arthur Miller’s having trouble getting his work out...

Money we will have with us always; and theatre fits with steady money by exception. In general, theatre on our own terms will be made inconsistently and outside the marketplace. We can get the grants, send the mailings, pursue commissions.... without pretending that we are building lasting structures. Make temporary structures perfectly; their lightness (emptiness, weakness, brevity) is their excellence.

We are not mistaken when we find ways to make our art dysfunction in the marketplace.

\*Note on barter: offering to paint the barn in exchange for room and board while you’re in town to work on a production is neat, but not exactly what I’m talking about. We should be able to trade labor as writers, directors, etc. for room and board; direct exchange. If Elvis had felt able to sing for his crowns he’d be alive today. All Elvis theory and much else owed to Nick and Gaby.

## To review:

Erik Ehn

Many of us are up to the same thing. By working in each other's engaged presence, in need and support of each other, we abet innovation and cancel redundancy. What we need: More than anything, to learn and to listen. Our experiments may or may not yield solutions. This isn't our aim; the alertness and nimbleness of the experimental process is our sufficiency. We live to be attentive to the morphing solutions that present themselves in the face of perpetual curveball problems. We experiment to heighten our vulnerability (which is why two out of three collaborations end in howler monkey agony); to become and remain more acutely aware of the world; to create an acoustic school - where listening incites listening. This environment of collective vulnerability is Artaud's cruelty.

Our theater is less about content than about new sensibilities; more about wakefulness than tasks; more about conundrum than conclusion (John X's dark-night dramaturgy). Our ends: New engagements with time, space, training. Our means: time, space, training. These means, these ends require the re-orientation of the person. Money is the facilitation of the impersonal. There are other means to our means. As per our art, we learn best from each other in the live encounter. We travel... Since we are sharing ways of working as well as work, we travel in need so our projects, workshops, etc. require the local community to complete them. Otherwise we are practicing speaking more than listening. [Use the list to advertise, okay; also: put the word out on things we can all look at from the same vantage - workshops, events outside whatever we think rat is.]

To make travel-in-need possible, we need hospitality. Hospitality is the best idea we have, the axiom of our polemic.

No scripts: New Notation (celebrate and advance the incompleteness of text)

No directors: Writers

No writers: Actors

No actors: Actions

No audience: Collaborators

No box office: Collect donations, give them away, on the theory that giving attracts getting

No development: Continual reformation; live in the present

No seasons: As a project is, so it will grow

No intermissions: They suggest that the world is so secure, what you left will still be there when you come back. Instead: shorter, fugitive pieces, or momentary collapses, seizures

No written contracts: Know who you're dealing with, require their virtue

No 501c3: You damage your donor's charity; turns gifts into tactics

No money: Barter first

No application for government support: They need us badly; they should be applying to us

No sense: Sensibilities

No sincerity (an attitude towards honesty; as overblown enthusiasm is to alertness): Just the facts

No rat: Secret name; private, real links

This is the big cheap theater. The reality of our bigness is bound up in the precision of our local identities. **IDENTITY IS A FUNCTION OF HOSPITALITY:** you are the welcome you provide (instrument of peace).

I cross all these lines. I think about them though, holiday time.

## Dear Arts Worker: rat meet: an invitation

October 3-6, 2002  
University of San Francisco, CA  
Performances, Presentations, Workshops

### Change the Space

Looking at where and how art happens  
in response to the needs of justice

We struggle for space: political, artistic, architectural...  
What do these spaces have in common?

Legal rights and dramatic freedoms, new stages and new staging grounds;  
Good judging, good judgment, clear sight, sharp art;  
Distribution, open dialogue, reformed dramaturgy...  
How is progress mutual?

Global market culture pushes to outward conformity, while aggravating intrinsic inequities (surface sameness facilitating concentration of wealth and proliferation of atomized appetites). What challenges do we face, trying to wed the unique with the collective, the untranslatable with the collaborative? How does art go global without globalizing? In what productive ways can our experiments argue on behalf of one world/many voices, against one world/few pockets? How do we change the space around us, and the space we occupy?

If the crisis in the world is cultural, what is the counter-culture now? What is it countering and what is it choosing?

### SOME TERMS

From Philly notes, '01

rat is an anarchic association of theater artists committed to sharing work and ways of working outside market and political conventions of growth.

We are anarchic: unregulated and unstructured, collecting no dues, electing no officers, convening arhythmically.

We are an association: communicating by all means, but most real in live encounters, believing that the performing arts are corporal mercies, caring for bodies in space through acts of hospitality.

We share work and ways of working: by requiring each other's labor and expertise, stepping past advertising and news. We cast each other, co-write, seize each other's resources, and make problems for/with each other.

We are outside the market on the theory that every use of a dollar represents a failure of hospitality. Money is morally neutral but imaginatively stunted; we promote barter and unmediated exchanges of goods and services. We look for alternatives to conventional script and organizational development believing that the myth of perfectible efficiency endorses stasis, thing-ness, and unjust concentrations of wealth.

“rat” because: every city has them; because build the new in the shell of the old; cunning; unlovely, ineradicable. Ana-acronymic: radical alternative theater, room and transportation, race against time... but actually, rat.

A rat meet is any size; any one can call one together; whoever comes, is (via Alternate Roots); whatever resources there are, as long as they are shared, are sufficient. Every effort is made to provide food and shelter. The meetings “happen” when bread is broken.

This is the Big Cheap Theater - mutual, tawdry, unstoppable, present, kenotic, grace-full, as much an ethical as an esthetic enterprise. We hold the right to fail, to scatter, to let go, to reform improbably, to infiltrate, interdict, self-contradict, disavow the principles set down here, to make space when all space was thought collapsed, to make that space habitable by infusing a portable, repeatable sense of home: residence at tempo.

But a truly faithful manifesto has only one word, a “yes” to possibility in the resource of these companions.

Jack Bentz  
Erik Ehn  
Peter Novak  
Roberto Varea

#### SOME THOUGHTS IN ANTICIPATION OF THE MEET; A RAT OVERVIEW.

rat is a proposition, an opportunity for theater workers to come together in an effort to reverse a structure where the large, central, remote and privileged enable the many and dependent. The many - in their brokenness, naked insistence and fearlessness - embrace their own agency by banding together. In conversation after conversation I am reminded that the disasters and successes we encounter in our driven microcosms are experienced in similar ways over and over again elsewhere (miraculous sources of support, despair over rent, finding or not finding language for collaboration).

This coming together of artists is happening already; rat isn't causing it, it is celebrating it. There is widespread (if often unconscious) duplication of methods, script-choices, and survival scams. An increased consciousness can only lead to an increase in excellence, and an enhanced sense of place in the broader community. The de-facto gathering is what it is; rat offers particular points of view and concrete excuses for convening and interweaving our projects.

As often as possible we look to alternatives to money in exchange, and alternatives to corporate models of growth. Money is necessary, some people say war is necessary; we look elsewhere first. Theater transacts according to the logic of hospitality (sacrifice for the sake of mutual advantage) versus commerce (profit).

Esthetically we favor immediacy - a sensual and dialectic relationship with our audience; an involvement of audience in the structure of our art making, and an identification of our audience with our community.

We prize the free impulse - license to create according to the needs of the creation.

“to hope, till Hope creates From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” - Shelly,  
Prometheus Unbound

The specific rat agenda: to discover where possible and to advocate for the establishment of houses of hospitality - locations around the country where food and shelter are available to visiting artists. This is of a piece with a program to distribute work and ways of working in a revised model of touring, where parts of shows, or ideas in progress, or designs, etc. are traded between theaters, so that so that the visitors require their hosts personally and profoundly (beyond satisfactions of space and audience). We are looking to discover means of making transportation cheaper, through ride shares, and ideally, a national frequent-flier bank that would collect and distribute donations towards free tickets. We communicate amongst ourselves and to the field at large, working out the thinking and the passions required by a big cheap theater.

In eight years we've gotten far and have broken down and are who knows where. The houses of hospitality are out there, but not so as to be listed in a directory. Work is being traded and could be traded much more aggressively. The flier-miles bank remains a dream but does not feel like it has decayed to fatuousness yet. The conversation has its very good days, some of them on the list, often in remarkable encounters, live at the meets, and in collaborations that grow out of the meets.

The meets vary widely in size and purpose, and reasons for coming (or staying away) vary. The SF version will feature good people from a number of countries talking about ways the struggle for art and the struggle for justice intersect. Theaters are confronting deep issues in terms of their spaces - the way they physically interact with their audiences and environment, and the way they inhabit the social space. Workers in other media, along with political activists, social scientists, etc. are confronting similar practical and philosophical dilemmas. By sharing stories of how we are surviving and how we are failing, perhaps we can discover new tools suitable for each of us personally, and, more importantly, perhaps we will have refined the great device of our community.

"You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milt! Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy." Isaiah, 55:1-2

We need bread, we need wages. Our babies need shoes on their feet. We don't have babies in order to buy shoes. We don't make theater in order to pay the rent. We don't go to the theater in order to buy the ticket. We are purchasing something more vital with something more expensive than money. That "something more" is a space shared by arts workers and justice workers. That's the SF topic.

More to come, but quoting Jack Bentz without permission: "How can the theater reimagine its function to include being a force for change as well as entertainment? What needs to be changed and how can the theater identify the injustice and imagine new ways towards performing society?" He proposes we move towards a Prophetic Theater, where "the prophetic voice. reminds a people or an audience what they as a people said they were going to be. Sometimes this is a prophet of God sometimes this is a prophet of the Constitution and sometimes this might be a prophet of Modernism"

More down the road.

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# Forced Entertainment & Tim Etchells

## Chasing Ruins:

An Interview with Tim Etchells by Caridad Svich

*CS: Forced Entertainment's commitment to the creation of work outside traditional spaces for performance is unique in a country where such a strong text- or script-based tradition exists. How have you kept your commitment to the work alive?*

TE: We've been lucky. We started working together many years ago, and with no big game plan and no real long-term strategy we've been able to continue. The biggest part of this is that we have a vision of something we want and need to do. The rest of it is luck—luck that, as it happened, this really is a group of people that has a conversation it needs to have, a set of topics and themes and concerns we need to keep discussing together.

I think the best decision we ever made was that we weren't interested in being a successful theatre company. I think it took us ten years to realise that fully—that the ladder one was meant or expected to climb in the UK—was of no interest to us. I think from that point on we were confident that expansion sideways into installation projects, new media, video and so on, were of more interest to us than trying to forge relations with the mainstream theater venues. It's a very liberating moment when you admit that you aren't even tied to particular forms or strategies: that the next thing you do might be a publication, or a twenty-four hour performance or CD ROM or, indeed, a completely text-based performance, that you're tied to ideas, nothing more. I think we've found this (largely self-given) freedom very productive. And I think it has invigorated the work and consequently kept audiences on their toes!

*CS: The governing media tend to focus exclusively on major cities in discussing art and forget that art can be made anywhere. Your company is based in Sheffield. Do you think this has afforded you a certain freedom to make the kind of work you do?*

TE: I think being in Sheffield has given both a freedom and a restriction. On the positive side you're out of the market, out of the immediate trends of what's in vogue, and away from the distractions of loads of other work, loads of other artists. There's a freedom in that: the chances to develop what you do, what you're interested in, to develop an aesthetic in some way privately. And of course you can live better away from the capital. Rehearsal space is cheaper, rent is cheaper, and beer is cheaper (!). And you're in a city with a different kind of community and a different economic and cultural position. I think that in the start that was all, on balance, useful. It's a mixed blessing. All the money and power remain in the capital (funding, journalists, major venues and even, to some extent, academics) and so if you want to do stuff and see stuff and have it taken seriously you have to engage with the capital, you can't avoid that. You just get to spend a lot of time on the train.

*CS: When you create a piece with the company, do you determine the site for the piece first or does the piece evolve and then you find a site for it?*

TE: Sometimes we have a site in mind and make a project to go there. Sometimes there is an idea waiting for a site, or which seems to demand a certain site. For us, ideas are always bound up with spaces and things. We don't often have preconceived themes but rather we let themes and ideas emerge from objects, spaces, or events that happen in improvisation. So for *First Night* (2001) the first thing we started from was a line of the performers smiling (fixed, rigid, game-show host grins) and from these grins came the costumes, and from this visual look we more or less derived the whole piece. Our strategy is to trust whatever whimsical fascination we might have for certain things - pieces of music, costumes, spatial arrangements, and so on - and to trust that structures and content will arise from them.

Our process tends to be a combination of very 'free' improvisation and exploration next to, or alongside, a lot of talking, analysis, and theorisation. We've often likened this to the nice cop/nasty cop of interrogation - that on the one hand we'll be spontaneous, even arbitrary about what happens, what gets used and how, and on the other hand we'll be brutally analytic about the content and structures that are made in this way. We tend to reject considerable amounts of material in the process and most rehearsals are videotaped so that we can sit down together later and look at what happened. Tapes are often a source of reference later in the process too, as we check back on the content or mood or structure of sections as they originally appeared.

In terms of spaces we tend to think about entering into a dialogue with the kind of expectations they engender. We try to use the resonances - we stage *Quizoola!*, where possible, in cellars or basements because we like both the secret/hidden away quality of these spaces as well as the association with interrogation or incarceration. *First Night* has been made very much with middle-sale theatres in mind, and, as a kind of twisted vaudeville, it enters into a dialogue with the expectation of such traditional 'entertainment' theatres in the UK

CS: *Is there ever for you as an artist too much dreaming?*

TE: I'm kind of suspicious of dreaming (at least when it's used about art-making!) - perhaps because it first summons an image for me of something quite indulgent or unstructured or individualistic. I'm more interested in the way that our dreams (our imaginations) are shaped and formed by society, culture, and landscape. I'm also interested in the way that our dreams (desires) can only be realised through the technologies of culture, which (as literature, as speech, as film, as new media, as object-making) always has limits, agendas, and problems. All these restrictions, all these edges and boundaries are a key to the way we make and understand our world and things that people make in it. I'm especially suspicious of dreaming when it is linked to technology where the rhetoric about freedom and possibility tends to get extremely out of hand. I don't trust the promise of infinite possibilities and I'm politically skeptical about all that supposed the 'freedom'. I'm as interested in what technology can't do as in what it can. I'm also attracted to the limits of technology and to using it in simple, economical ways. *Nightwalks* and *Frozen Palaces* are these sumptuous worlds, navigable landscapes for which we very deliberately choose to exploit just one fairly simple new media form/ device (Apple's QTVR panoramas) in what amounts to a minimalism. They're interactive, they're not linear-narrative in form, but they are full of edges, decisions, impossibilities, and restrictions.

CS: *Do you think feelings of estrangement and loss are inevitable in contemporary culture?*

TE: Maybe now we're just so aware of the huge pile of culture, history, you know, just stuff that's stacked up behind us. There's so much of it. And it's so visible. (And of course there so much stuff it also all disappears.) I was home the other day and channel hopping on the TV and later I was saying 'oh there was this thing about World War II, and another thing about

magic and another thing about the history of surveillance’, and they were all on at more or less the same time and I was sort of drifting through them. In that context it’s hard to feel the world as your own, that your own moment counts for much... rather, a feeling like you’re in the middle of someone else’s big mess. The contemporary situation just amplifies the basic feelings of estrangement we have as humans who inherit a set of things (culture, biology etc) and are not fully comfortable in these things. The contemporary situation (excess) just turns the heat up on that.

*CS: The Situationists were dedicated to making art out of their lives. It is not a completely foreign concept, but so much of Western culture now is dedicated to the individual behaving as a consumer or passenger. How do you make work in a socio-political climate that centers so much on consumption?*

TE: We’ve largely made performances for theatres. You can consume these. You buy a ticket. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. (As a joke we say it has a beginning, a muddle, and an end). I suppose what we have done very much in this context is try to make work that creates a problem in the act of consumption. We’ve done that in many different ways: chiefly, in the theatre work proper by making the pieces demanding or reflexive, by creating situations that challenge the public in some way, or where their role or expectations become a large part of the performance. We do this through making open structures, performances that really ask the public to join the dots, to make connections - pieces that demand they run contrary or contradictory scenarios in their heads as the performance unfolds, etc. We also tend to employ a performer-presence in the pieces that is what we describe as ‘workman like’, everyday, banal, or, best of all, human-scale. It’s something that tries to exist under the rhetorical strategies of theatre (though we’ve had our interest in these too!). We’ve been interested to be either more or less than what theatre ‘ought’ to be. We’ve also been fond of turning the performances back around to face the audience and to get them to think about what they expect and what lies behind those expectations.

We’ve spun outwards to make projects in lots of other media, including performance projects, which become in a certain sense unconsumable. So our durational performances, which have lasted anything from 6 to 24 hours and for which the public are free to arrive, depart and return at any point, abandon the framework, structure, and trajectory of beginning, middle, and end in favor of letting people determine their own shape of start(s) and end(s). The twenty-four hour performance, *Who Can Sing A Song to Unfrighten Me?* (1999), is something I often think about as a kind of unknowable (and hence unconsumable) object. Even the people who try to see all of it end up falling asleep in the auditorium, letting the show mix with their dreams. I like that... that you can’t see the performance... that it resists that.

The Situationist understanding of the spectacle, which in their description relentlessly appropriates all that it does not yet possess, remains pretty valid. Perhaps what’s more doubtful by now is the possibility to even imagine a space or life outside of this process. Perhaps that idea of theirs was always a provocative fantasy rather than an achievable reality. But for us, the chances (in art and in life) seem to lie more in the idea of hollowing out spaces inside the spectacle itself, in its ruins, in its own neglected areas. There’s no pure space left. We can regret this. We can be angry about it. But we have to live in the result.

*CS: Your piece Disco Relax, for example, plays on the ambiguity of performance. Is the actor the character and vice versa...? How do you keep the element of play alive in the work?*

TE: We often work with the idea of levels - a baseline of performers-as-performers and above that levels of pretences, assumptions of character, or whatever. We like the effect of a kind of

slipping between these layers or levels. The rehearsal process is very playful, the performers switching in and out of role, on and off the script, deliberately sabotaging each other, letting fictions occur and then breaking them.

When it comes to creating performances we have two strategies. The first is the obsessive ‘lets fix everything and recreate the videotape exactly’ mode in which we improvise and then recreate the successful sections or moments. The second is a deliberate attempt to leave space for improv. So, in the theatre version of *Speak Bitterness*, only about 70% of the lines are fixed; the rest can be made up or chosen anew in any given live performance. And in something like *Disco Relax*, the central performers (Cathy Naden and Sue Marshall) are free to invent stuff within the parameters we’ve already established. In these works the improv stuff sits inside a framework that is absolutely fixed and which itself is often drawn from many hours of improv and eventually hardened into a script.

In the durational works we tend to use improvisation much more fully. *Quizoola!*, *Speak Bitterness*, and *Who Can Sing A Song to Unfrighten Me?* are all based on rule games, or fixed structures inside which the performers must constantly make live decisions. We’re interested in these works because they allow for constant free-play, and as a result of this there’s a very live energy, a great generosity, too, somehow.

*CS: When making a piece, when and how do you decide what to embrace technologically and not?*

TE: Technology tends to get used if it is kicking around in the studio. Hence, a rash of shows with a record player, or a bunch of shows with video. We haven’t used anything much fancier than that in the theatre work because we don’t like clever or supposedly sophisticated things. You could say that these days (around here at least!) record players and video stuff are basic aspects of human life. I like that these things are common technologies, which are overwritten with years of everyday use, that they become banal. With the computer stuff we’ve done, or mixed media installation, once again, there’s no particular desire to be at the ‘cutting edge’ of technological development. We can leave that to the military. We have a pretty laid back attitude to technology: use it when we feel like, don’t make a big deal out of it. Our process-rambling, trial-and-error-mitigates against using anything too complex. We’d probably spend six months building a complicated technological set/device and then decide after five minutes work in the rehearsal studio that we didn’t like it. If you make that kind of decision about some clothing from a second hand shop, or about an overhead projector you hired for a week, it’s not so bad, but I wouldn’t like to be in a position to waste thousands of pounds that way!

*CS: Performance is by nature ephemeral. Yet you also work on the printed page. Which feels more performative for you: theatrical/site-specific/installation performance or fiction/essays?*

TE: Each space demands its own strategies. But they’re all equally places that demand that the self (or whatever) be staged, deployed, constructed, built. At a certain point, that was a revelation to me - that writing is a kind of acting. But as soon as my essay work had started to employ fiction... and the theatre work had started to employ fact... well from then on, the boundaries were very much in question.

This interview was conducted online in September, 2001.

## Forced Entertainment on Politics and Pleasure

Michelle McGuire

Regarded by many as one of Britain's leading experimental theatre companies, Forced Entertainment devise theatre that questions issues concerning contemporary life. Based in Sheffield, the company has toured nationally and abroad with diverse shows for small scale theatres, installation works for galleries, site-specific performances, digital media pieces and most recently films. Formed in 1984 by a group of six graduates from the University of Exeter, the ensemble are a rare breed for having stayed intact through Arts Council cuts and a volatile arts environment. Perhaps the secret of their success is an ability to operate within the media culture of the late 20TH century - firmly placing themselves in a society of changing cultural forms, TV politics and consumerism. I met with Robin Arthur, Claire Marshall and Cathy Naden to discuss the processes of their understated work.

*Michelle McGuire: Is Forced Entertainment a reflection of the times and therefore a product of Postmodernism?*

Robin Arthur: I think the short answer to that is yes, probably. As people, as artists, we've always been consciously trying to make work that is contemporary. There are quite a lot of artists that are trying to make work that is almost like classical work. And I don't just mean people who, in theatre for example, go back and approach the classics. But, there are a lot of writers who think about their work being in the high modernist classic tradition - almost outside of the time - who would almost regard the notion that their work emerged out of the time that they write it in, as being a kind of insult, a kind of cheapening of what they do. But I don't think that is true for us at all. I think we've always tried to make work that is contemporary and arises out of the moment.

Claire Marshall: So it's always been influenced by music, by film, by videos, by other aspects of culture.

RA: When we first started making work, I didn't know what Postmodernism was. But when I found out what it meant, it did seem like quite a good way of describing some of things that we were doing. I think that our relationship with that term or that set of conceptions has gone rather more cynical of late. But, I think it would be stupid to deny that it is something that describes quite well a lot of what we do.

Cathy Naden: Tim [Etchells - Artistic Director] always used to put this quote on publicity that was around, might have been as early as *200% & Bloody Thirsty*, which was a show that we did in 1989. He used to say that the work was always understandable by anybody, "who was brought up in a house where the TV was always on". And I think that in a way, we are kind of filters for everyday experience and that can be things we've seen on television, or things we've seen on the news. And it is not a conscious process of looking out for those things. I think it is like an expression of what it's like to be alive now. Because things kind of filter through accidentally, like the Gulf War happening around the time we were making *Marina & Lee*. And it crept into the text and little parts of the show. But that was never an overtly political statement we were making. It was just one part of an experience that was creeping into the work. And also, I think that the way you can use the high culture and low culture that you get in Postmodernism, is something that we use a lot. The sort of putting together things that shouldn't go together, trash things and crap things and making something new out of it.

CM: I think Postmodernism has become a bit of a dirty word sometimes, that suggests that everything is very ironic, very cynical and very removed. Although it's a word that describes some of what we do, it is just a describing word. You don't set out to make a Postmodernist piece of work. Sometimes it feels like it's not a good description because a lot of what we do contains a lot of cynicism, a lot of anger and there is also a lot of naivete and hope and innocence in the things that we want to make happen on stage.

RA: I think that is a really good point. Critical terms like Postmodernism are interesting at the point where they arise from an observation of work that is taking place. So, when the term was created, I think it was an observational term, it was a term that detected something that was present in work. One of the problems is that as soon as the word became in vogue, people tried to make Postmodern work. Those critical terms, it seems to me, should always be subsidiary to the creative process rather than in control of it or dictating it. I wouldn't like to think that we attempted to make Postmodernist work or that that was in the back of our minds. Or that we were trying to conform to some critical formula, it's a word that has, at various times in the work that we have been making, been a relatively useful description. But it is not a formula that we attempt to fulfil when we make work.

*MM: Much of Live Art has a political social awareness. How does Forced Entertainment fit into that sphere?*

RA: Again, the fundamental part of what we do that makes it political or socially involved is to do with the form. It's to do with things that we've discovered about what we do in live performance over the last ten years or so. Working out about five years ago that we didn't want to go and play in huge theatres in front of 600 people. Being involved in a form that's about small scale and about a kind of intimacy with people, is for me, one of the biggest political parts of what we do because it's a rejection of all those notions about 'up-scaling' and 'size is important' and mass communication being incredibly important. I mean, I'm not saying that we are totally opposed to those things and I don't even think we've worked out for ourselves how or why that it is important to us. But it always comes back down to the fact that when we make performances, it's for small auditoria, it's for small numbers of people. At the top range of our touring circuit where you are dealing with venues that will hold two hundred people, you get in there and it's horrible, you don't like playing those places. You don't like the lack of communication or the lack of contact. So, that kind of smallness, not conceptually, but just the very gut-level instinctive rejection of the notion of commercial success or commercial concerns is very political. It is that kind of decision which is perhaps less overt than you might be talking about with regard to the whole live art thing. But I think it's there in that whole live art agenda, almost at root, because of the medium that people are dealing with.

CN: I think we tried to find our own way through the funding maze. We haven't followed the normal career path for a small scale company because we haven't moved from project funding to revenue funding. But three or four years ago, we made this decision to diversify. So, we tried to keep the creative process by making pieces that weren't with theatre and diversifying into other things like digital media. So in that sense, those sorts of projects that have been happening within live arts have really been tapped into. And that is also about getting to different audiences and reaching the fine art world or digital media world.

*MM: So is that how you see Forced Entertainment progressing in the next few years? This kind of diversification?*

CN: Yeah, I think we will still continue to make the live work. Certainly economically, it makes sense to diversify. I think it's really good when you can have work out there that's doing the job for you without having to involve other people. The thing about touring shows is that you always have to go to where they are going. A project like *Frozen Palaces* (CD ROM) could be out there in the world doing the work for you.

*MM: And you do all your work in one day.*

CM: Yeah, but there is something about that which in a way is at odds with what Robin was talking about because for all of us, it is a political act to commit so much time and so much hands-on work to make these shows. Everything is still to do with us all cleaning the buildings, us all being responsible for doing the little jobs that happen. I don't think it will ever come to the stage where Richard [Lowdon - company member] sits down, designs a set and hands it over to someone and they build it. I just can't see, not completely, him not wanting to see what materials are being used on the set and having to work with the performance as it grows. So, keeping the hands-on approach is really quite important. And then, sit that beside the idea that you can write *Frozen Palaces* and send it out in the world.

*MM: And that is going back to that kind of multiplicity that we were talking about before. Where you then reflect back into that mass multi-media.*

CM: And I think both of those things have to exist for us to exist. Sometimes, I think that in ten years time, Forced Entertainment will just be this name under which different projects exist.

RA: I think that what Claire was saying there comes back down to the other aspect of it that is - God, I don't really know if we really constitute as a co-operative anymore, but effectively that has always been the way that the company has worked. It is a strange kind of pragmatic socialism that takes place for us in our work environment a lot of the time. It is changing a little bit but at root, I think it is still there and I've not liked to think about us getting down to the point where the division of labour was so specialised that I only ever just turned up and did a show. At root level there is, in terms of the choice of media, in terms of the way that we work, a collaborative way that we work which, as I go on, think it is an increasingly rare to encounter. It does happen, it rarely happens for a very long time.

CM: I think it is almost unique given the longevity. Other companies that have been going a long time generally have about two original members. People like Natural Theatre Company, I think, are two creative directors with different performers each show sometimes. Having your little space in the middle of the city and all being centred around that and essentially nobody having major commitments outside of that is very unusual.

RA: Having established those two crux points to go back to, the political or social agendas that are more normal in live art. I think that, in a way, when we then embark on making work we don't carry that mental baggage with us. I'm sure that actually, because of the nature of the process and because of the nature of the business, that the work that we make is actually political, but for me it's political in a naturally evolved way rather than a formulistic way. I think the work has political and social concerns that emerge from the process and from the way that we work rather than political and social concerns that are bolted on. If you look at a lot of the-atre as opposed to live art, because live art is a very different category, but if you look at the

most overtly social or politically social theatre work that has come out of this country in the last twenty or thirty years, most of it has been made in the context of an incredibly, perniciously, nasty, not just capitalist system but a kind of really strange world. Where notions of democracy or commitment are utterly out of the window. If you think about the great political playwrights, their relationship with the means of production of their work is well, dictatorial. It has no democratic credentials at all. They write the damn thing, hand it over to a director who directs the damn thing. And I don't understand how you can think about making political or social work if you haven't sorted out your own means of production to start with. It's utterly ludicrous for someone to claim that they are writing left-wing, social critiques when the mechanism that they use for bringing that stuff out into the world is highly suspect, by anybody's standards.

CM: I can remember thinking when that play, *Blasted* was on at the Royal Court which was all horrible ultra violence, buggery and terrible swearing on stage. I remember reading about it and thinking, well we've done all that, we just didn't make a fuss about it and we didn't pretend that our blood was real. We said it was fake and you could see the squirter but we covered ourselves in it and we died. The way that Tim and Cathy write, is a language full of obscenity that is just kind of casual. We use violence all the time by talking about it or not doing it or sort of pretending to do it. There are tons of angry political statements in a lot of our work, it's just that instead of making a play about 'the poor homeless people', or the problem of homelessness, you get a card board sign that refers to that or you get a little bit of text that talks about the people all around being 'just a bunch of fucking cunts'. I think it is very angry, especially with all the Thatcher years and the Major years. It doesn't start off that we are going to make a show about this, it's just if you're angry and political with a small 'p', that's going to be in the work.

RA: I think that is very true. There is always a belief that the world is more complicated than Disney or the Communist Manifesto. The world is a more complicated place than either of those things would like you to believe it is. And our politics are rather more amorphous, even romanticised. That results usually in a kind of general pissed-offness! It's more to do with punk than it is to do with structuralism. It is not about having an intellectual overview about what is wrong with society, it's about saying, 'I saw this thing and that made me fucking puke and then I saw this thing and that was rather sweet'. And how those things actually work for you now in the world. And that is where our politics and our social agenda comes from and where it makes itself apparent. The work always dictates its own politics rather than politics dictating the work. It is less common now, but in the early eighties, there was this Marxist critique that said that politics and political and economic underpinning of society dictates everything, which means that when you're an artist, you should be concerned with those things primarily and your art should in some way reflect that. And we've always had the attitude at root, that that is a very skewed way of looking at the world. And that the artistic way of looking at the world is a valid one. If it occasionally takes swipes at various economic or social political things on route, then for sure it's going to do that because it lives in the same world as those things.

MM: *Is Pleasure [touring show 97/98] representing the mood of the company?*

CM: *Pleasure* must have come out of the mood of the company. I mean, I think we were exhausted making it, we got really stuck making it. It was an incredibly difficult show to make and we went down a lot of blind alleys to make it. And when we were touring it before Christmas we were still changing it. I don't think we are going to change it anymore now, as you have to put a stop to it at some point. But it does reflect something. The last show,

[*Showtime*] was such a show about making work, it was such a show about being a performer, it was a show about being away so much and being dislocated. Making *Pleasure* is kind of a reaction against that. It's like, what have I got? What do you want to see? What can I do for you? And I think a lot of the mood of *Pleasure* is about that. I think it is a very strong reaction to a very mixed and difficult and busy year.

RA: I think another thing to say about *Pleasure* is, when we started work on *Pleasure*, I think we all thought it was going to be a very different show from all of the other shows that we have made. And, one of the interesting things is that it turned out to be not such a very different show. I think it exposed a difficulty, within the company which is that the work is always a compromise, a complicated and difficult compromise between lots of people whose quite idiosyncratic desires and wants form a piece of theatre. I think it has been a good learning process for us to know that you can't just suddenly launch off into something entirely different and just expect it to just to be this radically different thing. We are always going to advance in tiny little grandmother-like footsteps, I think. Rather than in big jumps. It is not in our nature as a group of people to do that.

CM: Because you are some kind of democracy. You can only do those big leaps if you brought in a new director and you did what they said. And we wouldn't!

RA: And I do think it is how we make things as well, and you can't get away from it. It sure is a hell of a lot different than *Showtime*.

## On Risk and Investment

On Risk and Investment was written in May 1994 as a kind of public provocation, in response to an invitation from Alan Read, who was then head of the Talks Department at the ICA. He asked for a manifesto piece to be shared during Barclay's New Stages in a season of talks called 'The Seven Ages Of Performance' – a statement that might spur a discussion on an issue of concern in contemporary performance. I tried my best and wrote something that talked about risk and investment – the demand that performers and artists should be 'on the line' in what they do. The piece was recorded on video since I couldn't be at the ICA event, and I remember that in performing it I managed to hit a strident manifesto-like tone for the most of it, but couldn't help a smile at the end.

Investment is what happens when the performers before us seem bound up unspeakably with what they're doing – it seems to matter to them, it appears to hurt them or threatens to pleasure them, it seems to touch them, in some quiet and terrible way. Investment is the bottom line – without it nothing matters, and we don't see half enough of it. At a recent event I attended someone asked a performer what was going on in a certain part of the piece he'd been in – the performer replied, 'I don't know about that, ask the writer...'. That answer simply shouldn't be allowed.

Investment is the line of connection between performer and their text or their task. When it works it is private, and often on the very edge of words. Like all the best performance it is before us, but not for us.

This privacy of investment doesn't make a solipsistic work or a brick wall to shut the watchers out. Quite the opposite – investment draws us in. Something is happening – real and therefore risked – something seems to slip across from the private world to the public one – and the performers are 'left open' or 'left exposed'.

To be bound up with what you are doing, to be at risk in it, to be exposed by it. As performers we recognise but cannot always control these moments – they happen, perhaps, in spite of us.

Investment is slippery and evasive and it isn't often found where we'd expect it – personally I have no big regrets about that. Actors flying into passions, dancers hurling themselves to the ground, performers bravely taking stances on large issues or themes. All these are the sites for many embarrassments – embarrassments in which the public declamation of a big idea is not properly matched by a private investment. I ask: 'Are you bound up with this?' 'Or is it the shape of a passion and the noise of a politics?' 'Are you at risk in this?' That's all I want to know.

A student I taught in Leicester used to tell stories in my performance classes and they were inane and rambling, and they were of no consequence, and she was at risk in every one of them. Risk implicates me, I say 'I'm bound up with this too'. Politics came off of her stories without a hint of intention. And there are some people who can simply sit in a space or stand quite still in it and still be at risk, 'left open', leaving me open too. In the complicity of the performers with their task lies our own complicity – we are watching the people before us, not representing something but going through something. They lay their bodies on the line ... and we are transformed—not audience to a spectacle but witnesses to an event.

Risk and investment in the strangest places, slipping and hiding. Risk is the thing we are striving for in the performance but not a thing we can look for. We look for something else and hope (or pray to the gods we don't believe in) that risk shows up. We know it when we see it, I'm sure of that. Risk surprises us, always fleeting – we're slightly out of control. Investment drives all types of live work – the formal and the content-full, the cabaret and the high cultur-

al – laying waste to all distinctions. I don't care where we see it, but it's all too rare and it's the only thing we should care about.

Investment links to passion, politics and rage. It slips out in laughter, numbness, silence. Investment happens when we're hitting new ground, when we don't quite know, where we can't quite say, where we feel compromised, complicit, bound up, without recourse to an easy position. This is not the place for respectable or soap-box certainties – only live issues will do. Investment wants us naked, with slips and weaknesses, with the not-yet and never-to-be certain, with all that's in process, in flux, with all that isn't finished, with all that's unclear and therefore needs to be worked out. Don't give me anything less than this. Don't give me a truth that's more fixed, i.e., more of a stupid lie.

Investment comes when we're beaten so complex and so personal that we move beyond rhetorics into events.

Investment forces us to know that performative actions have real consequence beyond the performance arena. That when we do these unreal things in rooms, galleries and theatre spaces the real world will change. To me that's the greatest ambition and the truth of cultural practice – things can change, things can slip, things can move, because they're pushed (deliberately), because they're knocked, by accident. All that has to happen is that the direct lines of investment get drawn – between performers and task, between witnesses and performers.

Thinking of investment we ask: when this performance finishes will it matter? Where will it matter? Will the performer carry this with them tomorrow? In their sleep? In their psyche? Does this action, this performance, contain these people (and me) in some strange and perhaps unspeakable way?

I ask of each performance: will I carry this event with me tomorrow? Will it haunt me? Will it change you, will it change me, will it change things?

If not it was a waste of time.

## Play On: Collaboration and Process

This piece was written for and first presented at a seminar on play and performance in Leuven, Belgium in January 1998. The considerably expanded version here makes use of material I presented in Wolverhampton during a paper I gave there in 1995 on creative process and collaboration. The essay is a fragmented, speculative account of our own process, an anatomy of collaboration and an investigation of the role of play itself as a force of transformation, subversion and resistance.

### A WARNING

It is almost inevitable that in trying to write about play, I will write very often about death.

A memory. I saw a performance by a colleague of ours. She'd been collaborating with someone, a friend of hers, he'd been ill when they started – HIV – but after they showed the work some times in public he got very ill. He was in hospital and she used to go and work with him there – they taped a lot of stuff on video – he clearly wasn't going to get out again – they figured he could be in the piece, you know, on video. So by the time I saw the performance the guy was dead already. Not long dead – a month, probably, maybe even less. And F was trying to show the work in public for the first time since he died and she was dealing with her grief in the piece and it showed and someone said to me that really she should have been home in bed. It was brave and fucked-up. It was raw and sometimes it didn't make much sense. And it might even have been embarrassing except that death and loss hung over the piece so strongly you could never exactly dismiss it.

Anyway. One thing about it that really held a charge was the video material of the guy acting from his hospital bed. In these scenes he was dressed in some frivolous cape or costume, gesturing faintly, laughing, or he was moving round the hospital room, making some great long speech from the text, an IV drip on a wheeled trolley thing plugged into his arm, a cheap plastic crown on his head and a wooden sword in his other hand, his arm as thin as death. It was absurd. A background of medical machines. I can't tell you how beautiful that was. To see him so obviously close to dying and yet still committed to the act of pretending – to see him playing – to see him acting – to see him give life to some fictional part of himself – in the ruins of his body. I admired that – it was funny and a bit scary – I think I liked it because it was... resistant – I liked it that even as the real world of biology and material facts were catching up with him fast this person wasn't paying much heed – he was playing, changing the world in this (I want to say frivolous) way. But I don't mean frivolous.

My love –

It's not frivolous to challenge the hard logic of biology or material facts with the soft and mutable logics of play—play with its transformations, its power reversals, its illogics, its joys, its potential escapes...

It's not frivolous to think that even as we die we're creatures of fiction and pretending, that we're not simply 'facts' or biology, that we may not be contained by either. I don't think it is frivolous to insist that, even as one dies, one is multiple, playful, partial, strategic and indeed fictional.

I learned that from F, and from M, if I didn't know it already.

### SHOPPING

My son Miles (aged 4 at the time) is loading the bath with more and more ridiculous plastic items, dropping them into the water and on top of me – blue ducks, yellow guns, giant clocks, alligators, wind-up fish – asking 'do you want some more toys dad?'

An adult body, surrounded by the props and objects of children's play.

These last few years are those in which the bedroom has half-filled with strange animals and plastic figures, in which most of the stories I have read feature talking mice and animate trees and in which our late-night motorway journeys are soundtracked by the delights of ‘Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes’.

Years in which the rehearsal studio has come more and more to resemble Miles’s room – a playhouse: balloons, large inflatable hammers all from *Showtime* (1996) rehearsals, costumes for dressing up – as trees, as gorillas, as a horse, as a ghost, as a dog, as a thief...

Miles wanted to know if there was a shop you could go to if you were frightened of dying. He was scared to die and just wanted to know.

### PROCESS (1)

They had this unspoken agreement that no one would bring anything too completed to the process – a few scraps or fragments of text, an idea or two for action, a costume, an idea about space, a sketched-out piece of music – everything unfinished, distinctly incomplete – so there’d be more spaces for other things to fill in... more dots to join.

They talked about the way that half-demolished or half-built houses were the best places to play... so much incompleteness in the spaces, so much work (imaginative, playful, transformative) to be done. They liked this kind of mental space for themselves to work in, and they liked to leave some of it for the public too.

The process they used was chaotic, exploratory, blundering. A question of going into the rehearsal room and waiting for something to happen. Waiting for something that amused, scared, hurt, provoked or reduced one to hilarity.

A starting-point could be anything – a record, a second-hand suit of a particular kind, a list of different kinds of silence, two imaginary scenes from a soap opera, a blackboard, the gesture of someone they had seen in the street, a hasty construction of a space in which to work – any of these things could be a major clue, alone, or in some unexpected combination. It was important that no one did their homework too well – that no element of the theatrical language might substantially precede any other – so that any element could lead.

For years they couldn’t quite bring themselves to use the word ‘improvising’ – they’d call it messing about, having a bit of a run around in the space, playing around. In any case often the best of these ‘improvisations’ would start without anyone noticing – during lunch break perhaps when someone might get up and start messing about in the performance area – waving a gun maybe, trying out some text. Then someone else would join in and someone else, and someone else. Before long they’d be somewhere else too – pushing the material into unexpected territory. It seemed fitting that these good improvisations so often began in the blurred space between lunch break and performance, between the everyday and the fantastic.

Most recently they talked about ‘trying to get themselves into trouble’. An antidote to the skills and strategies they’d built up, a way of avoiding their own conventions... getting into trouble was something you achieved by working too hard and too late, through exhaustion, confusion, delirium, drink and the rest of it, by sticking to the ridiculous randomness of the process – ‘getting into trouble’, i.e., like pushing the work so you find yourselves in a territory beyond the one you know – by following a loose associative logic, by playing with no regard, in the first place, for sense.

### ‘NICE COP/NASTY COP’

For a few days they’d play almost without thinking, doing, well, whatever came to mind. Improvisations (they finally got used to the word) were long and relatively unstructured. The mood would be, well, ‘see what happens...’.

But after days of this the discoveries (or antics) of the week would be scrutinised. The videotapes of improvisations would be played back and discussed, and a process of interrogating the

material might begin. They'd ask the questions that were largely denied until this point: what is that doing there? What might that mean? What does this imply about structure? Would this work be sustainable as a 'show'? What is missing from it? What does it remind one of?... and they'd make demands of the material – for more sense (or less) for more joy (or less), for more pain (or less), for more intelligence (or less).

After a day or two of this kind of talk they'd go back to playing again. Forget what they'd just said. Or half forget about it. More days of play, more days of 'anything goes'.

Then back to questioning again.

This routine of nice cop/nasty cop, the tactic so beloved of interrogators the world over, kind of suited them too. It seemed a good way of teasing stuff from the unconscious and working it. But even playing nasty cop there was a certain lightness to the way they operated. To bring down a conceptual grid or frame onto what they were doing, but then to take it off again and replace it with another one. In this they were, at best, speculative and pragmatic. They had no dogma (or they tried to have none) – they were only interested in 'what worked' (what worked for them, in this place in history, culture and time). They tried not to get stuck in one logic – they tried to keep it moving, playful, nimble.

They talked about the difference between arriving at a decision and making a decision. The difference between coming to a decision and forcing one. They always preferred the former approaches – the meandering (with a strange certainty that you dare not trust) towards the things that they needed but could not name in advance.

The sign they lived by: 'You know it when you see it.'

1985

One night in the kitchen of the house where they lived on Langsen Road, one of them put his hands to his face and pretended to cry – a broken sobbing that was somehow very realistic. A couple of people were at the cooker – making dinner – they heard the noise and turned around, concerned – he sobbed a few more times, then took his hands down and smiled, soon they were all laughing.

After that there was always crying in the work, more or less – sometimes ludicrous cartoon-style weeping, sometimes soft and gentle sobs, sometimes foolish tears splashed out of water bottles.

Oh, and yes, there was quite often real crying in the kitchen too, and in bedrooms, and hotel rooms and in cars and in all of the other locations that God and capitalism saw fit to provide for the glorious movie of their lives.

Tears then. Between the real and the fictional.

PLAY (1)

Play as a state in which meaning is flux, in which possibility thrives, in which versions multiply in which the confines of what is real are blurred, buckled, broken. Play as endless transformation, transformation without end and never stillness. Would that be pure play?

Perhaps the closest they ever got to it was in *12am Awake & Looking Down* (1993).

There were five performers with a vast store of jumble – sale clothing and a pile of cardboard signs which bore the names of characters – real, imaginary, from fiction, from history – characters that came from the great crowd of some scrappy urban collective unconscious – a crowd containing FRANK (DRUNK), THE EX-WIFE OF THE EX-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, A BLOKE WHO'S JUST BEEN SHOT, A 9-YEAR-OLD SHEPHERD BOY, AN EU TRADE NEGOTIATOR, LEAH BETTS and A BOXER WITH A TORN RETINA.

By changing costumes and changing names the performers ventured endless possibilities for and of themselves, and the constant rearrangement of character, sings, costume and spatial

positions worked like a narrative kaleidoscope – throwing up stories, potential stories, meetings, potential meetings, coincidences...

JACK RUBY crosses the stage his hands under his coat as AN AIR STEWARDESS FORGETTING HER DIVORCE sits crying, wrapped in a towel... THE HYPNOTISED GIRL stares into space as A YOUNG WHITE RACIST ELECTRICAL ENGINEER makes a hasty Fascist salute ... ELVIS PRESLEY THE DEAD SINGER walks over the stage and AN ANGEL, SENT FROM HEAVEN TO THE EARTH stalks him, following ... and at the sides of the stage there were always further performers changing costumes, choosing signs, watching the action for an opportunity or a space.

Richard Foreman speaks about his pieces as ‘reverberation machines’. In the studio I would watch *12am* as a kind of endless coincidence machine – I would watch it for hours – unable to stop it somehow – always eager to see what it ‘threw up’ next, what they did next, what they thought of next... I was always gripped by the process of them playing – watching them think, watching them stuck, watching them try, watching them find ... the world is constant invention, constant flux.

And there were times when I would look at it and think this is terrible – this is just the empty fragments of 2,000 stupid stories colliding with each other – there’s no meaning in it, just the noise left in the machine of culture... and then FRANK (DRUNK) would take a curious look at BANQUO’S GHOST and meaning would happen, like electricity between two lovers who are kissing goodnight, car alarms ringing, and there’d be nothing I could do to stop that.

Between the meaningless and the very highly charged.

#### COLLABORATION (1)

Is collaboration this: the 12 years’ endless proximity to other people, physical, vocal, all day and into the night, watching people fade in and out of coherence and concentration – an intimacy that approaches that of lovers who now no longer bother to close the bathroom door whilst shitting? We are in the rehearsal space at 2AM still talking and arguing about how it works or doesn’t work and X is asleep on the floor, face up, mouth open, arms by his side while the remainder of us talk. When he wakes we will joke a little and continue. Change the furniture, clothes, haircuts and this scene could be any time this past decade. A sharedness that doesn’t have a name.

Or is collaboration this: a kind of complex game of consequences or Chinese whispers – a good way of confounding intentions?

If the process of direction in the theatre most usually has at its heart the interpretation of a text and the fixing of a set of meanings in it, the staging of one interpretation out of many possible ones – perhaps we had in mind something utterly different – theatre or performance as a space in which different visions, different sensibilities, different intentions could collide.

In an unpublished essay John Ashford, now head of The Place Theatre, once called experimental theatre ‘a compromised art... a mucky, mutable, dirty, competitive, collaborative business’, and we always liked the quote recognising in it the great mess of our own process but also appreciating the fine word compromise – no clean single visions in our work, no minimalist control freak authorial line – since by collaboration – impro, collage, the bringing together of diverse creativities – one gets an altogether messier world of competing actions, approaches and intentions.

What does Elizabeth LeCompte say somewhere about her work with The Wooster Group – about her job being to build the frame around the performers’ lives?

And once again: is collaboration just a good way of confounding intentions? I think so, and because I trust discoveries and accidents and I distrust intentions, I sit at the computer and I make a list of the misunderstandings and misrecognitions in our collaborative process, celebrating these above the instances of clear communication:

(1) I give instructions for impro to the performers but they are misheard – I have no idea what the people on-stage think they are doing – most of it is ridiculous but there is a moment that no one could have expected or predicted and it is wonderful.

(2) A performer tries something in impro but it is mis-seen or mis-recognised by the others on-stage – the others grab firmly on the wrong end of the stick and something brilliant happens.

(3) The composer mis-sees what we have done and writes music which we did not expect. I love it.

(4) I mis-see the performers – projecting onto them a narrative and intention which they do not have – for ages Terry is at the back of the space talking into the disconnected telephone as the impro continues around her. I have made up a whole story about who she is and what she is talking about but when the scene around her quiets down I can hear snatches of her talking and I am shocked to find that she is simply replaying a conversation with an accountant or a bank manager that she had some 10 minutes earlier on the real phone in the office:

‘Yes... I can understand your position, but I don’t accept that the delay is my problem or my responsibility... yes... yes... May 23 rd ... no ... ‘

I stare at her – unable to admit for ages that I was so completely wrong, but enjoying the revelation.

Collaboration then not as a kind of perfect understanding of the other bloke, but a mis-seeing, a mis-hearing, a deliberate lack of unity. And this fact of the collaborative process finding its echo in the work since on-stage what we see is not all one thing either – but rather a collision of fragments that don’t quite belong, fragments that mis-see and mis-hear each other. A kind of pure play in that too.

In *Hidden J* (1994) Richard as drunk git English bloke on his way back from a wedding; Cathy and Rob as gibberish speakers from war zone broken Europe; Claire sat at the front with this sign saying LIAR around her neck; Terry as frivolous narrator who can’t even decide what century all this happened in. None of them in the same show really, or the same world, battling it out for space and the right to speak or own what is happening—a piece of contradictory intentions, brutal fragmentation.

Collaboration for them then was never about perfect unity but about difference, collisions, incompatibilities.

#### EVERYBODY JOIN IN

A great rushing joy in the game of dying from our piece (*Let the Water Run its Course*) to the *Sea that Made the Promise* (1986) – four players – two large bottles of tomato ketchup for blood – and a soundtrack of bad American TV, cut up and channel-hopping fast, the channel hops sound like guns shots ...

The contest is to see who can act out the best movie deaths – the deaths getting ever more glorious, more bloody, more violent, more romantic – and the glee of the game was always infectious – like everyone watching just wanted to join in. There was a moment of hesitation for the performers – like, ‘Do I really have to get that revolting stuff all over me again?’ – but then they’d bite the imaginary bullet, get the first spray or great dollop of ketchup on them and then surrender sense, give in, abandon ... go all the way – throw themselves into it, pure glee.

#### EVERYBODY PAUSE

And then inside the game there would also be these moments of pause or reflection.

When the players would take a look at each other and think about what was happening. Thinking ‘what if this were real?’ or else ‘what are we really doing here?’

A flickering – between real time and play time – between the idea of action with no consequence and the fact of action that hurts.

And then back to the game again – doubled speed, gleeful commitment.

For them there were always these numerous semi-stops, hiccups, breaks in the flow of the performance, moments where one game stopped, broke, exploded, slipped into or behind another.

There were the kind of contemplative stops in *Let the Water...* where the players would cease their game for a moment and consider its consequences.

And there were the kind of strange interludes where people committed to one task for more or less a whole performance would give it up for a while and do something else.

All through *Showtime* Cathy pretended to be a dog – on her hands and knees in an old overcoat, with a ludicrous dog’s head mask (I can’t remember where we got it from – some crap costume hire place – the kind of costume no one else had ever hired). Anyhow, Cathy as this disruptive dog – ‘scampering’ and barking throughout all the other scenes – a truly unhelpful presence – and then at a certain point Claire decides to interview the dog – she sits down next to Cathy, asks her if she minds answering a few questions, she points the microphone to the dog and Cathy answers in her own voice ‘No, no, I don’t mind’.

And for a while Cathy talks and answers the questions and you can’t be sure if this is ‘Cathy’ or the ‘Dog’ that is meant to be answering. And then Claire says, at a certain point, ‘Cathy don’t you think its about time you took that dog’s head off now?’ and the dumb blank dog looks at us (questioningly) and Cathy’s hands come up and lift off the dog’s head and we see her face for the first time in the piece – must be about 50 minutes into it – and she’s sweating and still a little out of breath I think but the only thing that’s for certain is that, in the ruins of the dog game, she is more present than she ever could have been if she’d just walked onto the stage and sat down – Cathy is very here, and very now, very here and now, in the ruins of the Dog game she’s very present.

The game pauses and it’s like you need to see her take the dog’s head off in order to even begin to understand what it was, what it meant to pretend that dog for so long, like only now, when the head comes off and the game stops can you measure it, and as Cathy talks (death again: a long slow story about how she would commit suicide if she were going to do it) we measure the distance / difference between real and fictional, human and animal, real time and playtime...

A strange reassertion of the game; when she’s completed her long suicide story Cathy puts the dog’s head back on again. And remains as the ‘Dog’ for the rest of the performance.

## SIMON SAYS WATCH

In the ketchup/movie deaths game from *Let the water*, and in so many others they played on stage, there were always people watching as well as people doing. These figures stood looking on, assessing the performance of their colleagues, encouraging them, spurring them on, looking on with concern or bemusement, awaiting their own turns.

They loved this mixing of the hot and the cold – those doing and those watching – they loved this flickering, or this co-presence, this flickering of real time and play time.

They saw a tape of a James Brown encore routine in which Brown was down on his knees and out of his mind with emotion singing ‘Please, please pleaaaaaaase, pleeeeeeaaaaasse!’, whilst his minders-cum-trainers-cum-bodyguards were looking on in concern, like ‘James has really gone too far tonight ...’. And on the tape the minders tried to stop him, tapping him on the

shoulder as if to say ‘Come on, that’s enough, get back to the dressing room’ but Brown would not give it up and the minders were shaking their heads and Brown was sweating and shaking and screaming singing ‘Please, please pleaaaaaaase, pleeeeeaaaaaase!’ And of course he only seemed so very very into it because the guys behind him were so very very cool and distant, not into it at all.

Again, this hot and cold, this doing and watching from the stage.

### SIMON SAYS STOP

Perhaps the strangest moment of any of these games was when they stopped. Because in the stopping was always the time for measuring how far things had gone, how much the world had changed because of the game.

They were tempted to think of endings in performance as a kind of return – a point at which the travellers, sent out to discover things in a strange imaginary country, had finally come back. In shamanic performance this journey is taken as literal – performers sent out (or in or down) on a journey to the spirit world, a task that has real consequences, real dangers, a return that can bring real gifts. Performance then as going out, and coming back changed.

The audience-cum-witnesses want to measure the distance (or feel the proximity) between their world and the other. Listen: water dripping into the pool from the desolate gantries at the end of Impact Theatre and Russell Hoban’s extraordinary piece *The Carrier Frequency* – a portrait of a flooded world, postholocaust. After the piece has ended people somehow can’t resist the temptation to come and stick their fingers in the pool; testing the limits, as if the feel of the water on their fingers might take them that bit further to the place that they’ve just seen. Or the end of our own *Speak Bitterness* (1995) – where the audience often gather at the long long table to examine the text which is strewn all across it – were they really reading stuff from that? Is there anything we missed? Just how does it feel to stand here and look out?

### PINA BAUSCH

Performance as a way of going to another world and coming back with gifts.

For me, ending performance was always about crossing the line between worlds, or passing on the chance to cross it; refusing to come back. The five or six curtain calls closing Pina Bausch’s *Cafe Muller* which I saw in summer 93 were almost pure refusal. Here the gazes of the dancers (Bausch included) were as stern and distant and as lost in private pain as they had been throughout the performance – there was no returning in it, or only a nod to that, as though the image-world could not be quit, its psychic residue too strong.

Perhaps blurring, uncomfortable endings such as this one are the best – they stay with us, after all, and if Bausch’s dancers cannot leave off, cannot shrug off their journey, then somehow, neither can we.

Central to the charge of these difficult endings and at stake in all performance endings is the negotiation of *where* the events we have witnessed will have their consequence. In real or imaginary space? What will be the transfer? How will it take place? How and where will these things mean?

At a workshop presentation years ago I watched a performer remove all his clothes and stand motionless before us for a minute. As an action it meant next to nothing (too meaningful!) but the audible sighs of relief from the performer once he’d retreated to the dressing rooms (sighs on the edge of laughing and crying, sighs on the very edge of the performance itself) were as gripping as anything I’ve witnessed. Those sighs were the marking of the journey from the play-space to the real, inscribing consequence.

## PLAY (2)

Play is charged, it resonates, because it is a stupid dog (like the one in *Showtime*) worrying at the edges of what is real and what is not ... playing at the edges of what is real and what is not, disrupting the borders between the so-called real and the so-called fictional.

I wondered:

What game might you play using 2 men, a bottle of whisky, a blindfold and a gun?

What game might you play with a pile of jumble-sale clothing and a record slowed down to 16 rpm?

What game might you play with four women and a disconnected telephone?

Sometime when we're touring (now maybe, years ago maybe, impossible to say). Two people, whose names can't be mentioned, end up staying with people from the venue. They have to share a room. They aren't together but it isn't a problem. They get put in the kids' room—the kids must be away or something. They sit in the room talking – its very late already – bright painted walls, pictures, a mobile of clouds and space rockets. There are bunk beds. They end up fucking. The bed is too small. There are toys in it.

To be naked in this room is a strange thing. Sex in there is a kind of time travel. A loosening of the borders between what's real and what is not. Your body changes shape and size. They are watched by the toys.

Miles one night (years later?) couldn't sleep, he calls me in. He's very scared. He looks to the toys in the corner of the room and says 'Tigger and one of the rabbits are ignoring me' – I love it that what bothers him is not the life in these animals – they could be laughing, singing, dancing or whatever, he wouldn't mind – it's just that they're ignoring him.

Another time: again Miles can't sleep: he calls D into the room—he says the doors and handles of the cupboard are 'making him think that they are eyes and a nose'.

## LETTER

My darling,

We talk as if the real and the playful were separate. But we know that isn't true.

After *Psycho* the shower is not the same place. After the game we played endlessly one rainy Saturday afternoon, rushing in and out of the front room pretending to be monsters the house is not the same place...

A childhood memory – endlessly devising the rules and the systems of unplayable games. They had one game that was to be played all through the streets of the area where they lived. There were supposed to be two teams, each team was supposed to hide something – a matchbox – the other team had to find it. There was a crazed complicated system of clues and questions provided by each team. Their own plan was to hand the matchbox on a thread, down inside a drain by the side of the road. They even talked about ageing or dirtying the thread so it would not be visible... They talked about the game several times, always adding new rules, new locations through the streets, but obviously, never really got round to playing it.

At the same time a friend and I found an old butcher's chopping knife – a big ugly thing – too rusty to be sharp but quite suggestive of violence at least. We took the knife-thing to school in a polythene bag – we must have been 8 or 9 years old – and tried burying it in some bushes at the edge of the playground.

At the same time – playing in the newly built houses on the edge of the estates. Burying things in the foundations – pictures, objects, broken things. What might some archaeologist of the future make of these strange secreted offerings?

In all of these games there was perhaps one thing in common – the sense of the game as a secretive intervention in everyday life. Just to think – the same streets that people lived, loved and died on were to them the arena for these games. And after their games the streets were not simply safe or normal any more. The playground was a changed place with a large knife buried at its edges. The families that moved into the new houses suffered strange dreams, unwitting victims of the aimless voodoo practised by us.

Those games were rewriting the everyday. Quite simply: changing the world by any means necessary.

## NIGHTS

We had a similar approach when we were making *Nights in this City* (1995 and 1997) – a mischievous guided coach tour of Sheffield and then, in a second version, of Rotterdam.

In trying to determine the route for the coach in Rotterdam we are helped by many people who live and work there.

We start by asking them questions like: ‘Where is the tourist centre of the city?’ ‘Where is a rich neighbourhood?’ ‘Where is a poor neighbourhood?’ ‘Where is an industrial area?’

But these boring questions get the boring answers they probably deserve. We do not find what we are looking for. We switch to another tactic. Richard and Claire are talking to one of our helpers. They ask her:

If you had killed someone and had to dump the body where would you take it?

If you had to say goodbye to a lover where in this city would you most like to do it?

Where in this city might be the best place for a spaceship of aliens to land?

This is what you might call *our* geography.

We think of this project like a strange writing onto the city – a playful and poetic reinvention – like you can take the city and project on top of it using words – of course the text contains hardly any facts about the city – it’s not an official tour in that sense – it’s much more playful. We are driving the streets of Rotterdam and pretending that it is Paris.

What’s the quote of Baron Munchausen that Terry Gilliam uses in his film? the Baron’s motto, or his favourite saying – OUT OF LYING TO THE TRUTH – that could very well be our strategy here.

Rewriting the everyday.

## PROCESS (2)

Peggy– You talked at one point about artists themselves needing to fall into (or for) their work, (or into the territory of their work, beyond their initial agendas) – to let it take them somewhere unknown, to surrender to that, or to respect that, to go with the work to a new place – an ethical need. That made me smile because we’ve long asked ourselves, when working on performance projects, having amassed some material by random collection and impro and accident and intention, and having worked with it a little, we have long asked ourselves the question: ‘What does it want?’ ‘What does it need?’ Anthropomorphising the work as if it had desires of its own. As if the fragments of the work in this early stage are a note (for Alice) saying ‘follow me’.

Friends have sometimes reminded us that it is really our desires we ought to be considering and not those of a dubious non-existent entity – and we laugh with them at our deferral/projection to this ‘it’ but at the same time we know there is also an ‘it’ – a collection of objects, texts and fragments which resonate in certain ways (in particular circumstances, personal, historical, cultural) – and which in combination really do (I think) make demands, demands that have to be heeded if the work is to be worth making and sharing.

## COLLABORATION (2)

Is collaboration this: four people in the room drunk and tired, treading again through an argument about the structure of the show, an argument which we've already had 100 times in the last week and for which all of us, by now, know all of the parts and yet are always coming back in circuits to the same stalemate stand-off conclusions about how and why the show does not work and will not work? There is a word for these too familiar arguments – we call them the loop, arguments that soon are shorthand and can be indicated simply with a gesture: the circling of a hand.

Yes, someone says, it should really work like that. But the thing is, when Claire stands there we have no way of knowing what the fuck is going on. It can't just happen.

So we have to go into a text. That'll help.

But we tried a text there (three weeks ago) and I can tell you it doesn't work. Yes that's right. A text can't help. Claire just has to stand there.

But the thing is, when Claire stands there we have no way of knowing what the fuck is going on. It can't just happen... (etc.)

And now we're into the loop. For every group a process, and for every project a loop. Maybe collaboration is simply the process of developing new words for the strange situations in which a group can find itself.

The loop is the heart of the show, a wall you hit your heads against until you are senseless, gibbering and tired of it, tired of it, tired of it. And strangely it seems sometimes that the worst thing of all is that the loop must be tackled in public, with the group, through speech, discussion. So many times in the process I begin to envy the solitude of writers and painters – who surely have their loops but at least aren't condemned to sit up forever and talk about them. Worse than Beckett, worse than Sartre. After two months of working on the show I can chant you the loops in my sleep.

## DRAWING IN

Cathy's long suicide story in *Showtime* comes right after she has removed the dog's head. Claire asks her, if she *were* going to commit suicide, how exactly she would chose to do so. The answer draws the audience in softly – a long and intimate pornography of detail; of running the bath, and of lying in it to watch some TV; of listening to a favourite song, of sticking her toes into the taps, of listing her favourite people, favourite books and favourite places, and of waiting for the electric bar fire to glow a perfect orange before lifting it up and dropping it into the water where she lies ...

When Cathy has finished Claire tells her 'Thank you', and at that point Terry – dressed as a pantomime tree, and coming straight out of 10 minutes' stillness – makes her outburst. From inside her absurd brown-painted cardboard costume – a cylinder with stupid holes for arms and eyes – she yells at the audience, gesticulating like a psychopath, thick with vehemence, breaking the mood:

'What the fuck are you looking at? What the fuck is your problem? Fuck off! Voyeurs! There's a fucking fine line and you've just crossed it. Where's your human decency? Call yourselves human beings? Why don't you fuck off, piss off, cock off, wankers, voyeurs. Fuck off. Go on, pick up your things, pick up your coats and your fucking bags and bugger off just fucking cocking bugging wank off...'

They had this game with the audience, that's for sure. A game of drawing them in and pushing them away.

Like your presence at this event had to cost something.

## CLAIRE

Claire takes her seat at the start of *Hidden J*. She comes out before the audience on her own. She's first out. She takes the cardboard sign which is lying on the chair – she puts it round her neck, it says: LIAR.

She settles in her seat. Looks those watching in the eyes.

It's hard to look at her, since in looking you contribute to her shaming. Like Claire fell victim to some backstage dispute in the company – they sent her out here to be humiliated for a while before the piece really starts. Soon the others come out – they start building the set. Claire is in position like she is holding the fort, bearing the weight of the audience's attention, but all she may do is sit there and suffer their gaze. To be in the audience here is, simply, to objectify and humiliate Claire. She sits there for most of the piece. Our watching is never without a kind of ethical problem.

## GO TOO FAR

In *Club of No Regrets* (1994) – Robin and Cathy bound and gagged with industrial tape near the beginning – the actor/hostages that will enact this evening's spectacle. Cathy and Richard as their brutal captors come clumsy don't-give-a-shit stagehands – they point toy guns at the hostages' heads, look to the audience as if to say 'What shall we do with these two... how far would you like us to take them tonight...'

In previews through the summer of 1995 we had friends tell us again and again that they liked the work, they liked the violence and extremity of the piece, they liked it but they wanted more. We should go further. They wanted more.

The chairs routine was already dangerous. It was before we had the rubber floor and the studio floor was lethal once wet. We hadn't even worked out how to do the taping-up properly so sometimes people got taped in such a way as they couldn't protect themselves when falling. Most often when supposedly watching that section I couldn't even look. I remember D coming in to watch it one time, the only person I recall saying, 'Really, why are you doing this to each other...'. She was probably crying.

But everyone else wanted more.

What is it about those human persons who, as Richard says in *Showtime*, 'Like to sit in the dark and watch other people do it'?

People (like me and maybe you) who will pay money to sit down and watch others act things out, pay money to see pretending. And people (like me, and maybe you) who want to see more pain than anything else. The death scene. The crisis. The agony. The anger. The grief. Done convincingly, done with distance or irony, but done none the less.

And if the performers sometimes stop and ask themselves, in the middle of the game, 'What is this, really?' No surprise that the work will sometimes turn on its audience and ask them, simply, 'What was it that you wanted to see?' 'What did you demand?' 'What was it that you wished for when you came inside tonight?'

One time when they showed the durational *Speak Bitterness* (six hours of confessions from behind the long table, with an audience that was free to come and to go at any point) – it was Amsterdam – the audience came in at the beginning and then, to their horror, more or less, hardly anybody left. After two hours they were pretty well out of material. They were making things up, inventing frantically, shifting the tone around as if somehow they might figure out what these people needed, what they wanted, what for them would be enough. It was desperate, slipping into hysterical humour very often. A small space – so small you could count the audience, you could see every move they made. He remembered an endlessness of eye contact, of enquiry from him to them – and in the end all he was thinking was, 'What do you want,

what do you want, why don't you leave us ... there's no release in this...? It became the most fascinating night. Truly fantastic.

Afterwards he talked to some people from the audience. This guy said:

I felt I got to see you all for the performers you would like to be, and for the performers that you really are and for the people you would like to be and for the people that you really are...

And with that he realised – the desire, really, was for nakedness, defencelessness. An exposure that does not have a name. Something beyond.

### TEASING

They had this game with the audience, that's for sure. A game of drawing them in and pushing them away. Teasing them with meaning, teasing them with narrators and central figures who would appear to be helpful but who would really say little to guide them through the mess.

Teasing them with certainties that would collapse. Teasing them with chaos, preposterous ineptitude.

Teasing, teasing. The kind of teasing that a confident audience would love and respect.

Did I tell you that account I read of hippies in Haight Ashbury – in the late 60s – they were so fed up with the coach loads of tourists gawking, staring from the windows of their buses that they took to carrying mirrors – when a bus full of tourists would go by the hippies would take out their mirrors and hold them up to the buses – asking the people on board to simply look at themselves.

What was it you wanted to see?

Did you dream of a looking that had no consequence, no ethical bind, no power inherent in it, no cost?

You won't find that here.

### YOU PLAY WITH WHAT SCARES YOU

Watching Richard holding Robin in *Showtime* rehearsals, the lurid guts (a can of Heinz Spaghetti tipped into his hand and clutched to his belly) oozing out of Robin, Robin dying.

It was the same summer that Richard's brother drowned. I mean it was only a few weeks before that Richard's brother had died and Richard was already back in rehearsals and now he was just holding Robin leaning against the blue and red kids' playhouse that was a part of the set, holding him, watching him saying nothing, trying to comfort him unable to speak as Robin played this big stupid death scene.

It must have been apparent at some moment that Richard was going to spend whole sections of the show holding Robin like that, in the way that he hadn't been able to hold Chris. I don't think we ever talked about it. Not much anyway. I think we all knew what it was. And we dedicated the show to Chris in a very quiet way.

You play with what scares you and you play with what you need.

At the end of the same show Richard with a time bomb strapped to his chest, making wishes, waiting for it to go off – things he'd like to have done, goodbyes he would like to have said... Waiting to die.

You play with what scares you and you play with what you need.

Antwerp 1998. I ask the women that I'm working with to write death threats – the kind of thing you could leave on an answer-phone – invasive, vicious, unsettling – the kind of thing that makes a house feel poisoned or unsafe. They start writing – they look puzzled at first, hunched over notepads, then after a time the first one starts smiling – this glee that she has thought of something really unspeakable and vile. Then the next one starts smiling, laughing

almost, a similar feeling – there are curious looks passing between them. They hunch closer over the papers. A strange exam.

Later I ask them to play the death threats into the disconnected phone I've placed in the centre of the performance space. They come up one by one, a little nervously and then read from their papers – picking up the phone and spouting viscous vile threats, rape threats, burglary threats, I'm-watching-you-from-under-the-table messages – a festival of invasion. And as each one takes a turn to come forwards and leave their messages the reactions from the others swing wildly – from nervous laughter, to silent horror, to expressions of disgust (that one went too far, that's too much) and back to fascinated staring, to laughter again – switching between these things ...

Afterwards we talk about this strange game of scaring each other – of tapping into fear. We notice that all of them, by implication, cast themselves as men whilst leaving their messages, cast themselves, in effect, as their own victims – not a part of my instructions.

Playing as a game of sitting in the house with all the lights switched out at midnight, just to prove that you can do it.

Or the game Michael used to play with his sister – playing their parents' record collection at 16 rpm in part to guess the tunes, but more just to frighten each other with the devil voices and from-hell tunes they told each other they could hear. You play with what scares you.

### THREE LETTERS

Dear Miles,

When I faxed you several times from America it was around the time of your 4th birthday and I mostly sent stories – stories about you, imaginary exploits, pirates, goodies and baddies, super heroes, transformations, magic.

Then one time I decided to write you a letter saying what exactly we had been doing – performing a show, going to a party all night, staying up to see the sunrise from a hill called Twin Peaks. Mad drunken dawn. I liked sharing this with you – in language I thought you might just understand – strange sights and excitements, adventures in a way – but when we spoke a few days later on the phone you asked me only 'why wasn't it a story?'

You wanted fiction.

I'm not sure what stories are now. Are they a means of escaping? Or of learning? Or of organising the world? A way of projecting oneself into imaginary victory and pain.

Miles – how come the stories you like are all about victory – how come the goodies always have to win? Miles – how come the stories you love always end with bedtime, or a birthday meal, or the violent and comical defeat of the villains, or a final coming home? Because you're building yourself?

Miles – How come the stories I like are falling to pieces – stories scarcely worthy of that name. In them the world is badly organised, in them an ending is something that wants to happen but cannot, in them good isn't easily told from bad, in them the world aches and goes on aching. How come the stories we in Forced Entertainment love are built on shifting sand and made of channel-hopping? Because we've been in the world a little longer than you? Perhaps, perhaps. I don't know.

I am thinking of you. Tim.

Dear Miles,

I'm sorry for firing so many questions at you in that letter before. I didn't mean to. Next time I'll just send a story.

Best wishes – Tim

Dear Miles,

There was once a woman who gave birth to two daughters, and brought them up alone, far from everything. For twelve years she kept the truth of the world from them, sparing them all of the unpleasant things that might spoil their childhood, and then on their 12th birthdays she sat them all down and told them everything ... she told them about darkness and the things that happen in it, she revealed the truth about the false-nose gunman, about the cellar and the shapes that lived in it, about codes and signs of regret, she told them about economies of scale and diseconomies of scale, she told them how the past lives on in the present, she told them about ghosts, about sexual pleasure and how it is obtained, she told them stories of entrapment and enchantment, she taught them to count in numbers, she taught them bad words and good words and she spared them nothing.

It took her a whole night to tell them, through the dark and into the fleeting hours of morning, she told them about ships at sea which encounter ice, about the boiling point of blood and the breaking point of bones, she told them about stories and what their uses were, she told them how to hurt people, and how people got hurt. She revealed the true law of desire.

She taught the meaning of the words ‘uncanny’ and ‘impossible’, she told them about Nixon and the strange quiet that sometimes falls in the middle of a big city, she taught them Truth Dare Kiss and Panic, she told them about game shows about sky and sea, about telephone wires, about noises and voices, and how men and women really die.

Thinking of you. Tim.

### PROCESS (3)

Watching back the video-tapes. Checking to see what happened in some improvisation or another, trying to register exact combinations, coincidences, structures. So that the spur-of-the-moment games and accidents could (later) be transcribed and re-presented.

They often wondered what making the work had been like before the video camera, but, try as hard as they might they could not remember. It was a constant companion to them and the store cupboards filled up with crudely logged, half-incomprehensible tapes.

Some days they ran out of blank video-tape. No one could be bothered to walk into town to buy fresh supplies. They’d go to the cupboard and select an old tape from the unofficial archive – how about *Emanuelle* (1992) number 22? – may as well tape over that – sure – another gap in the history... another story getting more and more provisional, fragmented.

### SIMON SAYS GO TOO FAR

In any game there was always the pull to the edges. That question of ‘What’s the furthest you can go inside the structure of this game?’ or ‘What would a rule break consist of here?’ or simply ‘How far could one go with this?’ or ‘How can we collapse this?’

So in *Hidden J* the pretty game of opening and closing the curtains of the tiny house centre-stage gave rise in the end to a whole section of the piece performed in private and obscured from the audience – where only the sound of Cathy’s volatile emotional phone calls in a made-up foreign language could be heard from just behind those curtains – a six or seven minute harangue of hysteria in which all one could see was the other performers, nervous, bored, distracted, waiting for her to stop, considering the awful sound of what she was doing... and their inability to see it.

Go too far. Go too far. So that in the game of playing dead, in the end two of them go down and stay down for 15 minutes. Not playing at all, or playing too much.

Go too far, go too far. The scenes repeated in Club of No Regrets getting faster and faster, the clumsy special effects of blood and smoke and water and leaves getting piled on the scene like a storm.

Isn't that the constant frustration for play? That it isn't real?

No surprise then that play always dreams of its other. The thing has aspirations.

Go too far, go too far. More storm. More storm. More storm.

So that there were always some players who don't know when to stop. Who'd be left out there in fiction or in play, getting too involved in it, getting confused. Remember Dennis Hopper's character in *The Last Movie* – a minor actor who stays behind in a Mexican town where a film crew have been shooting a western – the locals get into the whole movie thing – they want to play too – they build cameras and film lights from wood and string – they want to stage gunfights, fist fights – but they don't understand about pulling the punches – people get hurt, they want Hopper to teach them, they want, they want, they want someone to die.

And the stories of Hopper making the movie. Sam Fuller (or someone) going down to see him on-set-the cabins deserted, finding Hopper tripping naked in the woods, with a gun... out of control.

Go too far, go too far.

Cathy yelling and yelling the longest list of confessions in *Speak Bitterness* – 'we shouted for so long it didn't even sound like our own voices anymore ...' Her yelling like ice being poured right down your spine. 'We never never never wanted kids anyway.' Not even a fucking game any more.

Richard in impro for *Pleasure* (1997). Claire lying 'dead' on the ground in front of him. He covers her head with a jacket, then pulls her underpants off. Sits staring at her cunt.

Not even a game anymore.

Go too far. Go too far. Go too far.

Edges of the game – where it comes back to the real. Back to blank facts.

The material. What is, here. Now.

The game is in dialogue with the now. It cannot escape it.

A room in Antwerp. Laptop and MTV. Words. Voices.

Stillness.

Game over.

# Goat Island & Matthew Goulish

## Letter to a Young Practitioner :

from Goat Island

CJ Mitchell, Bryan Saner, Karen Christopher,

Mark Jeffery, Matthew Goulish, Lin Hixson

To a Young Practitioner,

“In this present period of unemployment, you can render a high service to your own community, and to the whole country, by co-operating with all movements to accelerate building constructions, especially of family dwellings, new roads and local and state public works. These measures will provide employment, enlarge buying power, increase the circulation of money, create markets for farms and factories, and assure prosperity and contented homes.”

I found this text during a Goat Island workshop, on a research visit to the Elks Memorial Building at the corner of Diversey and Sheridan in Chicago. It was one of a series of texts, images, sounds, and associations collected on the trip, which later served as a resource for a collaborative performance. Instructions for collecting materials on that research trip included finding: 1. a gigantic detail; and 2. an echo from two different constructional forms, examples being a wall/painting – or ornament/furniture.

Friends unfamiliar with Goat Island’s performances ask me what they do, and I tell them: they use text, but not to tell a standard theatrical narrative or story; and they use movement, though it’s not what you would expect by the term “dance”. And combining those texts and movements creates something beyond those individual components of text and movement, and the best word we have for that is “performance”.

Bryan has said, “we practice creative research and assembly.” Lin sees “research as an agent from the outside that transforms the material within; that brings nutrients to the digestion of our personal, individual experiences.”

Goat Island’s performance work is developed collaboratively, a model also adopted when teaching their workshops. Divisions between individuals, and ideas of authorship are blurred – through this we see that the creative material connects to others, and is completed by them. The emphasis is on process, systems, structure, research tools for creation. Use what is around you, approach it with fresh eyes and ears: use the other workshop participants, Goat Island, the room you’re in, the building, the city - other bodies. Use your memory as a resource - mental recall, body recall – not as route to nostalgia or therapy, not necessarily to tell your story, but to tell a wider narrative which reveals the extent to which your body already contains a wider narrative. Critical evaluation is transformed into the need to respond creatively. The work exists in the moment, vital, perhaps not yet even assimilated or understood by the artists who made it. Give up what seems important to you; it’s not yours. Think formally and then thematically. Not analyzing material to find its meaning, but accumulating material, finding unexpected connections.

We are already participating in a Goat Island workshop. Collaborating through words, sounds, touch, texture, viewing, thinking. The material is there to be received, processed, transformed. Keep a journal observing the incidence of the color yellow. Memorize the street names between Monroe and Belmont: how many streets is that? – the geography traversed almost daily, let’s look at this a different way.

And in ten years you will find yourself living in San Francisco, writing a letter, which says: “CJ refuses to believe in the existence of the absolute. I have found it.” And you will mail this letter to the person who, ten years earlier, wore your left black leather glove at the same time you wore your right black leather glove.

This is not everything I have to say, but this is all the time / for all we’ve experienced together. I would like to review a few thoughts now; lessons if you will. There are seven of them that I thought of specifically as it pertains to collaboration.

#### #1. REMEMBER OTHER PEOPLE.

Love them, hate them, give them gifts, steal their ideas, but focus on others to get out of your self. These other people will be your co-workers of course but also your audience and also those who have nothing to do with you or your art or your lifestyle. By all this, we mean, remember that there are people who live outside the art world. And we like to remember these because there is more to life than art. And we like to remember these because there is hunger and injustice outside. And we like to remember these because we want to communicate with other worlds of thought.

If you have someone that you can work with, make a commitment and work through the differences. Make a commitment to supplement the gaps with your own contributions. Pay no attention to those who will tell you not to work with your friends. It is an insurmountable work to be an artist. It is shallow to rely on your own energy. Ideas like to be cross fertilized. The bonding that happens between artists working together produces an integrity that reads into the work ... is visible in the work ... communicates to the audience and viewer.

#### #2. BEWARE OF BRILLIANCE.

Creativity and genius will only take you so far. They might be of little importance. Beware of these gifts if you have them. Be ware of these gifts if you see them in those you collaborate with. Look for a sense of humor. Look for conflict resolution skills, forgiveness, the ability to listen, the ability to place faith in other people’s fragmented ideas, a comfortability with failure, a disciplined nature and a love of work.

#### #3. MAKE SMALL PLANS.

Temper your big dreams. Dream the smallest thing you can think of and try to perfect that. It’s good to have one tiny perfect thing in your history. This is not a small challenge there are infinite details to perfect in a small venture and the changes force themselves in, expanding the vision. I feel that my eyes have become sharper in seeing small things since I have been working with Goat Island. As a child I studied in a one room school house and the first word I learned to read was “LOOK.” My vision for a classroom would be an empty room save a table a chair and a microscope.

#### #4. VALUE THE WORK OF YOUR HANDS AND BODY.

This physical body is the meeting place of worlds. Spiritual, social, political, emotional, intellectual worlds are all interpreted through this physical body. When we work with our hands and body to create art or simply to project an idea from within, we imprint the product with a sweat signature, the glisten and odor which only the physical body can produce. These are the by-products of the meeting of worlds through the physical body. It is visible evidence of the work and effort to move from conception to production. Our bodies are both art elements and tools that communicate intuitively.

**#5. WORK SLOWLY.**

This follows quickly after the last lesson about the physical body. It takes lots of time to work by hand, but this time input is a distinctive trade mark. The old world crafts people made things. We think they are valuable not because of their content but because of the time signature of the work. Their bodies were not more capable than ours to join wood or carve stone or create paintings or make dances; in fact, it is possible that the physical body is more capable today than it was hundreds of years ago. But a possible advantage the old world did have was a different concept of time. Perhaps they were more at ease with the passage of time. It was acceptable for them to take years to finish a work of art. We would advise you to look for long periods of time at your project. Maybe put it away, forget about it, bring it back years later finish it after you have become a different person.

**#6. LEARN TO SAY NO.**

This follows quickly after the last lesson about working slowly. If you work slowly you will not have time for every project that will be presented to you so you will pass up creative opportunities. It's easier to say no when you are older, But while you are still young you might not have many opportunities of a lifetime being offered to you and it will be hard for you to say no. But I think the chance of a lifetime comes quite frequently to those who are looking. If you follow this advise you will definitely regret having said no to some great opportunity and you will learn to live with that regret, but in return, you will have time.

**#7. BE THANKFUL FOR YOUR FEARS.**

Add this to the others that have come / the day is still beginning.

Never take the same route, always vary your path.

Don't write with a slow pen get one that flows well.

See as a new eye, as a novice, as someone who isn't jaded by fixed notions.

Invent 7 ways to exit your chair.

Stand with the smile of a sad person. Mark the place where your soul lives.

Breath out through the nose like my grandmother's labored breathing. Life was heavy and hard and she lived long and did not believe she would die, no not that way.

She said: With my arms I don't think I could touch the sky.

Dive a hundred times into a harbor.

Fall into the grip of another.

Perform a whirling dance to purge the toxic spider venom.

Listen to me:

I heard the creaking rope of a rope bridge and the crashing of the ocean waves 100 feet below. I heard a thousand stones moved by a hundred feet grinding against each other like the gnashing of monumental teeth against mountainous bones. I saw a man climbing muddy down a rocky mountainside on hands and heels dragging his bottom along the slippery wet stones. I heard another man say "He's trying to get a bit of punishment for all his wrongdoing."

Move in place as seven body parts step in the same spot at least twice before you can make a new footprint. Breathe only once every fourteen moves.

All that my heart longs for, may you achieve, and be my accomplice.

Get your writing materials ready. Close your eyes.

Adjust your body so that you are sitting comfortably.

Take a deep breath. Let your shoulders relax.

Let your forehead relax.

I forgive you all the endless hours you were away.

Coming apart at the seams, I need to get a hold on things in my brain. There's a building coming down across the street. Men are turning the bricks and mortar to a fine silt with a huge machine and the dust shoots out into a pile.

Meanwhile in the building where I live the roof leaks and the landlord would not like to fix it. There are buckets in the attic that have to be emptied and when they are not, they overflow. The water pools around the ceiling fan. Yellow marks show where the rain went. Please oh please don't make me climb that rickety ladder to the attic. Don't make me lift down that bucket to empty its dirty leaky roof water.

The dust is everywhere and settling in my room.

But when, from a long distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone more fragile, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; hear unflinchingly in the tiny and almost imperceptible drop of their essence the vast structure of recollection.

Memorize to perform. Perform to remember.

When is the sky lavender and the sea slate hard and flat and not much like water?

In the mornings the sky over the lake is white or pale blue and the water like metal deflecting the sun.

In the afternoon and early evening the sky and water are shimmery shades of perfect blue.

In bad weather it is all a mud gray with the cold and stormy.

What time is it when the sky is lavender and the sea slate, hard as a piece of rock and twice as silent?

You are probably wondering / how does one come to or reach this place of a young practitioner? I still consider myself a young practitioner, and am now trying to decide when writing this letter, with the thoughts that are in my head of when one enters this transition. What is the counter point of a practicing artist to that of the training or discipline one enters into to reach this certain place?

In 1994, I graduated from art school but previously to this time I was within the guise of preparing, preparing to be where I can situate myself now.

In the context of background, we are informing ourselves through what we have learnt along the many interruptions and decisions we have reached until the point at which we can be decisive to be a practitioner, within the particular field of the arts we have chosen.

I am still at this point of preparing now, paying close attention to all the details and information that encircles me. I still have a desire and need to learn what is placed in front of oneself and others around.

In an exercise on departure during a Goat Island workshop last summer, I was given a white sheet of paper from a participant with a single word written on it. The word was openness. We asked each participant to take the single words given to them as a gesture of a gift to take with them, and possibly guide and incorporate into their lives throughout the year.

Openness is now bluetacked onto the wall next to my work desk at home. This single word I have taken into and incorporated into my daily life both private and public.

The act of receiving, and the acceptance of a gift is an important philosophy I adhere to, especially in the practice of one's artwork. Through receiving one can attach many different levels, how to be influenced, to take on others thoughts as presents and reinterrupt into your mind and body. Once the digestion of the gift has been articulated in oneself then we begin to understand the nature and the power of sharing. Taking forward the information given. This

idea of ownership becomes a wider participation, and one of interaction and creativity with others.

Roger Bourke, conceptual Installation artist and teacher on my art degree course once told me in a tutorial to firstly stop, then look and most importantly listen and be patient with your work. Do not rush, allow us the viewer to see what you are making. Be confident and allow the material to come to you, begin to see with different eyes and learn the value of listening, the silence of yourself and others.

In hearing these words of guidance it allowed for confidence to build. The display and act of mentoring and listening is a large part of my teaching and arts practice. To create a space where seeing and hearing is an integral and pivotal role in how to be understood and acknowledged. As a young practitioner it is your decision whom you wish to take from and be influenced by. Choose wisely. Identify possible situations you wouldn't normally come into contact with. Allow for a great deal of care and in return it's own saturation to take you forward in confidence and articulation.

Be open to new discoveries. Being excited by the many languages you are able to learn and create / you understand who you are.

You understand who you could be.

You understand the gap between the two.

Sometimes, you close the gap.

You become who you might be.

You experience this for a moment.

What if we call that moment: "the classroom"?

I am talking nonsense, I know.

But I have had enough of the rules.

How straight the path, and how strict.

This you must do; this you must not.

That explains why we repeat the same thing over and over again.

Why we see so many animated features starring heroic mice.

Ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night, will that ever be your homework?

Or might this be your homework?

1. Describe the largest thing.
2. Describe the difference between green and yellow.
3. Describe something rough.
4. What is 62°F?
5. What weighs 4 pounds 6 ounces?
6. What is shaped like a hand?
7. What can you lift?
8. What is the opposite of music?
9. Describe a perfume.
10. Describe a delicacy.
11. What unbalances?

Take as much time as you need.

Strain the machine.

Never think yourself singular.

Absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly.

Don't labor under the burden of importance.

Don't use up all your energy chasing the dollar.

There are children in America who haven't learned how to play.

They sit immobilized.

There they go, strapped into cars, into videogames, approaching their imprisonable years.

The municipality has removed their sidewalks.

Concentrate.

Do one thing at a time.

Never grow tired.

Because what if we call that moment: "the performance"?

I saw a dance, or a comedy.

It was an act, people I did not know, doing things I did not understand.

Yet I felt I knew them, and I felt I understood.

And as I left the theater – I was exactly as old as you are now – I saw everything reel, as one does when one falls from a horse or bicycle, and I asked myself whether there was not an existence altogether different from the one I knew, in direct contradiction to it, but itself the real one, which, being suddenly revealed to me, filled me with that hesitation which sculptors, in representing the Last Judgment, have given to the

awakened dead who find themselves at the gates of the next world.

I knew then that I had a place, and that I had found it.

I will love the experience longer than the rest because I have taken longer to get to love it.

You must forgive me...I have been unwell all this time.

I am not yet well, writing comes hard to me, and so you must take these few lines for more.

My hand is tired.

I think of you often, and with such concentrated wishes that that in itself really ought to help you somehow.

Whether this letter can really be a help, I often doubt.

But what if we call that moment: "the right now"?

Prepare ourselves not for the world as it is, but for the world as it might become.

In this preparation, we experience this world as it becomes that one, for a moment.

For now / I cannot speak without hearing your voice. Your voice sits inside my voice and then again your voice sits outside my voice. Here is my voice. I exist. But I exist does not come before we exist. You switch on twelve mechanical birds, start them chirping, read me directions to a ghost town while a woman walks by in a grass dress. You kick my imagination into the air like a particle of dust and it floats. But it's airborne with your imagination. Eventually, the two settle together on the floor, indistinguishable.

I cannot teach without you teaching me.

I will tell you what I've been thinking lately. And listen for your response carried by lines of air. I have been thinking

One does not always want to be thinking in the future, if as sometimes happens, one is living in the present.

At twenty, I expected in the coming years to live the life of an artist. Having had artist friends in high school who jumped chain-linked fences to swim in swimming pools late at night when the gates were locked while I was trying unsuccessfully to fake an injury to remove myself from the agony of cheerleading at night games; and having painted paintings in a college art studio with skylights, where I spent afternoons discussing my paintings with Professor Thompson who sat in the corner of the room with a free standing ashtray at his elbow flicking a long-ashed cigarette into it as he told me to observe the beauty when I turned my paintings upside down and on their sides; having had these experiences I had a pretty romantic idea of the life of an artist. I was not prepared for what followed – researching pooper-scoopers, toys, and ear plugs for a patent office and delivering plate after plate of French toast to craving Los Angeles customers, leaving only fractions of night-time to make art. I did it by pooling my energy with others so that together we had enough usable heat to make a performance. But then, I saw the work of Pina Bausch, Tadeuz Kantor, and Tadashi Suzuki. I needed to work harder, much harder. These artists did not stop where I stopped. They kept moving. And they ran so far that the distance covered in their performances, caught me up and overtook me. The only way I could make work of this distance was by taking time. I moved to Chicago and found collaborators who were not in a hurry. I rested in each moment with the process and the moments accumulated. It was almost mundane. Mundane in the sense of a plodding ordinari-ness, a daily step taking of one and half to two years, to make a work. But also mundane in the sense of 17th century astrology when the word pertained to the horizon - that visible line of the in-between; between the two, of time to come and time elapsed. The final performances, when finished, had a rigour I liked. No one told me about this methodical, caught-in-the-moment beauty.

All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one-thing melts in another, until taxis are dancing with the daffodils.

Yours,  
 CJ  
 Bryan  
 Karen  
 Mark  
 Matthew  
 and Lin

#### NOTES

The members of Goat Island wrote Letter to a Young Practitioner collaboratively, and delivered it for the first time at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago on March 16, 2000.

The text has been published in Goat Island’s *Schoolbook 2*, and *Theatre in Crisis?*, edited by Maria M Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester University Press, 2002).

/ marks the transition from one author-reader to the next. The authors-readers progressed in the order, determined by chance, in which their names appear at the end.

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# Anne Bogart & Tadishi Suzuki

## I don't have a vision. I have values.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE BOGART

by Daniel Mufson

I spoke with Anne Bogart at the festival that the Actors Theatre of Louisville had in her honor in 1995. Looking back, one can see that Bogart was one of the early critics of America's obsession with technology, but equally important are the statements she made about her process and her plans for the future.

*DM A critic at the Actors Theatre of Louisville celebration of your work [in 1995] pointed out that every time he had seen The Medium, he discerned a progressively stronger point of view, a feeling of a statement that the piece was making against technology. This struck him as a contrast to what you, and also Paula Vogel, had said about the multiplicity of meanings that ought to be available in viewing a piece. Is there a contradiction?*

AB There were two things that kept that piece from having a clear message. First, I have ambivalent feelings about technology. I'm on e-mail, and I'm into computers, and I'm interested in innovations and technology. It was not my intention to say technology is bad, or that we shouldn't embrace technology. Second, the piece was put together pluralistically, meaning that the text is not only from McLuhan— all over his work—but also from pop magazines and writings on the effect of technology on people.

But over the two years since we made *The Medium*, the subject has come into the popular consciousness. What we're saying becomes more important because people are recognizing the message more. I've always felt proud to be saying those things—not to say technology is bad, but that, as McLuhan would say, there is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening. And something that a theater piece like that can do is to contemplate and say, "This is happening to us, look at what is happening to us." That's what I get a thrill out of saying. And I don't think that's the same as saying, "This is what you have to think."

*DM You've mentioned elsewhere that it wasn't just you putting together The Medium. You've often talked about the group process, and I'm wondering what you think makes your work a single vision?*

AB I really don't think it is. I'm often told that there is a vision. I don't have visions and I don't have pictures in my head, or ways that something has to be. I think all of those three pieces [at Louisville—*The Medium*, *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, and *The Adding Machine*] and everything I've ever done is a highly, highly collective vision. I think there is a company vision that is emerging from the SITI company, because we've worked together for a while. But what I've tried to do is always work with people who aren't afraid of giving huge amounts of input.

*DM So are you re-envisioning the director as a sort of facilitator?*

AB I'm not envisioning any way a director should be, I'm only refining what I can do best—which is, to act as a facilitator and a sieve. If I have a talent, it's that I am able to focus other

people's visions. Anybody who's worked with me will tell you that I don't tell anybody what to do; I create an arena or a ballpark. And then I always hear, "Oh, Anne's vision." I don't have a vision. I have values, maybe.

*DM Is that what you mean when you say you haven't really changed much from the first piece you directed in high school?*

AB I'm referring to a sense of timing and a sense of humor a kinesthetic sense on stage. I don't know if one is born with that, but it develops early. Those things have somehow oddly stayed the same—which is why I always wonder if you can teach directing, because you either have that sense or not. In the same way that I think a musician or a composer works; it has to do with how time is spent, how time is organized.

*DM Are you moving away from itinerant stagings, or was that just a constraint placed on you at Actors Theatre?*

AB No. I'm a big fan of Max Reinhardt's career, where one play would be a tiny little chamber piece, and the next one would be pageant outdoors in Salzburg, and the next one would be a George Bernard Shaw play of large scale, and the next one would be Kleist. I'm a big fan of the expansiveness of theater; I'm interested in all the different relationships an audience can have to an event. Right now, what I'm exploring with the SITI company are what I like to think of as little essays that are about theater, but that are also about other things—like *The Medium* and *Small Lives*. They're essentially "Essay Theater."

*DM Could you clarify what you mean by Essay Theater?*

AB Rather than doing a play in an Aristotelian sense of a character going through a catharsis—although McLuhan sort of does that in *The Medium*—it's the idea of taking a theory or theories about a certain aspect of life and expanding on them in a theatrical form. Like the one I'm working on now, *Going, Going, Gone*, which is about quantum mechanics. It's finding theater metaphors that encompass certain innovations in theoretical thinking.

*DM Was the first Essay Theater that you did No Plays No Poetry?*

AB I guess so.

*DM When did you start conceiving of this as a distinct form?*

AB After doing *The Medium*, I discovered I had about 15 "Essays" I wanted to write. And I've only done a couple of them, so I have a lot of Essays in me.

*DM What else are you thinking about?*

AB Things that deal with sociology. I started working with Erving Goffman's theories on how people interrelate, and I'd like to expand on that. And Goffman's notions that there are 17 forms of human interaction possible—that's interesting to me, because in the theater we only usually do two or three.

I want to do a piece about consumerism, about what it means to be a consumer as opposed to a citizen, which is a notion that Bill Moyers actually talked about recently in discussing why

people should support public broadcasting. He said that public broadcasting is one of the few media that treats its audience as citizens as opposed to consumers.

*DM A couple of things came to mind when I saw your most recent Theater Essay, Small Lives. First, you've spoken about being a distinctly American artist, and I'm wondering how that ties in to a piece in which the text comes from Chekhov and the movements seems to be so influenced by Asian performance.*

AB It's very important to understand that, if I say I'm interested in my American roots and American culture, I do not mean to pursue it by only doing American work. I have become more American through my confrontations with other cultures. If I go to Japan, I am confronted by my Americanness because everything is so foreign. If I am working in the proximity, say, of a Tadashi Suzuki, who has a completely different notion of what an actor or rehearsal or audience is, I am confronted with my own notions, and therefore I will drop whatever notions I have inherited and don't necessarily believe upon inspection. Conversely, I'll tune in to the ones that I do believe in.

I intend to engage in content and in texts that are non-American—that's very important to me. That's the basis for the founding of the Saratoga International Theater Institute: it is about a fellowship of artists from different cultures. The odd and unexpected by-product of that is, I become more American the more I engage in other cultures. If movement looks Asian and the text is from Chekhov, that is a response, I'm sure, to an interest in other cultures. But I would hope that there is, or I think that there is, a great deal that is American in it.

*DM What do you think is specifically American about Small Lives?*

AB I agree with Gore Vidal, who calls America the "United States of Amnesia." I think we are unbelievably optimistic—which is our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. For me, a group of people who walk along a road, having no idea where they come from or where they're going, but who are kind of oddly hopeful, is quintessentially American. I think it's American in spirit.

*DM You've acknowledged that Small Lives is a dense play, and Paula Vogel talked about your No Plays as an experience that had to be re-experienced and remembered by the spectator in order to be resolved. How necessary do you think it is to see plays like Small Lives more than once, and is that a limitation of the piece? Or is first-glance accessibility an unreasonable and debilitating demand on theater?*

AB I do not think that what makes strong theater is accessibility at first instant, mainly because my first experiences in theater were not simple—I didn't understand it. But I did sense that there was something there. I find immediate accessibility easily forgettable. All the great theater experiences I've had have either been too long, or too difficult, or I've had to reach. That doesn't necessarily mean I think audiences have to come to see it more than once. I have had the experience, and of course I'm a theater person, where I remember going to see 20 times Richard Schechner's *Mother Courage* in 1974 or 1975. That was his greatest work, it was an unbelievable production. I didn't understand it. But there was something about it that brought me back. I don't necessarily think that the sign of a good work is where you have to come back to understand it; I don't understand most of my work. I have to look at it and constantly redefine what it is. If I did understand it, it probably would not be as volatile. I don't think that understanding is necessarily the best thing in art.

*DM What is?*

AB Aliveness. In the theater, certainly a sense of event. A sense of human beings reaching towards something, a sense of inspiration. As in great music: you are taken to a place where you are not in familiar territory, where one encounters new landscapes. That's what I want in the theater. I want the audience to be in new territory, I want myself to be in new territory. I mean, I am the audience, ultimately.

*DM Although it doesn't seem as if you move completely away from giving the audience at least some trace of a narrative.*

AB No. Because I think any good person in the theater also has a strong streak of show biz and a sensitivity to the level of entertainment and story. No matter how rigorous, there's a sense of showmanship; there should be, I think, in the theater.

*DM People asked you at the festival how you choose the plays you do. You said, in regards to classics, you often go on the recommendation of people you respect. How do you decide which contemporary plays and playwrights you want to stage?*

AB It usually, oddly enough, does not come through reading the script. It's by having a relationship with the playwright. The playwrights I've worked with, I can count them on one hand. There's Eduardo Machado, Paula Vogel, Chuck Mee, Mac Wellman. Every single one of them, I actually met them before I worked with them. Similarly, people I respected would say their work is important. I don't know that I can recognize great work on paper. There are people whom I respect and I really listen to them, and they do know how to read a play. I can read a play once I'm working on it, but to choose a play, I get very insecure, because I can't tell. Often I think a play is hard to see on the page. Or, it takes a huge investment, and sometimes I'm unwilling to give that investment because I'd rather be reading history, or psychology. That doesn't erase the fact that, once I've started working on it, once I've made the decision, its an incredible experience—one's relationship to a script is incredible.

*DM How do you mean?*

AB When I started working on plays like *Danton's Death*, I realized that when I would do research, I would go to a library and sit there and try to study the French Revolution, but what would happen is that I would wander over to the magazine section. And I used to feel guilty about that, as if I weren't really dealing with the material. But then I found out that, because *Danton's Death* is in my mind, all of the detours are part of the research. For example, with *Danton's Death*, I picked up a magazine about the club scene, and I ended up setting *Danton's Death* in a club with "celebutantes," which had a correlation to the fashions and the notion of fashion after the French Revolution, and the air of brutality. I think you can hypertext off of plays. Plays should awaken rich associations that you can't really control, and the older I get the less I'm interested in controlling the associations. As a young director, one wants to say: this is what I think, and this is what I know. As I get older I'm more interested in complexity, in opening something up rather than closing it down.

*DM One of the interesting things about The Medium was the degree to which the intellectual and the emotional were absolutely fused. That's something you don't see too often. It wasn't just about presenting art with a political slant, but about intellectual ideas having an emotional import. Do you see that in the other pieces you're working on?*

AB *Going, Going, Gone* is about quantum mechanics, using the structure of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, of two couples spending an evening together.

I never understood science or math in high school, but recently I started listening to physics tapes because I couldn't read the books. I listened to them when I was driving between Saratoga and New York. When I would have closed to book because of not having understood, the tape would keep talking. It would be Stephen Hawking's or *The Tao of Physics* or something, and I would be driving, and suddenly I would get it. I would stop trying to understand, and suddenly I would say, oh my fucking God, I think I just understood the Heisenberg Theory or the Theory of Relativity or something. And that started changing the way I think about the world and about movement on stage and about relationships. I want to create a piece that gives the audience the same experience I had in the car: they're involved in one story (I was looking at the landscape)—in this case they'd be involved in these two couples passing the evening. But what they're hearing, what they're saying, are these extraordinary theories from quantum mechanics. In some pieces, that's how it should work.

DM *And do you explore what's terrifying about quantum mechanics?*

AB I'm learning that the more I study quantum mechanics, the more I'm questioning the whole notion of living. I suddenly think that I might be the only person in the whole universe, and that you're a figment of my imagination. And that I'm creating you—therefore I question every moment of my life. That's what I want and that's what I'm scared of, too.

DM *I sounds like you're making an association between quantum mechanics and solipsism.*

AB Oddly enough, solipsism came up recently in something I was reading—that you can actually take quantum mechanics to be about solipsism. But I'm still in the middle of it, so I can't really draw any conclusions.

DM *But it's taking you into philosophy of science texts?*

AB Deeply. And religion, oddly enough, and the notion of religion.

DM *To me, the actual content of McLuhan's writing made *The Medium* terrifying and powerful, because these were intellectual ideas, and yet, I turned around when it was finished and the woman behind me was weeping. And that seemed like a perfectly understandable—yet surprising—reaction. I wonder if a piece on quantum mechanics...*

AB I don't know. We'll see. I didn't know in starting *The Medium* that it was an emotional piece, either.

DM *But you must have some instinct about it, if you choose that topic.*

AB I just know that quantum mechanics, or the study of it, is changing my life profoundly. So I want to do a play about it so I get to spend more time with it and share it with an audience.

## Discussing Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki

TDR, Spring 1993 v37 n1 p147

When directors Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki rounded the Saratoga International Theater Institute in 1992, they sought to create a center for an international fellowship of artists that could flourish in the context of a contemporary global village. The company seemed a logical, almost essential move for the pioneering Japanese and renegade American directors. Bogart - an experimentalist known for large-scale ensemble pieces and deconstructed classics, whose work was so cutting-edge she might be called post-avant-garde - had recently resigned after one tumultuous season as artistic director of the venerable Trinity Repertory Theatre in Rhode Island, and was becoming increasingly critical of the current state of America's resident theatre system.

By 1992, Suzuki's influence had been felt in the United States for more than a decade. His method of actor training was a staple of several American training programs, including the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (which introduced the method to the U.S. in 1980), Juilliard, the University of California-San Diego and the University of Delaware. At StageWest in Springfield, Mass., artistic director Eric Hill - a leading Suzuki-trained actor in his own right - built the theatre's resident acting company around the director's theatrical principles. In 1988, Suzuki's *Tale of Lear* - cast with Hill, preeminent Suzuki interpreter Tom Hewitt and 10 other American actors from StageWest, Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage, California's Berkeley Repertory Theatre and the Milwaukee Repertory Theater - embarked on a U.S. tour.

Both Bogart and Suzuki envisioned SITI as a place for the creation of new work and the advancement of theatre research, essential components of their nascent company's philosophy. They also set as their mission the training and nurturing of young theatre artists. Working with a core company, Suzuki and Bogart have, over the past three seasons, used SITI as both a laboratory and a stage on which to develop their methods of actor training.

Suzuki's work is predicated upon the body, and specifically upon what he calls the grammar of the feet. At the root of his training method are exercises in which actors stomp their feet in time to rhythmic music for fixed periods of time; the foot-stamping then becomes the basis for a demanding and precise stage vocabulary of stillness and movement. Suzuki's actors may perform while frozen in place, or erupt in a madcap dance while seated in wheelchairs. The physical exercises, reinforced by equally rigorous vocal work, generate total body control for the actor and seek to unify the physical body with the spoken word, so that the actor's intense, guttural speech becomes simply another variety of gesture.

Bogart's training method, which she refers to as the viewpoints, has its roots in a range of sources, most notably postmodern dance. The viewpoints are a philosophy of movement designed to develop a common language shared by the actors, through which they can become the collective choreographers of a play's physical action. They address time (through tempo, duration, kinesthetic response and repetition) and space (through shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship and topography).

Bogart's most recent work for SITI includes *The Medium*, based on the life and work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, and its companion piece, *Small Live/Big Dreams*, a meditation on memory in which five actors each represent one of Chekhov's major plays, using only lines taken from their respective scripts. Both productions were developed with the members of the SITI company who perform in them, based on patterns that emerged through viewpoint-directed improvisations in rehearsal. (The pair will be remounted at Kentucky's Actors Theatre of Louisville this month as part of its Bogart-themed "Modern Masters" festival.)

SITI opened its inaugural season in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. with *Dionysus*, adapted and directed by Suzuki, and Bogart's production of Charles L. Mee Jr.'s *Orestes*. The following year,

the company presented Bogart's *The Medium* and Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear*, as well as the first American performance of his newest work, *Waiting for Romeo*. *Small Lives/Big Dreams* debuted this past summer. In addition to these productions, SITI's work over the past three seasons has included international touring and company-led intensive actor-training programs in Toga-mura, Japan (where Suzuki maintains a summer base for his own company), Saratoga Springs and New York City.

Suzuki carries on from the top of his mountain in Toga-mura, re-examining his older pieces and developing new ones. Bogart directs frequently at theatres across the country. Hill continues his work at StageWest. And since its founding, SITI has developed a company - an ensemble of actors who work with the two directors both here and internationally, on both SITI and other projects.

Four of those company members have been affiliated with SITI since its inception - Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Tom Nelis. All have extensive experience working with (and now teach) Bogart and Suzuki's training methods. In October, they met to discuss their work with the company, as actors and as teachers of the two training methods, in a moderated conversation.

*How has your work with Bogart and Suzuki, and their two training methods, impacted your approach to acting?*

**KELLY MAURER:** There's something I want to say first about Suzuki's training. Oftentimes, his training is thought of as a style, but his training is training. He has an aesthetic when he does his plays, but when we coach, we have to address the fact that what people are learning is a diagnostic and a training method, not a style of acting.

**TOM NELIS:** I've always found the Suzuki training a very individual thing because, as Kelly says, it's diagnostic. I'm always testing my own limits inside of it, trying to refine my concentration, my center, myself. And then when I go to Anne's training, it's something quite different - it's about everybody else. It's about listening with your body to everybody else and responding to everything that's going on. In a sense, Anne's technique is about always getting out of your head, not letting your head be in the lead.

**ELLEN LAUREN:** When I began to work with Anne, the thing I was known for - my discipline - translated to rigidity. What was giving me so much trouble was that I was responsible not for myself but for the group. With Suzuki's training and diagnostic, as we're saying, you compete with it. You put it against your body like a template to find out where you fall on the graph, to see how high up you can get on the scale of it.

With Anne, you can't compete with or muscle or wrestle her training, or you really undermine yourself and each other. In the theoretical world you enter when you work with Anne's viewpoints, the most profound moment actually is the moment of failure. In that moment of crisis, you realize that the map that you're given of the possible places to go are the other actors. They are the path out - their breath, their bodies. You become them in that sense.

You don't necessarily in Suzuki's work become your fellow player. You're all up there struggling to stay alive, but you are completely involved with your whole being in getting through that event yourself and holding up what has been put into your responsibility - that part you are playing. And then these people behind you or to your side are responsible for their parts.

*Was it difficult to reconcile this with the more traditional background all of you, to one extent or another, shared - specifically, coming from training methods rooted in psychological realism and isolated scene work?*

NELIS: Well, psychological realism is necessary for me to do either Suzuki's work or Anne's work. The beautiful sculptures, the physical narratives that they both create need an enormous amount of specific justification. Because neither of them is interested in realism, because both of them are interested in extreme theatricalism and both of them seem to ask the question with every show - what is possible in the theatre? - they demand that I back it up all the more than a typical show with a fourth wall. The physical explorations that both of them are involved in are radically different than anything I had previously connected with psychological realism, yet without an understanding of psychological realism, I think I would be swimming in their work. I wouldn't be able to make it make sense, so I don't think it would make sense for the audience.

LAUREN: In the beginning of my work with them, I think I did regard this training as something that was opening up a different universe and realm for me on the stage. But what it was actually doing was feeding the work that I kept on doing in the American regional theatre. I didn't all of a sudden find myself way, way out on the edge of the envelope at StageWest. At some point, everything ceased to be compartmentalized: not only my classical conservatory training - speech and voice and movement and scene work - but my improvisational training. And I've always called upon that, both in Suzuki's work (which astonishes people) and Anne's work.

What I'm finding is that now when I work with Mr. Suzuki and Anne - and I've sort of pressed through to at least a level of confidence where I can use their tools somewhat efficiently, rather than just kind of being hauled around by them - I feel much, much more grounded psychologically in a real world. I feel now if I do what we would traditionally call a "real play," I'm doing something a little foreign - that is, acting at being real.

MAURER: There's sort of a way you're supposed to act in realistic plays - my feeling was always that there is the way I'm supposed to be, and the way I'm supposed to say lines, and the way I'm supposed to stand. And I felt boxed.

So working with Mr. Suzuki and Anne - as Tom was saying, with these two artists who constantly, continually are on the edge and ask the question, "What is theatre?" - then I as the actor can ask the same question about me. How expressive can I be? In how many ways? I felt like it took the straps off me a little bit. Which is kind of odd to say because Mr. Suzuki is very specific about the way he works and what his aesthetic is. But on some level, I felt freer.

NELIS: Both Suzuki and Anne give great attention to context, and they set parameters, limits. Within those limits anything goes, but they set limits. Whereas realism doesn't do that. It actually says, this is realism, so whatever is real is okay. But that means that there are virtually no limits, and it's much harder to be specific in that kind of situation.

WILL BOND: And it's very ambiguous. You say realism, which means be real, when in fact there's nothing "real" about being on stage. So you have to kind of personally make up what realism is, and hope that your feelings are universal.

Anne and Suzuki are simply onto something else. I remember Mr. Suzuki saying, when asked about a character's emotional inner life: "Well, you have emotions, don't you?" Yes, I'm alive, I have emotions. "Well, that's great. So we don't have to work on those. Let's work on the thing that we're interested in, which is the theatre, the metaphor of the theatre." So I don't think it's setting that psychological role aside, but just acknowledging that it exists and going on from there.

NELIS: Now Anne won't spend time working on that, but she'll always acknowledge that you have to take care of filling it. You have to take care of justifying that inner life, and she can always point to it when you haven't done it.

LAUREN: Exactly. And she'll bully you. She'll say, no, I'm not buying this here, there's a problem. And I must say, it's exactly the same with Suzuki. Unless he is seeing it, unless he feels that the objective eye is getting it, he will keep pointing at it, and keep saying, What is that? If this is the best possible thing you've come up with in this moment, look at it more carefully, because it's not getting across.

MAURER: Anne often says that the emotional life is the most important thing, but it's also a very delicate thing, almost an untouchable kind of thing. She doesn't necessarily want to muck around with your emotions. She would prefer to set where your hand goes, what the outside is, and then allow the freedom to happen within the structure itself.

Oftentimes in a rehearsal, an emotion comes out, and the response from the director or whomever is, oh that, keep that, do that. And it's destroyed, Anne feels. So she sets the stuff around it, and the life can still exist within it.

BOND: The scaffolding that is built around being in an Anne Bogart play or a play of Mr. Suzuki's is very intricate, very precise and very demanding. This notion of bringing your whole being to the play becomes the point. I'll maybe even take a step further, and say that I feel that when I'm in one of those plays, I'm not playing a character. I'm doing everything I can to fulfill the metaphor, as opposed to being "real" and delving into the side of myself that seems to speak about the character that I'm playing. This simply requires everything you have to get through the event. It means artfully attacking very huge obstacles. It's a physical and psychic event.

NELIS: The thing that you're talking about right now is something I learned from Mr. Suzuki. When I worked with him, what it all came down to was getting in touch with my own will power for the first time in my life. It was like he had me under such a microscope, and he himself became such an enormous obstacle for me, that the only way to do what he was asking me to do was to actually say by force of will, damn it, I'm going to do this and I'm going to get through it, and whatever he throws at me I'm going to take it.

Once I realized that, I had something that I could take to Anne's work or to any other work: The larger you can make the obstacle, the more formidable the structure is, the greater you are able to be present within it.

MAURER: It's also interesting what happens to the ensemble. Because you know everybody in the event is experiencing the exact same thing, you immediately are solidified. The responsibility that you feel not only for your own little performance but for making sure that your fel-

low players are okay, and that the event collectively comes together and works, is really enormous. It immediately becomes a very cohesive organism.

BOND: I don't necessarily feel this going into other plays, but in this work you look at the other person and think, I'll see you on the other side; you're going to be okay, stay close.

LAUREN: While you're doing the work, the thing that gets checked - the thing that you protect, and remove out of you like a being, and go home to at night and let it have cigarettes and feed it - is your ego. You sort of take that shield off in the most interesting way.

It's real quick to attack you again the minute you walk out the door or in your dressing room - before you even get the costume off - but in the moment, I find that it's the one thing you do not have time to feed, to fan. That's an extraordinary thing, and I think there must be some amount of fortitude in the people that have muscled through these years and stuck with it. It's definitely not for everybody.

MAURER: The two of them are absolutely insatiable, and on any given day you can love them for that and want to kill them both - absolutely want to strangle them. I remember I was having a devil of a time with a role that I did for Mr. Suzuki, and finally I said, I'm going to take charge of this thing, whether he likes it or not. And I did it, and backstage afterwards I was all set to hear his disapproval, but he came back and he said: "Finally." So there is the sense of will power, and ownership, too.

LAUREN: Their work relies on us - the quality of human beings that we are, and the will and the gifts that we all have. It's being developed in our bodies, and in our spirits, because we're the vessels for what it is they're trying to perpetrate on the theatre. We're out there doing it and laying ourselves down. They are, in both their ways, I think, extremely reverential towards the actor and the critical presence of the actor in the theatrical event.

How do Suzuki's vision and his vocabulary interact with Bogart's vocabulary? Have they influenced each other over the years?

LAUREN: When I go into rehearsal with Suzuki, I try and have a very clear plan about what I have to do. What's ahead in the next five minutes? What do I literally have to do? How many steps here? How am I going to get my breath ready to go? With Anne, I try to make sure that I have no idea what I'm about to do.

Then what happens when I perform is that I really screw myself up with Suzuki if I'm so tightly sticking to my marks that I become metallic and tinny. When I leave myself up to staying open and free in Anne's work, I have to be extremely articulate and ride very close deputy on myself so that I breathe correctly, that I hit very clear marks.

MAURER: Yes. When I do Suzuki's work, which is so structured, I have to find the freedom within the structure. And with Anne's work, which is based on freer principles, I have the freedom, so I must find the structure. Somehow that seems to be my goal.

NELIS: Suzuki's actors are rabid fans of Anne's work and her training technique. Combining their approach with the viewpoints is allowing Anne to push at the theoretical edge of the envelope. She often works with a group of people from disparate backgrounds, and to great effect. With the Suzuki-trained actors, a clarity is available because they have a certain physi-

cal discipline - if they repeat the same movement and phrase a million times, the structure will stay the same. And that clarity allows her to make the work more complex and still supportable. Sometimes, if you don't have that type of discipline, the work doesn't get more complex, it gets complicated, and then the structure can fall in on itself.

LAUREN: Anne doesn't think of the last pieces, *Small Lives* and *The Medium*, or of SITI's work in coming months, in terms of being plays, but as essays on the theatre. We are collectively writing these essays - either through the body as a performance, or literally, as a way for Anne to test her theories. It's a really fascinating way for SITI, I think, to start encroaching on this revolution (or whatever thing we're trying to do) in the American theatre.

MAURER: Anne's pieces are always works in progress, which is such a wonderful relief. Oftentimes as actors when you go out to the regions, you've got seven weeks. Three months later you wake up at 3:00 in the morning and go, oh, God, that was it. With Anne's pieces we are always creating; they constantly adjust and readjust and grow.

LAUREN: I've been performing the role of Agave in *Dionysus* now for almost four years, meditating on it, worrying it, trying to do it right. It can't be any longer than 15 minutes; it feels like a lifetime.

The opportunity for an actor, certainly for an actor in this country, to have something like that in her life that reflects her as she grows older and matures, is an extraordinary experience. When people click into that or come to an understanding of it they are completely overwhelmed. This idea of doing something on a lifetime basis, of doing a production again and again, is an idea that we have gotten away from. We consume culture and then it's gone.

BOND: For Anne and for Mr. Suzuki, I think, the work actually becomes the measure: They are reflected over the years against the piece of work they made. We measure ourselves against it over years, and find how we grow or don't. And the plays are out there as reflectors of the culture, and vice versa. *The Medium*, for example, is a very clear mirror. Does it work? Or does it not?

How do the training methods affect your work on projects with other directors?

NELIS: I'm dealing right now with an interesting phenomenon. I'm doing *Dancing at Lughnasa* [at Actors Theatre of Louisville], which is basically a memory play, and Mr. Suzuki's plays are always that. So here I am as the narrator, the guy who's remembering, and usually he sits off to the side of the proscenium and steps into the picture on occasion. That's very Suzuki-like, to just remember as the play goes on around you.

I have this interesting tension going on about how I use what I know to focus and ground this character, and keep the concentration the same as in the Suzuki method, but also relax physically so I am not an oddity amongst the other actors. I cannot be doing a stylistic play all of my own, I have to be in the same world, and yet I want to retain some of the things that I know I can use. So I walk a kind of tightrope, and it's not terribly satisfying, but I keep working on it. It's a very curious problem.

What is the nature of your collaboration on texts? Most of your pieces with Bogart now are company-created. What is that like?

NELIS: It's a great joy. She's got to be the ultimate collaborator. She relies on, thrives off, what you bring in every day. I think the thing in Anne that's so brave is that she doesn't come in with a preconceived notion of where this is all going to end up. In fact, she doesn't come in with a preconceived notion of where the day's work is going to end up. So it's absolutely fascinating and it's empowering, and you experience great permission as an actor to risk everything.

BOND: I think empowering is an interesting word, because there is great joy for an actor to have that much responsibility, and to be trusted like an adult. I often think of her directing style as that of a conductor. She gives you the score, such as it is that day, and we take off and she conducts it. At the end of the day you keep what works and throw out what doesn't. It's terribly exciting to be on that kind of ride.

MAURER: It taps your imagination to the absolute maximum because there's not one ounce of it that you are not responsible for. You're responsible for your own part within it. Sometimes you're responsible for writing it. Sometimes you're responsible for the overall structure of the thing. But down the line, you have some sort of responsibility to every element.

*Are you able to participate in the creation of any of Suzuki's pieces?*

LAUREN: I was in the pretty unique position where he built a show (*Waiting for Romeo*) around me, fitting together different snippets and centuries of Western theatre texts. I had an enormous collaborative part in that, perhaps not in the traditional sense that I would come in waving pages, but in the sense that if I didn't feel a particular way or if a piece wasn't for me, I could make it evident that it wasn't a go. "This isn't a keeper," as Anne would say.

I have also collaborated with Suzuki, although it's not maybe immediately apparent, in the role of Agave - a role that's been in his repertoire for 20-some years. Here I come in, this big, tall Yank, and I'm given this costume that was made eight years ago and sweated in - it can't be washed because the colors will bleed - and I get this prop that every actress has carried, and it looks it. This summer a big thing happened: They made me my own costume. It was sort of a metaphor for what it is I have begun to do with Agave, which is collaborate and address the issues about that role that I think are important and that move me.

I've never felt more responsible as an actor than I do with Tadashi Suzuki. People often think that you just try and measure up to this thing that he gives you, this highly, highly strict thing. I have never been more responsible for absolutely the whole structure than I am with Suzuki. It couldn't be more enormous a task.

MAURER: I have not done as much work with Mr. Suzuki as Ellen has, but I do remember some of the first weeks of rehearsal in the role that I was doing in *Dionysus*. I don't know what I thought; I guess that I was going to go in and he was going to tell me, now go there, and now go there, because his company is so precise and their study is so structured. And he gave me some parameters - I think you ought to be here in your little wheelchair, and I think you ought to be here - but then it was okay, go.

BOND: He's really not interested in put your arm here, put your leg there. It's up to you to decide, although if you're not coming up with it, he'll tell you where to put your hand. In the South American tour of *Dionysus*, there were whole scenes sometimes we didn't even rehearse. We'd move from theatre to theatre, and we'd realize, well, this is a totally different theatre, we've moved all this shrubbery - now, where exactly do we enter on the third "Tomorrow and

tomorrow” speech? And you realize that in the heat of the creative process that you have to make those decisions responsibly.

But built into the work is the idea that it’s impossible to do. And it’s kind of exhilarating to go after something that’s impossible to get, especially when you’re surrounded by actors who will strap on the harness and say, let me at it.

NELIS: These are obstacles you don’t overcome, that are too big to overcome. The most amazing thing I ever saw the Suzuki company do was perform, outside, in a typhoon. It was a stunning thing, and you could see how thrilling it was for them. It wasn’t a danger to them, but the experience that they and the audience went through was so vivid - the audience was there in rain slickers watching this performance, the rain was going sideways and the costumes were flying off the actors’ backs. And they were nailing it. But in the face of the obstacle, not by overcoming the obstacle.

LAUREN: We grow up with that sense that if you have a pain, you take an aspirin, or somehow you get around the thing by moving slightly to the left or numbing yourself against it. Anne and Mr. Suzuki go straight into the problem, and the harder the problem becomes, the denser the wall that you’re trying to pass through, the straighter the line has to be. You cannot go around it. Of course you can, but it’s unsatisfying to yourself, and ultimately to them.

MAURER: This is true also with the training. Oftentimes people will say to us, well, doesn’t that hurt? Isn’t that painful? Well, yeah. But somehow, actors aren’t supposed to have pain. Dancers are allowed it, athletes certainly are allowed it. But we’ve come to believe that actors are supposed to be within their comfort zone. How do you feel about that? Are you comfortable with that? We ask this question all the time, and so we operate in this little box, this tiny comfortable box. What Suzuki and Anne will not allow you to do is be in that box.

If you’re uncomfortable, they usually jump up and down and say, good. How does that feel? Well, it feels like I’m wearing the wrong size shoes or something. Perfect, something must be going on.

NELIS: And they both have that relationship with their audience.

*This conversation makes me think of something Samuel Beckett is supposed to have said to actors he was directing in a production of *Waiting for Godot*: “No matter, try again. Fail again. Fail better.” As members of SITI, what do you hope to achieve with the company. Where do you hope it goes?*

LAUREN: For the past two or three years of SITI we have sort of been the vessels, and the projects have come down and been organized for us. I think what’s happening right now for us is that the company is being born. We’re coming up with who we are finally in year three, and we are only now putting ourselves in a place of responsibility.

MAURER: Certainly, it is a given that we want to keep collaborating with both Mr. Suzuki and Anne, and to perform here and internationally. I want to, if at all possible, create a space where artists in this city - and all over - can fail big and fail better. And if that becomes true, if that continues to be true, then I know that I will tomorrow hopefully get better.

LAUREN: I think we have a couple of choices. One is to be SITI and be fast on our feet and go here and there and teach, and the other is to become SITI, and institutionalize and get a building and have roots somewhere. Honestly, I am very, very pulled towards the idea of a place, be it a literal, physical place, or just the agenda of teaching young artists and informing them, and in our way influencing the next generation of actors coming up behind us.

But when you teach, you've got to be the bill of goods, too. You've got to produce, you've got to concentrate on your own legs on the boards. We need places to do that, although whether we do that literally in one place in New York, I don't know.

BOND: I think finally we are actors. That's what we do - we need to make plays. That will finally speak volumes about whether the teaching was worthwhile, or whether the company exists.

NELIS: My hopes are slightly more grounded in my own pragmatic problems, that I can integrate my family life with an ongoing commitment to SITI, because I find now that it's very difficult. You have to grapple with what you're going to do careerwise, and I just hope I can continue to do the grappling in hand with SITI.

BOND: That is part of the conversation now. What is SITI but a company that exists because we all try to take care of each other's needs? The conversation that Tom's bringing up is a big one now for him, especially with a beautiful new baby, but we all grapple with that.

LAUREN: The company, for now at least, has to be radical only in the sense that it radically breathes, that it's a living organism and breathes with people's lives, as people's lives and opportunities breathe.

NELIS: But we're right at the crux of the problem in American art, because art doesn't make money. And when does the push come to shove? How are we going to deal with that?

LAUREN: You're not a company if you're dying, spiritually or literally. Anne and Mr. Suzuki are very keenly aware of that, and they have been very generous in the past towards SITI as an entire organization.

MAURER: We're trying to be pragmatic about the issues and creative at the same time. We know what we're up against.

## Balancing Acts

ANNE BOGART AND KRISTIN LINKLATER DEBATE THE CURRENT TRENDS IN AMERICAN ACTOR-TRAINING

Moderated by David Diamond

A year ago in the pages of *American Theatre*, Kristin Linklater, chair of the theatre division of Columbia University, spoke out against student actors' diluting their training by taking bits and pieces of craft from other cultures. "Actors-in-training are often submitted to a kind of transcultural grafting that dilutes their art," she opined in "Far Horizons," an article that outlined eight theatre practitioners' views on training, "instead of getting deep nourishment from the meat and potatoes of our own European-based, verbal traditions."

The iconoclastic teacher of voice, text and Shakespeare went on to say that, while good actors can pick up ideas from many sources, "they should be wary of becoming whores with low self-esteem. They and their teachers sell themselves short when they bow down to foreign gods."

Linklater's colleague Anne Bogart, who heads the directing program at Columbia's theatre division and is also the renowned artistic director of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute company, took exception to Linklater's remarks. In a letter to the editor that ran in the April 2000 issue of *American Theatre*, Bogart and the SITI company wrote that Linklater's suggestions "are as uninformed as they are destructive." Stressing the fact that the work of SITI "is enriched by contact with other cultures," the letter went on to say that Linklater's remarks "demonize the possibility of cross-cultural exchange. This creates a reactionary conservatism that does not belong in the arts."

In that same issue of the magazine, Linklater responded to the Bogart/SITI letter by saying that, "I certainly don't have the power (or the inclination) to demonize cross-cultural exchange." She went on to object to Bogart's characterization of her as "xenophobic, exclusionary and borderline racist."

With the aim of allowing Linklater and Bogart the opportunity to explain their positions more fully, we invited them to a face-to-face debate at the *American Theatre* offices. We also asked a dozen directors to listen to the exchange and join in the discussion. During the course of the afternoon, we discovered that, while Linklater and Bogart may radically disagree on methodology, their opinions about the discipline and goals of training are much closer than their original statements might have led one to expect. -David Diamond

**KRISTIN LINKLATER:** On many occasions, I've heard the suggestion that the American theatre and American-theatre training were inferior to those of other cultures. Now I have taught in many parts of the world, and I'm always struck by the fact that wherever I am, there are workshops in American actor-training going on—the basic stuff, the Americanized version of Stanislavsky, what came out of the Actors' Studio and dominated the actor-training studio scene in New York for many, many years. Now, the fact that our actor-training is so sought after, all over the world, it seems to me, is something we should be proud of. American artists don't have to look elsewhere for their roots. We have very deep roots.

**ANNE BOGART:** I actually don't care for most American actor-training. I think that Stanislavsky was strangled, mostly by Lee Strasberg. I'm very frustrated with what a rehearsal is for most American actors. It seems a little bit small. As a director, when I hear an actor say, "Is that what you want?" I think, "Is a rehearsal about doing what the director wants?" And that worries me. So, my entire life I've gone elsewhere for inspiration. I went to Germany to work as a young director, and I suddenly had an epiphany: that I'm an American artist. My

roots are back in vaudeville. I have an American sense of rhythm, an American sense of humor, an American sense of structure. Oddly enough, the way I get closest to my American roots-and most of the work I've done in the last 15 years is about American culture or American artists-is by going away. When I go to Japan and work with Tadashi Suzuki, for example, I'm thrown against a wall of my own assumptions. I have to choose what I want to own.

I formed a company based on a celebration of this issue. We meet people of different cultures who do things differently, and that act challenges us to grow-to become, oddly enough, more American. So, as the years go by I feel more and more militantly against the Americanized, misunderstood version of Stanislavsky we seem to suffer under. The biggest issue I have is with the actor's thinking, "If I feel it, the audience feels it."

DAVID DIAMOND: *Kristin, what is wrong with different cultural influences bearing on American actor training?*

LINKLATER: There is nothing wrong with it, once students have acquired roots in the Western theatre tradition. Those roots are deep; they go back to the Greeks, grow through Shakespeare and on to the 20th-century American classics. The tradition is densely verbal. It's based in the revelation of the human being through the human psyche, the human emotions, the intellect, the imagination-as shaped by a particular culture.

I think if you get your roots deep enough into this tradition you have earned the right to meet other, international ones. The depth and discipline of those traditions are extraordinary. If we come to them as if we're going to the street fair-to see what we can pick up to decorate our living rooms-then we're in trouble.

Anne, don't you think that there's a wildness and an excitement-an extension of the human expression-that comes from very deep inside the good American actors? The good American actors can blow the English actors off the stage, for a start. And there's also an excitement here, which has to be admired and respected. The frightening alternative to, "If I feel it, the audience is going to feel it," often seems to be, "I'll just tell the audience about it." And that's where a lot of theatre training and directing is going-"Don't be emotional, whatever you do. Just say the words."

I just love the fact that the Actors' Studio happened, and that it totally bastardized Stanislavsky, and Strasberg took people down into those depths of the neurotic self, to the point where nobody could hear a word for 25 years afterwards. The fact that he went so far in that direction and that we then started coming back, I think, is enormously valuable.

BOGART: This business of contacting an emotional memory and using that in relationship to a text causes a sort of narcissism that I find unbearable. I think that emotional recall is particularly dangerous because it works beautifully on film and television, where you want to be photogenic and spontaneous. After the moment happens, you never create it again. The technique doesn't work in the theatre, where it's not about being photogenic. Of course, the theatre is about being spontaneous, but in a way you can repeat. So the search in a rehearsal is to find a vehicle in which the emotions can change all the time.

My problem is this: The emotions are such powerful tools that a lot of rehearsals become about generating an emotion and then the director saying, "Keep that." Now, for me the emotions are the most precious things we experience-I don't even want to use the word "have," because they're not a commodity. Therefore, I believe that the emotions should be left alone in a rehearsal. What you're looking for in rehearsal is an action or a shape or a form in which the

emotions can always be different. Because the minute you pin down an emotion, you cheapen it.

So I prefer to look at the body, at placement, at arrangement. I'm interested in the emotions, but I don't want to strangle them. I think that the work of the Actors' Studio, especially, while fantastic on film or television, is deadly in the way it separates actors from each other. That's because the emphasis is, to a large extent, on trying to generate feeling, instead of on being present in the room.

*The type of work that you do in rehearsal-what tradition does that come from, if it doesn't come from a Western tradition?*

BOGART: Oh, I think it comes from a very Western tradition-it comes from vaudeville, from postmodern dance, especially of the Judson Church era. My influences are both international and American, and my company does two separate kinds of training-Suzuki training and Viewpoints. The Suzuki is like a barre class for a dancer, and the Viewpoints is a way to practice creating fiction using time and space. One is vertical; the other is horizontal. One is you and God; the other is you and the people around you.

[to Linklater] How does that jibe with the training in deep traditions that you were talking about?

LINKLATER: I have benefited both from the British version and the American version of those deep traditions. In London I was trained by people from the Old Vic Theatre School created by Michel St. Denis, who had come out of Jacques Copeau's Company. Jacques Copeau did in France what Stanislavsky did in Russia-he looked at conventional acting and said, "Where is the humanity?"

Then when I came to New York and started teaching at NYU, I encountered a holy madman of the theatre: Peter Kass, whose whole point was that there is no limit to what the actor can do, what the actor knows-the actor is always bigger than the character. I found that my voice work fitted extraordinarily well with that approach because my voice work involves freeing the human being from the constraints that our culture puts on us as we grow up. The actor's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to have a free and open body without tensions and a voice that can express the full gamut of human emotions and an intellect that will channel those emotions. And the balance between voice, body, emotions and intellect has to be exact; otherwise, you're going to get a skewed communication. The training I'm talking about, which is aimed toward that balance, comes out of everything I've learned since coming to this country about psychology and the self and the deep value of the imagination and individual creative spirit-and that's not the same as narcissism.

This training, for me, is the equivalent of your "barre class." When I worked with Shakespeare and Company [of Lenox, Mass.] and then with my own company, the Company of Women, our barre was a 45-minute or hour-long warm-up before every single rehearsal and performance-an inventory of our bodies and our voices, but also our emotional selves that day. And sometimes it was a mess. Everybody would have to cry for 20 minutes before they could get on with anything. To treat one's own emotions as part of one's technique, I think, is really important. And it's very different, by the way, from the emotional memory stuff that leads you down memory lane into some dark place. That has to do with neurosis, not free emotion.

So I believe basic training frees an actor from the constraints of habit, which is always a diminishing, reductive force. I could not train young actors in voice work if they were doing equal amounts of time in Suzuki. Suzuki involves building muscular control, and the work I do involves giving up external muscular controls. Lots of other kinds of training are incompatible

with my kind of voice work, too-modern dance is hopeless; ballet absolutely undermines every inch of the training. If an actor's psycho-physical system is constantly being thrown in one direction and then another, it won't learn as fast.

BOGART: For me, interesting acting training is just the opposite. I think that actors are not asked to do difficult enough things. I think on a daily basis actors need to do something that's almost impossible. I think they should study opera and ballet-three or four techniques that are next to impossible-and then try to do them as a professional. Try to walk into the room as ballet dancers, even though they're actors. Of course, I'm not an actor, but I actually think it opens them up.

LINKLATER: Do something that's nearly impossible...I spent an hour and a half this morning with my first-year students at Columbia, and they were convinced that I was asking for the impossible-that was to open up their throats and stretch their tongues out of their throats while their throats remained open. This was as hard as doing three pliés and a pas de deux.

I think actors come up against things that are impossible all the time. An actor might say, "You want me to speak while I remember the dreadful thing that my father did to me when I was six?" The answer is: Yes! Otherwise, how will you learn to open your throat while you're playing Iphigenia? Often in my classes a memory of something horrific comes up, and a student just wants to leave the room. I say, "You've got to stay in the room. Now is when you have to talk. Because that's when you're going to restore the relationship between your brain and your feelings so that you can be eloquent with your emotion."

BOGART: When I do actor-training, I do a lot of physically exhausting things-running and jumping and stuff. At a certain point people get really exhausted. And what I say is, "You're in the fifth act of Hamlet. You can't say, 'I'm tired,' and shut down!"

Is there any danger of dilution when an actor tries to get a little bit of Suzuki here, a little bit of Grotowski there...

BOGART: This is where I really agree with Kristin- "boutiquing" is dangerous. In a way, I think, it doesn't really matter what you choose to study, but you have to stick with it. The word I look for in actor training is rigour.

LINKLATER: Absolutely. Any art that's achieved a high level has gone very, very deep into its disciplines. I think there are parts of the brain that get engaged when you go long and slow and demandingly. When I do my Shakespeare training, we spend five weeks leading up to one sonnet, first trying to get the voice to move the body from inside-out, then going to the color work, and then vowels and consonants, and so on.

I want to go back, Anne, to something you talked about earlier-the relationship of emotion to physical movement, especially as rehearsal moves into performance. How do you get the actor to the right emotional place?

BOGART: I don't get actors to emotional places. I try to create an environment in which many-colored emotions might occur. I find that if I try to make emotions happen, the environment is cheapened. So I try to create the circumstances in which emotions can be free.

Now what I find is, in rehearsal, if you concentrate on detail, things start happening. The trick is to keep working on something. And eventually the emotions that need to happen-the

arc of the scene-emerges, not because you're trying to make it happen, but because you're taking care of things around it.

MARCY ARLIN [Immigrants' Theatre Project / Lincoln Center Theater Directors' Lab]: How do you keep a wonderful, spontaneous, magic moment that happens in rehearsal and translate it into the performance?

BOGART: When I was a young director and had no pay and no theatres to work in, and did work on street corners and rooftops, and worked with young inexperienced actors who didn't mind not being paid, I choreographed everything. I set moments of imbalance-sometimes it was just something that was really hard to do, like, "Can you get your elbow over here on this word and make sure you're looking behind you?" So that the actor then was actually straining against something and that made the juices go. When you watch artists work, you watch them throw themselves off balance and then fight for balance. And that is a heroic act. After all, great plays start when something goes wrong, so that the characters have to scramble to recreate harmony inside an imbalanced state.

The most important thing to do as a director is to see the person you're in the room with-what their hair's like, how tall they are, how heavy their body is. That's what you're working with and not something in your head.

LINKLATER: I'd like to pitch in on that one, too, because I think that's really at the heart of good acting. It sounds terribly simple, and it's very hard: To be really in the moment. To be here now. My job as the actor is to be open to the play, to let the play play me from beginning to end.

I think it boils down to the rhythm of your breathing. After the outgoing breath, there's a moment of nothing, and that's the moment of imbalance, as far as I can tell. And then breath comes back in again. You can train yourself to consciously say, "What a surprise! The breath came back in." I think training involves training oneself to be surprised.

NATALIA DE CAMPOS [LCT Directors' Lab]: Kristin, you mentioned the balance of the four aspects of actor's training-voice, body, emotions and intellect. Do you really think American training can fulfill those four aspects?

LINKLATER: I think American training is getting better and better. For a long time, stage movement for actors was not very well looked after here, but now we're into the second generation of Lecoq-trained teachers, and I think that's fantastic training for actors. And-God, it sounds a little immodest to say so-but in the 30-odd years that I've been here, voice training has become a serious part of actor training. Before, it was not an essential part of actor-training programs in all these universities. Now it is. And then there's the discipline of scene-study work, which has always been part of American training but was not part of British training until very recently. I think there's some very good training happening in this country. To the young American actor, I always say, "Don't go to London for your basic training. Stay here!"

Question from the audience: I'm wondering if the differences in your approaches might have something to do with a difference in the way you relate to your audiences.

BOGART: I'm interested in the creative role of the audience. My frustration with a lot of theatre is that all the answers are given and there's no room for the audience-and I think that comes, again, from film and television. There are two ways of thinking about the audience. The first is to want everybody in the room to feel the same thing. I tend to think of that as

what Spielberg did in E.T. You cry at all the right places, but everybody else is crying at those places, too, and at the end you feel like a manipulated rag. It's actually easy to make a whole audience feel one thing. It's also called fascism.

The second way is to create a moment onstage that triggers different associations in everybody in the audience. It's much harder to do that. I try to set up contradictions on the stage. In between those contradictions lives something very bright. I try to think of the audience as detectives; I'm leaving clues for them. The older I get, the more I try to do the least I possibly can onstage, so that the most happens in the audience's head.

LINKLATER: I would say I'm really old-fashioned, and I still believe in catharsis. If there is an emotional moment on the stage that triggers an emotion in an individual in the audience, then that emotion sheds light on the condition of that individual. And it's highly unlikely that you'll get everyone crying at the same moment. Of course, the kind of plays that I'm working on are mostly very verbal. The voice can, and should, have a powerful emotive effect on the audience. It actually moves sound waves physically through the air and hits bodies.

Two things that I see coming onto the live stage from film upset me very much. One is that actors are being trained in what I call the Mametian style, in which the voice is purely outward signage and is not meant to carry the story or carry the imaginative transformation from within the actor to the audience member. The age of irony has undermined the emotive power of the voice on the stage.

The second thing is this idea of soundscapes on stage. I have heard music onstage that tells the audience what it's meant to feel. That happens instead of the actor's voice, with its own intrinsic musicality and power, arousing an emotional response from the audience. Now that is a serious evisceration of the art.

MONIKA GROSS [LCT Directors' Lab & Women's Project Directors' Forum]: I'm an Alexander instructor. I wanted to go back to something that Kristin touched on earlier about modern dance. If we're looking for American psycho-physical traditions, early development of modern dance in America seems to be somewhat of a model for training.

LINKLATER: Martha Graham was one of the great, great American artists of the last century, there's no question about that. But Graham's technique is deadly for actors. Because if you contract in there [indicating the diaphragm] you can't breathe.

GROSS: With Graham, the emphasis is a lot on contraction, yes, but it's also on release.

LINKLATER: But it's for a different art.

BOGART: It's not a different art! I think Martha Graham is the most important theatre person of the century. I think she really got it in terms of character. I play a game in my head sometimes: "What would have happened if the Moscow Art Theatre never came to the U.S. in 1922 and '23?" I think, "Maybe Graham would have been our entire theatre!"

Anne, actors in your company spend a lot of time working around Suzuki. What does Suzuki training give an actor?

BOGART: The results I see are incredible concentration, focus, strength and the ability to change quickly. And I've found that when actors do Suzuki in conjunction with the

Viewpoints-which deals with spontaneity and flexibility and being in the moment-it's a magic, chemical combination.

AINNA MANAPAT [American Theatre intern]: *You were saying that you don't think American actors should go to England for their training, and I know that, among a lot of young actors right now, the buzz is that American schools are just not as good as RADA or BADA or whatever....*

LINKLATER: It's very colonial thinking. The BADA programs I think are terrific for young folk who have not been exposed to any serious training at all. But the dreadful, awful thing is that in this country there are so many undergraduate actor-training programs turning out people who think they are actors-it's drowning the profession in mediocrity. Some of them will get jobs anyway because those programs also train people how to sell themselves. And if they're aiming for the American professional theatre, these actors have to have an ear cocked to the marketplace. And if they go over to England, they will tend to come back with an English accent. English people coming here tend not to pick up the American accent in the same way-I don't know why that is. There are also certain emphases in the English training which may not be all that helpful for the serious, professionally directed young American actor.

SHEELA KANGAL [TCG staff]: I feel that the goal of so many training programs is to strip the student, leave him or her naked and exhausted, saying, "I don't know what I'm doing"-and then somehow, at that point, then they can start again. I just don't see the justification in that. If I go into a kind of training, I don't want to be called to a place that's unsafe.

LINKLATER: An actor who wants to stay safe is a boring actor. One of the things you have to learn as an actor is how to go into dangerous places. And you don't do that by being confirmed in what you already know. If somebody comes to me for training, I'm assuming they want to change, dig deeper or go further, get more dangerous, tap into their own individual creativity. Creativity is not a comfortable land to live in.

BOGART: All the really great actors I work with are willing to throw away everything they've done a night before opening and change it. And I think that's a quality of a great artist, and it takes a lot of bravery. Training should develop that bravery.

LINKLATER: Some thinker has said that the greatest spiritual level is insecurity.

BOGART: Heisenberg proved that. Mathematically.

LINKLATER: There you are.

## Charles Mee jr.

### There is no such thing as an original play.

None of the classical Greek plays were original: they were all based on earlier plays or poems or myths. And none of Shakespeare's plays are original: they are all taken from earlier work... Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is taken from a play by Klabund, on which Brecht served as dramaturg in 1926; and Klabund had taken his play from an early Chinese play.

Sometimes playwrights steal stories and conversations and dreams and intimate revelations from their friends and lovers and call this original.

And sometimes some of us write about our own innermost lives, believing that, then, we have written something truly original and unique. But, of course, the culture writes us first, and then we write our stories. When we look at a painting of the virgin and child by Botticelli, we recognize at once that it is a Renaissance painting—that is it a product of its time and place. We may not know or recognize at once that it was painted by Botticelli, but we do see that it is a Renaissance painting. We see that it has been derived from, and authored by, the culture that produced it.

And yet we recognize, too, that this painting of the virgin and child is not identical to one by Raphael or Ghirlandaio or Leonardo. So, clearly, while the culture creates much of Botticelli, it is also true that Botticelli creates the culture—that he took the culture into himself and transformed it in his own unique way.

And so, whether we mean to or not, the work we do is both received and created, both an adaptation and an original, at the same time. We re-make things as we go.

I think of these appropriated texts as historical documents—as evidence of who and how we are and what we do. And I think of the characters who speak these texts as characters like the rest of us: people through whom the culture speaks, often without the speakers knowing it.

## Unfinished Stories

Charles L. Mee, Jr.  
in conversation with Caridad Svich

*CS: So, let's start with what is indeed familiar territory, but nevertheless consistently engaging and vital to address: you re-use forms and stories, you re-make them for the contemporary world. When is the familiar familiar in a sad boring way and when is the familiar familiar in an ancient blood-curdling way?*

CM: I take stories the way Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides and Shakespeare did. None of them ever wrote an original play, and, since they are among the greatest playwrights who have ever lived, I thought it would be worthwhile thinking of trying to do what they did. So I appropriate stories (half the time, anyway; the other half I make up). And then to the appropriated stories I add appropriated texts from other sources, so that I make a collage of the materials of the world that we have received, and also of the world we are in the process of making at the moment: this seems to me what people do in their daily lives. I think a story is still vital if it is still being made. If something is taken as finished, then it is dead; if something is taken as unfinished, then it is vital. This is how we make our lives, and, since we only get one life on earth, this seems urgent, the most urgent and important thing we do.

*CS: It's true that Shakespeare, Euripides, and Sophocles didn't write original plays. They appropriated sources and fashioned them anew. I think there has been, however, a premium placed on "originality" as a concept in modern theater, and it has dis-allowed to a great extent the free-wheeling ability Shakespeare and Euripides (and even Brecht) had with re-shaping stories, re-imagining them, and re-claiming them for their time. It is as if a value judgment is placed on contemporary dramatists if they write "original" work versus "source-driven" work, i.e. that if it is "original" it is somehow worthier. I think such a value judgment reflects a misunderstanding of the artistic process because, in the end, aren't we all re-making stories whether they be from our own lives, our friends' lives, our lovers' lives, or lives told in fiction and history? Moreover, what do you think the (and I think it is) particularly U.S. preoccupation with "originality" in the arts comes from?*

CM: I really don't know where the preoccupation comes from. Maybe it's a byproduct of Renaissance individualism. The current obsession, though, comes from the copyright law. I'm sure you know there was no such thing as copyright in the time of the Greeks and Shakespeare. In Western Europe, I think, the Pope eventually became weary of having to support so many clamoring artists and so began to issue Papal bulls giving chosen writers the right to copy their works, or to have them copied. In this way, the Pope distributed the cost of patronage (and democratized it). And that model has grown, obviously, as a way for artists to support themselves. It puts a premium on a certain kind of originality. It seems to me, though, as corporations have taken an increasing interest in owning copyrights and using intellectual property as a basis for corporate valuations, the original intent of copyright law to support artists and nurture the arts and sciences has become skewed. It seems to me, in fact, that the law stifles development of art and science. To the extent that America has developed capitalism more energetically than many other countries, it may be that this preoccupation is a little stronger in America than elsewhere.

*CS: Are you aware that you have influenced a generation of playwrights who are now more likely to try adaptations? Is there something about our cultural moment that begs for adaptations of the big stories? And do you define a “big” story?*

CM: I’m very aware of being influenced by others all the time—but not aware that I influence anyone else. And—this is a small point—I don’t call what I do adaptations. Any more than I would call a play by Aeschylus or Shakespeare an adaptation. We are all engaged in the process of reconsidering and recreating the things that have been given to us by our lives and histories, and then seeing what can be made of that. Nothing comes *ex nihilo*. There are stories that playwrights have worked over for a couple thousand years, and so I guess that some of those stories have something extremely compelling about them—and I go to them to see what that might be, to see if they are still compelling, and, if they are, what about them is still alive and compelling, what they have to say about what human beings are, and what human beings might become.

*CS: Your latest cycle of plays was about love . . . are you done with love for the moment? Or is there more theatrical love to be had?*

CM: At the moment, I’m on to other things. I’ve done a lot of “political” plays in the past, and have a couple more of those that I’ve been meaning to get back to. So I won’t do any love plays for a while, probably. But I do think it is an inexhaustible subject, so I’m sure I’ll return to it. In one of my plays, *Fetes de la Nuit*, a character is asked why he talks always about love, and he says (inspired by the table of contents of a book by Foucault):

Because  
 love  
 love begins a discourse  
 with anxiety  
 remorse  
 longing  
 connivance  
 dependency  
 embarrassment  
 drama  
 brutality  
 identification  
 unknowability  
 jealousy  
 languor  
 vengefulness  
 monstrousness  
 cruelty  
 insomnia  
 crying  
 gossip  
 loneliness  
 tenderness  
 isolation  
 truth  
 the will to possess

lying  
remembrance  
suicide  
ravishment

because  
in love  
we come to know what it is to be a human being  
what it is to be human today  
because  
if we humans see who we are in our relationships with others—in all our relationships—erotic,  
poetic, political, economic, still the way we know one another most intimately and deeply  
how we are when we are free  
and how we are unable to be free  
it is in our love for one another.  
And so, if we are to know what it is to be human  
we know that best when know how we are in love  
what sort of species we have become in our time  
by what sort of love we've become capable of.

*CS: Wintertime, for instance, could be described as a colleague has said to me, as a “platonic farce.” It has a specific level of philosophical and theatrical grace. Do you love philosophical dialogues? Can theater be a place for philosophical dialogues? How and how not?*

CM: I got polio when I was fifteen years old. Until that time, I'd never read a book, only comic books. And then, when I was in the hospital, an English teacher of mine brought me a copy of Plato's Symposium. And I read it and asked for another Plato, and then another and another, so that, before I could again hold a book with more than three fingers of one hand, I had read all of Plato. I was drawn to those dialogues—full of conflicting ideas, passions, of the sort I was feeling, flat on my back, at the time. And then I started in on Aristotle. And I think all the time these days that Aristotle was right, that human beings are social animals, that we are the creatures not just of psychology, but also of history—of culture and politics and economics—and so I've always tried to write plays that go beyond psychology and embrace a larger understanding of what makes humans human, and what makes our world as it is. So, yes, Plato's warring passions, Aristotle's expansive understanding of the human creature: these have been my dramaturgs.

*CS: How do you use burlesque or vaudeville...musical numbers in the middle of text, glorious butt-dances in the middle of text? And why? There is such an open-ness to theatrical joy in your work. Where does it come from? How would you characterize it?*

CM: I've come to believe—with Shakespeare, and with the postmoderns—that art is most pleasurable not when it closes us down, narrows our perceptions and sympathies, draws boundaries of appropriateness or goodness, but when it opens us up. And I could add lots of justifications for the way I juxtapose high and low, tragic and farcical, intellectual and physical, how they pop against one another, how they make one another more vivid when seen in such surprising contrast—but, the truth is, I just love a wonderful time in the theater, and, for me, a wonderful time includes something challenging to think about, something to feel deeply and sometimes shatteringly, and some plain hilarity and joy and stupidity and release.

*CS: You are working on a piece about Joseph Cornell. His memory-boxes in particular are so rich and detailed, and highly idiosyncratic. Unlike say, Bob Rauschenberg's work, which inspired your collaboration with the SITI Company, Cornell's work has often been described by critics as hermetic, and mysterious, and outside the Pop world. What are your thoughts on Cornell and how his work can teach us today about investigating the world, self and memory?*

CM: Rauschenberg was a wonderful figure to start with: his energy is so positive, happy, colloquial, and inclusive before anyone knew there was such a word. It's so connected to daily life, so inspiring in its democratic sympathies, it was easy to hear it start talking and living on stage. Scenes made themselves. Cornell, by contrast, I find sad and strange, weird, kinky, a little off-putting. But there is something about him—drawn down deeply inside himself, following some set of impulses so distant and peculiar—that he seems like the very soul of the artist—and, indeed, the very soul of any human who feels herself to be on a journey in life that is essentially internal, that only after a long while rises to the surface and seems to resonate with others. This will be hard to put on stage. But one thing I love about beginning with the life of an artist—and not trying to do a bio-pic, but trying to do a piece “inspired by” a way of seeing the world—is that it leads to discovering very different theatrical forms. I think about Euripides and Shakespeare and Brecht all the time, but I've also learned a lot about how to make theater from Max Ernst and Rauschenberg, and now, I hope, Cornell.

*CS: When you are working on a piece, when and how do you decide which container, which form, is best suited to encasing the material you have written and/or assembled?*

CM: Often I just steal a story—from Euripides, say. And then I smash his play to bits and write a new play that lies, as it were, in the bed of ruins of Euripides. So Euripides supplies the form. I've done the same with Shakespeare and Brecht—and Rauschenberg and Cornell. But, if I just start out with some other impulse or hunch and write a play that is not derived from any other source, then I just throw stuff out and trust Rauschenberg's example. Rauschenberg made paintings and assemblages based, he thought, on chance. But, of course, what he discovered was that he couldn't “do” chance. His psyche determined his choices at every turn. And so, instead, he learned to trust his own psyche—to trust that whatever he did, it would—it couldn't be any other way—be shaped by who he was, by what he loved, what felt good to him. And, if he trusted that somehow, somewhere—because he wasn't from Mars—his psyche was humanly coherent, the finished work would be coherent, too. And that's what I have to trust when I do something that doesn't start from a previously made form.

*CS: Would you elaborate on how the Rauschenberg piece came to be, and what the process of working with Anne and SITI was like for you? How did the text take shape? How was the experience either a new way of working or similar to ways you have worked before with other collaborators?*

CM: I've loved Rauschenberg, and been inspired by his collagist way of making work, since the nineteen sixties. He has always seemed to me to be terrifically open, small “d” democratic, optimistic, vigorous, unafraid, free, egalitarian, again, inclusive before the word was in the common vocabulary. He makes art by picking junk up off the street—not merely ignored stuff, but absolutely rejected stuff—bringing it back inside his studio, putting it together and saying, “This, too, is beautiful.” So I started by looking at his work, picking some of my favorite images and themes—a stuffed chicken, Martin Luther King, an astronaut—and making a list of the things that recur in Rauschenberg's work. And then I made a list of texts that made me think of: chicken farmers talking about starting a chicken business, astronauts talking to

Houston, an astronomer talking about the stars. And then a list of possible events inspired by those images and texts. Actions. Songs. And I took those into a workshop with eight or ten people the SITI Company had brought together—not writers alone but also actors, a choreographer, a sound designer, an administrative person from the SITI office, a couple of students. And they did what I did—made lists of things they saw in Rauschenberg, what it made them think of, texts they heard or remembered or thought to compose. The rule of the workshop was: don't bring in anything you don't want to have stolen. Anyone can steal anything I brought in to make whatever piece they might want to make, and I could steal whatever they brought in.

So I emerged from the workshop with lots of ideas, and some wonderful pieces of text. One of the participants had a friend who was a truck driver, who had written her about starting out at five o' clock in the morning on his cross-country route—and then went directly into the piece. So I put all this stuff into some pages and took that to Skidmore College where the SITI company teaches a group of anywhere from 50 to 100 students—most in their twenties, some older—every June for four weeks. And they all improvised “compositions”—little scenes bringing together chunks of text, songs, dances, movements, physical activities.

I took all this stuff home, and I thought: now this is a mess. This is not a theater piece, it is just a bunch of random associations by a disparate group of people responding to the work of Rauschenberg. I thought: what would Rauschenberg do? I thought: he would just choose his favorite stuff out of it all and call that a piece. So that's what I did. About half of it is stuff I wrote or thought of, and half is stolen. That was a “finished” script. And then the SITI company took the script and made compositions of my compositions, and put other actions with my texts, and made up dances—and that was the finished finished piece.

*CS: You majored in history and literature at Harvard, and you worked as a historian for a long time before resuming your interest and life in the theater. What drew you back to playwrighting, and why? Do you ever think of your theater writing as an extension of sorts of your work as a historian in some way, in the telling of national and international stories?*

CM: History, as a discipline, claims that it is possible to frame rational sentences and paragraphs that will contain the reality of the world. And yet it seems to me that the reality of the world so often makes me want to yell and shriek and cry out and tear my hair—that it engages my heart as well as my head, whether I want it to or not. And so, in time, the writing of history just wore me out. I still read history a lot, and admire wonderful writers of history. But to me the form itself seemed too narrow and constraining to contain the world as I saw and felt it. On the other hand, the theater wants us to use both our heads and our hearts, and so that feels good to me, it feels like the world, and that's where I feel most like myself. Inevitably, having spent twenty years writing about politics and history, I take that with me as I write plays. I think of the characters I write as living in this larger world I've written about, and living in a particular epoch, and occupying some place in the world as it is becoming.

*CS: You have collaborated with leading stage directors Anne Bogart, Tina Landau, Robert Woodruff, Ivo van Hove, Martha Clarke, and Les Waters. Would you speak a bit about what you have learned from working with these directors, and how the specific collaborations have informed your writing?*

CM: I love theater that is made of music and movement and text. It seems to me that this is what most theatre has always been made of—and, in most of the world, still is. But the theater of western Europe since Ibsen—maybe beginning a little earlier—has been a theater of staged

literary texts. And so most directors have become masters of staging texts. The directors I love are the directors who imagine that their job is, rather, to create a three-dimensional event in time—in which text finds a place along with these other theatrical elements. So these directors mobilize an event filled with music and movement and text. And from them—and from the work of Chen Shi-Zheng and Robert Lepage and Pina Bausch and Sasha Waltz and Alain Platel and some others in Europe—I learn how to write for this sort of theatrical event. When I write, the text never comes first. First I see an event on stage, and, when I've begun to see it very clearly and in detail, then it just starts speaking.

*CS: Snow in June premiered at ART recently. It is a unique project. Would you expand on the making of this piece, and how it came together? What questions came up during the process of this cross-cultural artistic exchange (in terms of direction, text and music), and in what way did the questions lead to creative answers for director Chen Shi-Zheng, composer Paul Dresher, and yourself?*

CM: With *Snow in June*, Shi-Zheng came to me with a 13th-century Chinese play and asked if I would do a version of it. I thought the original play was magnificent, and told Shi-Zheng I thought he should just do that, but he wanted something new. The original is about a young Chinese woman who is badly treated in a dozen ways, is brought to trial for a murder she didn't commit and unjustly executed, and she rises from the dead to find her father, who is by now an official in the central government in Beijing. He hears her story and goes out to the provinces to set everything to rights. In short, the moral of the story is, if only the central government knew, everything would be okay.

So I took it and set it in Queens, New York, today. I threw away the ending and had the girl rise from the dead and murder everyone in revenge, so that, I guess, the moral became: you can take the nicest, sweetest, best human being and, if you treat her badly enough, turn her into a homicidal maniac. All the characters and language and events are from New York today, though the core characters and the essential plot-line remain the same. Paul Dresher asked me to write some songs, and I said I had never done that, but he said, that's okay, just write whatever and I'll set it to music. So whatever is just what I wrote, and lots of songs came out.

When Shi-Zheng took it into rehearsal, he felt it was too linear and narrative, so he sort of threw it up in the air and scrambled the scenes randomly and worked on them a while that way. But then, a couple weeks into rehearsal, he decided he wanted to return to my chronological order, which he did, but leaving out a lot of the narrative chunks and stitchings so that it remained surreal, expressionistic, of another world altogether—somewhere between my original linear treatment and his dreamlike world.

As you can guess from this, I am a guy who usually leaves directors completely alone. I never go to rehearsal, unless specifically asked by the director to come in for a day or two. So the director and the actors are as free to do their thing as I was to do mine, and in this way lots of different sorts of productions of my plays are done. There is no such thing as a definitive production. I do it, I think, because some years ago it struck me that I thought the playwrights who got the best productions were the dead playwrights—and maybe that's because they didn't go to rehearsal. So, ever since, I've tried to behave like a dead playwright.

*CS: Many of my U.S. contemporaries in dramatic writing have expressed their desire to live in a culture where the playwright's voice is part of the public discourse. There is a general feeling among us that the dramatic form, that theater in this country, is considered an elitist, rarefied art, disconnected from the world – from social, political and human concerns – and therefore irrelevant. What are your thoughts about the playwright's position in society?*

CM: I don't think about the playwright's position in society. I do think that if a person wants to stop war or change economic relationships, he or she should get into politics—and do it right away. Or, less directly, write polemics. Or maybe even journalism. Or, if popular propaganda is wanted, then the only medium worth writing for is television, maybe movies. To paint paintings, compose music, write novels, write plays: these have nothing to do with changing the course of the world in the near future. Maybe they have something to do with contributing to the nature of the culture over the long haul—in the way that, say, philosophy or plumbing might, even though they have little to do with the immediate public discourse.

But art is not a subset of politics or ethics. It is not justified by an appeal to some other purpose. It is its own calling, with its own agenda or agendas, subject to no other. I'm really not a person who makes characters in my plays mouthpieces for my own thoughts, but it just happens that a character in *bobrauschenbergamerica* said something I agree with:

art is made in the freedom of the imagination  
with no rules  
it's the only human activity like that  
where it can do no one any harm  
so it is possible to be completely free  
and see what it may be that people think and feel  
when they are completely free  
in a way, what it is to be human when a human being is free  
and so art lets us practice freedom  
and helps us know what it is to be free  
and so what it is to be human.

Still, if you believe that human character is formed not just by psychology but also by history and culture, as I do, then you are destined to write “political” plays in some sense—not plays addressed to an issue of the moment necessarily, but political in the broadest sense. Whether those plays then, in turn, affect the culture is up to the culture.

# Jacob Wren

## Mistranslation, Bad Faith and Even Worse

by Jacob Wren

I do not speak French. Nonetheless I thought I would direct a theatrical production about translation, a production that featured two anglophone performers from Toronto and two francophone performers from Montreal in which one of the central performative activities was translation from English to French and back again. Strangely enough this idea first occurred to me in Norway.

I was in Norway at the Bergen International Theatre working with Quebecois director Carole Nadeau on an experimental theatre text entitled *Unrehearsed Beauty*. We were directing three young Norwegian actors who were performing the text in Norwegian. Since we did not speak or understand Norwegian it was difficult to judge the exact quality of their performances. Nevertheless we still had a distinct feeling as to what worked and what didn't. And it occurred to me that one of the rarely questioned assumptions of most contemporary theatre practice is the fact that the director understands the language the performers are speaking. Now I would like to speak briefly about the true nature of egalitarian democracy.

If, as a director, I understand what the performer is saying on stage in a show I'm directing it opens up an entire universe of coercive possibilities. If I do not the performer retains a level of relative autonomy over which I can have little effect (even more so if the performer doubles as the author of the text) and collaboration is forced to develop new, and hopefully more creative, avenues through which to express itself. I am only being partially ironic when I say this and it is with no irony whatsoever that I claim extremely valuable and important work can be made utilizing this method.

However, this is not necessarily the method we used in our production *En français comme en anglais, it's easy to criticize* which brings us back to the topic of translation and, even more importantly, mistranslation.

There are people now, many of whom are in positions of extreme power, who would be perfectly happy if everyone in the world spoke English. (Many of them hold positions of considerable status within the corporate infrastructures of Disney and Nike.) I, however, am not one of them. English is now the international language of business and science but I prefer a world in which magic is generated through poetic and endless streams of mistranslation and miscommunication. Or, to put it another way, I prefer a world in which it is impossible to pretend that we actually understand one another in any literal sense of the word 'understand.' In my opinion this is somewhat more honest.

In a song about prostitutes, the French songwriter George Brassens sings: "Talent without technique is just a bad habit." We used this line in *En français comme en anglais, it's easy to criticize* as a form of self-criticism, like Andy Warhol going to parties with each and every pim-

ple on his face circled in thick red magic marker. But when I think about translation I realize how many bad habits I have accumulated, building a bonfire of them, surrounded by a small stone circle of philosophical pretexts, and trying to generate an artistic practice out of the ensuing blaze. This campfire of splendid ineptitude forms a series of semi-dialectical relationships through which I attempt to corner victory by always backing the side of the underdog: charm versus skill; clumsiness versus grace; convoluted syntax versus clarity, muddy thinking versus having something to say and just saying it, complicated simplicity versus either complexity or simplicity on their own; making a mess versus giving the audience a gift; bafflement versus quality; entertainment versus art or even not-art versus art, boredom versus entertainment. But perhaps dialectics is an outdated game.

Keeping all this in mind, you can see the genre of glorified bad faith out of which I might consider myself qualified to address the question of translation. This glorified bad faith occurs within an extremely specific context: that of contemporary theatre.

It is my contention that theatre no longer functions. Its social and artistic roles have been usurped by the cinema and its main purpose these days is only to make steadily diminishing audiences increasingly uncomfortable. (I don't mean to suggest that there is no good work or that the possibility of doing something of value in the medium of theatre is hopeless or impossible - only unlikely. Once we acknowledge this fact we can proceed.)

There is a common example I often like to cite: to the invention of photography, painting responded almost immediately and with great vigor. Seeing that photography fulfilled its former role with both greater efficacy and greater panache, painting invented any number of new strategies in order to compensate: cubism, surrealism, impressionism, colour field, etc. However one may feel about the relative validity of each of these individual strategies, one cannot deny that painting as a medium made a series of considered efforts to find a reason for its own existence in the post-photography world.

In comparison, theatre has failed twice. Firstly it failed to respond to the invention of the printing press (the act of reading is a much more intimate manner of experiencing a written text than that of attending a staged performance) and more recently it failed to respond to the invention of cinema (to paraphrase John Bourgeois: when you attend a bad movie you only feel like you've seen a bad movie, when you attend bad theatre you feel like you are witnessing the complete breakdown of human possibility.) Cinema lures us into a dream-like state in which narrative is believable, dialog possesses physical veracity, and emotion is not only larger than life but also more convincing, larger than life in a manner that acts almost directly on the central nervous system. In my experience theatre simply cannot compete. (I realize such broad rhetorical flourishes are bad form but I am attempting to proceed towards the topic of translation with as much haste as possible.)

So when one is attempting to create works of art within a medium that one is convinced no longer fully functions one is automatically operating in bad faith. This is not necessarily such a counter-productive location from which to begin.

We are in rehearsal. I have just completed a text (about ten minutes ago) and we are trying to decide how exactly to translate it into French. My idea is that we simply translate it badly and move on but no one seems to like this suggestion. The main question seems to be how to balance the inspired ingenuity of a chaotic first attempt with the more carefully thought through approach of discussion and content. It is perhaps the central question of all theatre and per-

formance: spontaneity versus precision, meaning conveyed through a certain way of being in the world versus meaning conveyed through technique. We have been working on *En français comme en anglais, it's easy to criticize* for well over a year now and we still haven't come up with anything resembling an acceptable solution.

Again and again we would come back to the question of tone, how the words were unimportant, since no matter how literally you translated the text, if you were unable to find some equivalent for the tone all was lost. And the tone was notoriously difficult to pin down, a slippery mongrel mixture of baroque earnestness, over-arching irony and logical contortion (though not necessarily as unpleasant as all that might sound.) Often we would write entirely new French sentences in order to convey what was only implied in the English, at the same time remembering how it was only a few days ago that our very first on-the-spot attempt was so much stronger than what we were currently working with but its authenticity could seemingly never be replicated or for that matter even proven.

I would once again like to draw a parallel with the cinema. Most of the films which have been most important to me have been experienced through the mitigating circumstances of English subtitles. However, that is not particularly how I remember them. I recall images quite vividly and with equal vividness recall scenes and even sentences as if they had been spoken in English. Why exactly does my memory play this trick on me? How is it that read subtitles are mis-remembered as spoken dialog? One of my feelings is that theatre has never blossomed into a truly international art form because it responds to the requirements of translation so poorly. Of course, a play can be translated and performed in any language. But the actual physical entity of the staged performance always relies to a greater or lesser extent on the content of the spoken word. Most attempts to remove this stricture result in either pantomime or dance, perhaps a limitation that one must somehow find a way to work within if one desires to experience the world through ones art and participate in the international community.

With *En français comme en anglais, it's easy to criticize* we engaged in an experiment to try and combat these speculative difficulties. In many ways the experiment failed but that is all the more reason to speak about it here. The experiment was as follows: when we performed the show in Bergen, Prague and Dresden we invited the artistic director from each of the theatres to join us on stage as an additional translator. Since translation was already one of the central themes of the production it seemed like a natural fit. But while in Montreal the audiences were often bilingual and therefore could appreciate the subtle and misconstrued inter-play between the two languages, in other countries much of this was lost.

But more importantly we learned that the audience must come to the theatre already aware that language and translation both have a political and problematic aspect to them - a framework of which they are acutely aware in Montreal, somewhat cognoscente of in Norway (where they are often self-conscious that their language is not a particularly international one) and less interested in in Prague and Dresden. Therefore, works can exceed the boundaries of language only to the degree that a common cultural context can be assumed (or inscribed within the work itself.) But I fear that this phenomena can only be enacted within the limits of what the audience already knows. In other words, to push beyond the assumed common context - and this only applies if one is speaking of content and not form, or of those aspects of form through which content can emanate - one must make use of language or some equivalent. And if one wishes to travel (with work) then the question of translation will eventually come into play - either elegantly (but seemingly unaware of its potential for miscommunication) as in the case of cinematic subtitles, or somewhat more clumsily as in the case of our inclusion of an addi-

tional cast member/translator/artistic director (i.e. over-aware of the very present reality of miscommunication.)

Which brings us back to the fact that I do not speak French. One of the many ironies of *En français comme en anglais*, it's easy to criticize is that I personally am unable to appreciate it on anywhere near the same level as many members of our Montreal audience. It is most certainly paradoxical, but for me in some small way this situation makes the production more democratic, the pseudo-collaborative democracy of the process mirrored by the unbalanced nature of the final products reception (unbalanced because the audiences appreciation of the work is out of proportion with that of the director, but also in many other ways.)

While to a certain extent the work I do is based on ideas (however unstable), in rehearsal I am always careful that whatever specific ideas we are working from in no way over power either the naturally creative dynamic of collaboration and collaborative effort or the mysterious, yet often potently accurate, tendencies of personal instinct. Since neither collaboration nor instinct can be honestly portrayed as being guided by either rationality or reason, one must search for meaning elsewhere. And perhaps this is how I will choose to end this tentative attempt at self-justification and editorializing, by suggesting that meaning and artistry can be found virtually anywhere, often in the places we are most reticent to look: even in failure, even in confusion, even in mistranslation and miscommunication and, of course, even in bad faith - all of which have many important and ridiculous lessons to teach us that we may some day make the actual effort to explore. Until then.

## Completed Questionnaire for a Croatian Theatre Journal

(filled out by Jacob Wren)

*1. The recent turn of the century was an opportunity for numerous taking stocks of the past. We would like to encourage you to take stock of the future. What kind of development of creative theater do you foresee in the forthcoming decades? Do you see any basic modes or directions of that development? Do you believe theater will take a course generally desirable or personally close to you?*

In my opinion, theater is basically a reactionary art form that has little or no mechanisms in place for absorbing innovations or new ideas. Therefore, it seems to me that theater, much like opera or rock n' roll, will actually change very little in the years to come. There will continue to be the majority of theater practitioners who stage mediocre productions of repertory material with a few exceptional productions scattered across the globe, a smaller number who write new plays most of which are quickly and thankfully forgotten (perhaps one or two of which make in into the repertory though I definitely haven't witnessed such an event in my short life span so far) and a considerably smaller number who engage in creating innovative work, sometimes generating slightly more public interest, usually less. In this third category very little of the work is written about in any meaningful way and therefore there is an enormous amount of unintentional repetition from generation to generation. Theater is extremely local and ephemeral and that is perhaps the main reason it refuses to significantly develop. I see no indications that any of this will change. Trends will come and go but theater will remain more or less unchanged, in this sense it is astonishingly unlike contemporary life, which is perhaps something to be said in its favor (though I have to admit I don't really view it in that light.) Speaking more personally, I began working in theater when I was extremely young after having seen productions by Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group. At first I tried to incorporate techniques from both these artists. To frightfully over-simplify we might refer to these tendencies as 'large scale avant-garde formalism' and 'ironic art-world deconstruction', but over the years I suppose I have naturally skewed towards the later. And because of these not especially deep origins I now find myself at the bottom of an extremely awkward dilemma within the body of my own work. Irony is completely played out, having substantially become the dominant language of commercial advertising. I still love the world of visual art but am nervous about trying to find connections between it and the theater, since most of the time such efforts feel mainly like those of a vampire out in search of new blood. And deconstruction is a somewhat shaky philosophical position, almost a position of suicidal desperation (i.e. if one cannot figure out how to build something one can always go around taking other peoples creations apart.) To do it well also requires irony, which I would simply like to see less of in the world (though I must admit I still enjoy it immensely.) So most of the strategies I have employed up until this point are basically over. Many others are probably feeling this as well and the responses to it will likely be extremely varied. In the future, I think more and more I will be searching for a very simple, human frailty. To try and generate a direct sense community through the work, to deal with the audience as if they were human beings just like the rest of us. Lately I have become interested in how community is political. How what Alexander Kluge refers to as an "oppositional public sphere", a public space that is neither privately owned nor

simply of the classical type, “a type of public sphere that is changing and expanding, increasing the possibilities for a public articulation of experience,” is perhaps a kind of political space that theater can at least partially generate. I think some of Alan Platels recent work skillfully suggests this general direction. As well, up to this point all of my work has taken on the voice of the problem, has explored just how deeply dysfunctional the world can be and the low level crypto-fascism of everyday life. Now, I suppose, I would like to attempt to take on the voice of the solution : people, despite all the difficulties, and also inspired by those very difficulties, attempting to work together; the idea of community or many conflicting ideas of what community might be that could possibly intertwine; welcoming imperfection and “not knowing” into the ways we attempt to create changes in our world, etc. All of this is, of course, overly idealistic but if I don’t find a few ways to lighten up a bit I’m really not sure I can go on. And, perhaps more to the point, I turn thirty in three weeks and I’m mellowing with age. I have no idea whether any of these strategies I am currently exploring will become trends but if they did it might make me feel a little bit less lonely. On the other hand, if I were to feel less alone I might gradually become less interested in notions of community proving there is always some sort of paradox at the heart of everything I do.

*2. Will theater put yet greater demands before its audiences, will it turn to audiences from which a still higher level of knowledge and competence is expected? Or beliefs and ideological preferences?*

I have absolutely no idea why people still go to theater. Generally when I speak to individuals about this they respond vaguely that they are in search of something “live” and I of course relate because, especially in my life, I am overly alienated and deadened, would like nothing more than a little bit more liveness, which perhaps is a coded short-form for the fact that we would all like to feel a little bit more alive, stave off death for a little bit longer if not forever. I really see no evidence that theater is a possible way to achieve this. Perhaps in Europe it is still different, but over here in North America, in the slithering heart of corporate capitalism, people get whatever kind of theater they think they might want. We have all been reduced to niche markets and if you want to go see a big, blockbuster musical you are no better or worse than someone who wants the very best of avant-garde culture. Unfortunately, this eliminates one of the main reasons people were interested in contemporary high art culture in the first place. At any rate, about half of the television commercials I see are enormously more radical and progressive than anything I’ve seen in the theater, or even the world of art, for many years. The Russian art critic Boris Groys speaks about how Russian avant-garde artists in the twenties saw themselves as making art for the ideal men and women of the future who have yet to be born. And all innovative art has a bit of this arrogance. But most of the theater artists I’ve known have at some point in their tiny lives become sick of making work the audience simply doesn’t comprehend, begin to desire to make work for the real, living and breathing, flesh and blood people who have paid their money and desire to see something that somehow resonates with their most intimate lived experience. I think in a very literal sense it is basically no fun to, year after year after year, stand in front of an audience who is not completely with you. In a way it breaks down the very idea of what we want an audience to be. And theater, unlike visual art, requires an audience in order to really become theater. Therefore, though I do think a tiny segment of theater will continue to oscillate around an ever more complex strata of theatrical rarefaction (and I include myself in this category), I think most theater artists will eventually be drawn to speaking with people in a simpler fashion and that this will probably never change.

*3. What consequences will development of new technologies and living in a world in which communication between people is more and more mediated by technical means have on theater?*

There is no question in my mind that theater has been replaced by cinema. All of the tasks which theater used to perform so effectively, cinema now does better. So I suppose the question becomes what does it feel like to be culturally replaced (it sends one into an endless downward spiral of questioning ones identity) and what does one do about it. I have often used the example of how when painting was replaced by photography it responded instantly and energetically with an overwhelming number of new possibilities and strategies (cubism, surrealism, abstraction, color field, installation, etc.) and how theater has been not nearly as energetic or imaginative in its responses. However, I am now wondering if this is such a good example. It now seems to me that most of the strategies painting invented have turned out to be dead ends and that within the field of painting there is an enormous return to representation. Perhaps the main point is that it is extremely feeble to try and base any sort of lasting tradition on the brilliant but erratic discoveries of a few eccentric geniuses (if that is in fact what they were.) And then the larger question whether there is still any role for tradition to play in the fast paced, infinitely replaceable world in which we currently live. If the question refers to the phenomena of the Internet then I really think it is too early to tell. Over the past hundred years the world population has exploded in a completely unprecedented fashion. I sometimes think the Internet is only a way for all these people who previously didn't exist to talk to one another. And theater will of course attempt to respond. And that response will be a kind of failure. And that failure will be sociologically fascinating and beautiful but I really hope that I won't have to sit through it. Amen.

# Why all these questions?

The Mouson-Springdance Dialogue, Frankfurt

What subjects are you really interested in?

Why is it interesting for you to occupy yourself with that?

Why is it interesting for you to work with this medium?

What have your performances to with you?

Do you have an opinion or point of view on the subject?

What is your attitude towards your medium?

Who looks over your shoulder when you are at work?

What is your specific input in your performance?

Are you provocative in your work?

Are you making a comment?

Are you expressing feelings?

What is your position as an artist in your work?

Do you think people can learn something from you? Why are you not a teacher?

Do you like to work with symbols and metaphors?

Are you interested in psychoanalysis? What makes you want to use it in your work?

Are you interested in politics and economics? Why have you not become a journalist?

What is the relationship between your political interests and your interests in theatre?

Is there a project that you have been eager to realize for a long time now?

Where do you get your ideas?

why all these questions?

How do you judge the viability of your ideas?

Is your idea one that you would want to spend a year or more on?

What does this idea have to do with you?

How does this idea become workable?

How do you start a new project – from a tabula rasa?

Do you create a space for thinking within the work process?

How do you organize the elements of your work, your ideas, your media, your criteria, the technology?

Imagine you are a painter: what is your attitude towards the canvas?

Imagine you are a painter: what do and don't you want to have on the canvas?

How can you realize what is in your head?

How do you construct a performance?

Do you choose one solution or do you explore several possibilities?

What part does the audience play in your performance?

Do you want something to happen between the audience and the performance?

What do you expect of the audience?

How do you feel about communicating with your audience?

What do you want to communicate with your audience?

Do you want to give something to the audience?

Do you think it important to know what the audience thinks about you? And about your work?

Do you think it important that the audience believe you?

Does the audience have to exert itself with your work? Do you want them to?

Is it important that the audience discovers the link between the performance and your idea that lie behind it?

Do you think your inner world is interesting for the audience?

Do you want the audience to have an emotional experience?

Do you want the audience to start thinking about your subject or take a position on it? Why?

Is to “realize” something for the audience the same as to “experience” something?

Do you set out to let the audience identify with the people in your performance? Or with your problems?

What reaction from the audience would displease you?

Is the audience informed about your subject before they enter the performance space?

What is the aim of this piece? How do you propose to achieve that aim?

When openness is your aim, how then do you measure whether your piece is open enough?

How many objectives can you achieve with one piece?

Can you achieve your objectives with the media you have chosen to employ?

Do you use material that is close to you and that which is distant?

Are you reconstructing a situation in order to underline something?

Are you looking for a framework? Do you want to limit or define your ideas?

Is your work open or closed?

Is your performance a statement? At the level of content or form or both?

What was your last performance about?

Is there a connection between you last piece and this new one?

What is your next project about?

How does ‘content’ become theatre?

Do content and form coincide in your work?

Can one separate content and form? Can one separate the 'what' from the 'how'?

What comes first, content or form?

Can form be presented as content? Do you want it to be?

Can content direct you towards form?

Is there a connection or a dissonance between the form and content of what you create?

Do you think that aesthetics are a form of manipulation?

Have you ever considered leaving out any and all suggestion, illusion and reference?

What is specific about theatre for you?

How specific is the medium of theatre used in your piece?

What do you mean by theatre and theatricality?

Do you accept certain principles specific to theatre such as beginning, end, time-line, and the shared space of performers and audience?

Is theatre the right medium, as far as credibility and identification are concerned?

Where do you think illusion works best, in theatre or in film?

Is theatre a medium suitable for education people?

Are you eager to do something new in the theatre?

Is this the only way for to make theatre or are there others?

According to you, what is dance?

How do you translate a subject into a dance performance?

Does your choreography say what you want it to say?

Why do you choose this art form to say what you have to say? Do you use the medium in a way that is not possible with another medium?

How do you arrive at your selection of artistic media, such as video and music?

why all these questions?

What is the performance about?

What statement do you want to make with this performance?

Where lies the essence of the piece for you?

Is it a conventional or unconventional piece?

Is it a dance project, a theatre project or a plastic arts project? Why?

Is there a political aspect to the piece?

What is the story behind the piece?

Why do you wish to this? And why exactly this way?

Why is this performance interesting to watch, to listen to, or experience?

What are the other questions?

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incomplete. please send more

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Gertrude Stein  
Ruth Margraff  
Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
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François Truffaut

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Robert Rauschenberg  
John Cage  
Yvon Rainer  
Mary Overly  
Kurt Schwitters  
Merce Cunningham  
Bill T. Jones  
William Forsythe

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incomplete. please send more.

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**THEATRES.PRESENTERS.FESTIVALS**

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**OTHER**

*Rat Conference* - <http://ratconference.com>

*Jacob Wren's Unrehearsed Beauty* -

[http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/200/300/chbooks/online/unrehearsed\\_beauty/](http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/200/300/chbooks/online/unrehearsed_beauty/)

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