

TEMPTING THE MIRACLE:  
SACRED THEATRE, OR EXPLORING SUZUKI/VIEWPOINTS AND  
COMPOSITION IN DIRECTING JOHN PIELMEIER'S *AGNES OF GOD*  
AN AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHIC MEMOIR

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A Dissertation  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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COMPOSITION IN DIRECTING JOHN PIELMEIER'S *AGNES OF GOD*

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presented by Matthew Allan Saltzberg,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy of theatre,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. M. Heather Carver

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Dr. Cheryl Black

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Professor Clyde Ruffin

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Dr. Richard Callahan

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Dr. Elaine Lawless

Nanny and Pop,  
for you.

*Et pour Ryan,  
mon chevalier à l'armure étincelante.  
Merci d'être venu dans ma vie,  
et merci d'avoir allumé la lumière.*

By good luck, I was left-handed, as indeed, throughout my whole life,  
I had never done aught in the right-handed way.

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's  
Apprenticeship*

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ABSTRACT

In December of 2008, I directed John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* as part of the University of Missouri-Columbia's academic year season. I took this opportunity to seize the moment and, through intense actor training and an auteur directorial approach, develop a performative manifesto that sought no less than the revitalization of the live theatrical event within the cultural economy. The production asked, and attempted to answer the following: What is the sacred?; What is its relationship to theatre and performance?; Can it be conjured in theatrical time and space?; If so, how?; and finally: What is the experience that sacred theatre can deliver to performers and spectators alike? For my *Agnes of God* collaborators and me, this involved a full-scale "theatreing of the sacred," an extra-ordinary event tempted – through tenacity, diligence, and a belief in the miraculous – via Tadashi Suzuki's Method of Actor Training and Anne Bogart's Viewpoints training and Composition method of performance-making. This dissertation, conceived as a piece of performative auto/ethnographic writing, explores the accidents and unpredictabilities that made the production process so wonder-full and, in endeavoring to evoke what it names, so tempts the reader's active, subjective and vulnerable participation.

“Who is it? (*silence*) Who’s there? (*silence*) It is you?”



Figure 1. Katherine Hamlett as Doctor. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

Prelude  
*topography:*  
*defining the landscape*



To begin. To act. It is always a chance.

- Ronald J. Pelias, *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher's Body*

It is necessary to begin from the beginning. A man must begin observing himself as though he did not know himself at all, as though he had never observed himself ... Study is the first step towards the possibility of change in the future.

- Georges Gurdjieff, quoted in P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*

And so begins our work, our hardest work – to bring the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and heard and our inability, finally, to do justice to it in our representation. Our [experiences] ... useless unless plumbed for forgotten revelatory moments, unexpressed longings, and the wounds of regret.

- Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*

All we can rely on in this complex process, when we are seeking out this resistant, subtle, creative emotional material, is our worldly wisdom, our human experience, our sensitivity, and our intuition.

- Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*

One writes out of one thing only – one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.

- James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

The artist searches for lightness and for exactitude in the face of rot and decay. Fueled by curiosity, energy and hope, we enter the darkness. We accept the darkness and in that acceptance sometimes we discover a thin vein of light.

- Anne Bogart, "From Hyde Park, Chicago," Anne's Blog, November 4, 2008

What we've gained in logic we've lost in faith ... The closest we come to a miracle today is in bed. And we give up everything for it. Including those bits of light that might still, by the smallest chance, be clinging to our souls, reaching back to God.

- Mother, in John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*

It is a long journey, through a country that is sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible.

- L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

Nothing on earth is more gladdening than knowing we must roll up our sleeves and move back the boundaries of the humanly possible once more.

- Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

## Warming-Up: Why Write?

“There is before every kind of performance,” says Richard Schechner, a scholar/artist whose work has shaped crucially much of my own thinking about the definitions and capabilities of performance, “a liminal time ... when performers prepare to make the leap from ‘readiness’ to ‘performance.’ This leap is decisive,” he continues, “a jump over a void of time-space ... preparing the performer for the leap, giving the performer the courage to jump into performance.”<sup>1</sup> What Schechner is speaking of is the all-important (and often neglected) warm-up component of the performance process. So, like an orchestra faced with a conductor about to raise her baton, we must tune our instruments – our *bodies* – awakening an interior sensitivity as well as a kinesthetic vulnerability to the world around us. May the journey begin.

---

*You are about to enter into a space heretofore unknown to you. There is a sign above the entrance written in the grave penmanship of the Teacher’s left hand. It reads: “Enter at your own risk ... PLEASE!” You cross the threshold filled with equal amounts of curiosity and trepidation, unsettled by the austerity of the scraped, scarred wooden floors and the barren, dingy white walls. Something arduous and urgent must occur in here, you think. As your eyes search the room anxiously, you notice the only apparent bit of instruction, scrawled in large letters across a green slate board on the far wall: TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES BEFORE ENTERING THE SPACE. You nervously comply, leaving your comfortable tennis shoes on the great pile just inside the door. Your tired, naked feet meet the cold floor; your skin turns to goose pimples as a chill runs up your spine. You step further into the room and find yourself among your fellow neophytes, who tentatively stretch their strained and neglected bodies in an attempt to rid themselves of the tensions*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 240.

*inscribed through the rush of daily life. Although you are nervous about what is yet to come, you have done such preparatory exercises before, and you immediately surrender yourself their conventions. As you search for an open space in which to work, you study the others and find yourself somewhat put at ease by the fact that you will not be taking this journey alone. Finally, you take your place in the far right-hand corner of the room and begin to work out the tension in your back and shoulders, embedded there from too many hours sitting hunched over your desk. You begin to breathe deeply, and enjoy this welcomed – if unnerving – break from routine. You make a solid attempt to clear your mind – of all its deadlines and priorities, stresses and anxieties – and to relax, to just let yourself be. In and out, you breathe, in and out, from deep within your core. In ... and out ... in ... and out. In ... and – Suddenly, you experience a sharp intake of breath as the Teacher, stolid and imposing, enters the room; His presence is so magnetic that all eyes are immediately glued to His figure. He carries with him an incredibly sturdy wooden staff that induces thoughts of extreme discipline and rigor. Before you can contemplate leaving, He bangs His scepter-like apparatus on the floor, creating a dizzyingly ominous echo that initiates you into the expedition at hand.*

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This writing, conceived during meditative walks along Columbia, Missouri’s picturesque Hinkson Creek Trail, and, later, through St. Louis’s vibrant Central West End, concerns the conjuration of the sacred in theatre through my revisionist interpretation of John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God*, a haunting tale of mystery and miracles surrounding a young Catholic nun accused of murdering her own child. With a crucial awareness of the dismal state of American theatre and the ever-diminishing interest in live performance, I sought – through rigorous corporeal methods of training and performance-making – to bring back from exile theatre’s inspiring forces and recall its conception as a site for individual and communal renewal and reinvigoration. Grounded in the notion of the sacred as “a performative movement outside the known configuration of self and world,” my production

asked and to some extent answered the following: What is the sacred?; What is its relationship to theatre and performance?; Can it be conjured in theatrical time and space?; If so, how?; and finally: What is the experience that sacred theatre can deliver to performers and spectators alike?<sup>2</sup>

With the labor-intensive but joyful research, rehearsal, and performance processes several months behind me, I assumed I was well-prepared – if not a little reluctant – to confine that galvanizing experience to several hundred typed pages. After neatly pinning to the wall a few photographs of the production for inspiration, I opened a new Word document on my laptop, and ... nothing. Just ... nothing. Night after night – for I am, by nature, a creature of the night, preferring the veil of its murky stillness to the blinding glare of the daylight hours – night after night, I sat in front of a blank screen. “Oh my,” I lamented, “there is so much to say, perhaps too much.” It seemed impossible that I should ever be able to pull everything together. I continued to stare at the screen, the cursor blinking expectantly. Anyone who really knows me knows that I am almost never at a loss for words. What was it that was keeping me from crafting the ultimate expression of my personal, artistic, and scholastic beliefs? I want to do this, I thought, I *need* to do this. Perhaps I set too lofty a goal, and I am afraid that what I actually create will never be as powerful and meaningful as I imagine it in my head and, more deeply, in my heart. Have I placed upon myself too heavy a burden by giving you, dear reader, the expectation that I will capture on the page the vitality of the fleeting moments I attempt to depict, and by implicating you, my unwitting benchfellow, in that process? How *does* one write about live performance, happenings that flash by in an instant, called into being for one brief brilliant second, only to be lost forever? A live performance is, by definition, ephemeral, a fact that is

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Yarow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, ed. Ralph Yarow (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 19.

as frustrating as it is an expression of the theatre's alchemical majesty. Indeed, the driving force behind my conjuring the sacred in theatre was, in fact, to redefine and rejuvenate the position of the live event in the cultural economy.

But perhaps a better question is: Why am I writing in the first place? It occurs to me that the written manifestation of my process must be considered as an integral part of that process, and due consideration must be given to the fact that as I write, I am inevitably reshaping a rather vibrant performative experience. And so as far as I am concerned the answer to that question must be more than 'because I have to.' This writing must devote itself to more than the completion of a degree or the addition of a line on my vita. While diplomas and extensive résumés are wonderful and (at times) frustratingly necessary, it is the genuine hunger for enlightenment and understanding that *drives* the completion of degrees and the accrument of experience that I seek to lay bare. I have just enough nerve to believe that this work will be meaningful to anyone who has a vested interest in the future of the theatre. If I want to answer the call of my predecessors discussed throughout these pages and truly translate experience into meaning, I must somehow transmit that experience to a global audience. Writing, reproducible in ways a live performance is not, facilitates that transmission. Jill Dolan, a scholar/artist whose recent book *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* serves as a vital inspiration for my own work, says that "the challenge of writing about performance as a public practice, one that circulates extensively and has some social impact, is to make it live well beyond itself, to hold it visually in memory, to evoke it with words, and to share it widely, so that its effects and potential might be known."<sup>3</sup> If crafted properly, with form tailored to content, a written accounting will not, as I once thought,

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<sup>3</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 9.

*confine* the work; rather, it will in fact *expand* it, broadening its dimensions and intensifying its significance.

I like John Updike's answer to the interrogative title of his essay "Why Write?". He says that to write is

to lift through the double magic of language and mechanical reproduction our own impressions and dreams and playful constructions into another realm of existence, into space far wider than that which we occupy, into a time theoretically eternal: *that* is the siren song that holds us to our desks, our dismal revisions, our insomnia panics, our dictionaries and encyclopedias, our lonely ... labor.<sup>4</sup>

So it is in this other realm of existence, this alternate space just beyond the reach of our daily selves, that I will situate us, you and I, co-conspirators in the intentional disobedience of convention that follows. In this way, we can continue the process depicted herein, a process begun in the past but one that together we will write – right? – back into the present and into presence, transmitting the embodied aesthetic sensations that the players named in this writing have already been feeling.

I have become like Trigorin, Chekhov's dramatic representative who knows "how it is with an obsession. The moon, for instance – day and night someone thinks only of the moon. Well, I have a moon. Day and night I'm obsessed – I must write, I must write, I must write ... I can't forget the unfinished story waiting on my desk."<sup>5</sup> Transcribing the intricacies of my intuition is no easy task, I assure you, yet it is with a hard-earned sense of discipline I press forward. Kenneth Atchity calls this "rare commodity" the "bedrock of productive writing ... determination more than self-confidence, the commitment of your will to the

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<sup>4</sup> John Updike, "Why Write?," in *Burn this Book*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Anton Chekhov, *The Sea Gull*, rev. ed., trans. Jean-Claude Van Itallie (New York: Dramatists Plays Service, Inc., 1997), 26.

dream.”<sup>6</sup> I consider myself, for the first time, a *writer*, a title filled with the special sensibility of the artist-craftsman. As a director, teacher, and scholar – the roles I play in life and, thus, in the story about to unfold – I consider myself an artist. And so now in my new role as writer, I will seek to craft this writing with the same diligence, specificity, and intensity that I did the performance process about which I am writing.

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*After being called to attention by the Teacher, you have been made to stand in stillness with your eyes closed for what feels like an eternity. He moves about the space, stalking each neophyte. The hair on your neck stands on end; the sense of tension and expectancy in the room is so thick you can feel it weighing on your attentive body. With your pulse racing and the urge to move rising in your throat, the only sound you hear is the rhythmic thumping of the Teacher’s bare feet against the floor. It’s as if the room is alive: you can hear its heartbeat as your own blood pressure rises and you can feel the sting of heat beneath your skin. Thump thump ... thump thump ... thump thump ...*

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In writing, I find myself wanting to continue the breaking of the rules instigated by our particular process of performance-making. I want to invite you, dear reader, into an experience so vividly felt that you cannot stand outside it at safe remove. Like the eloquent Stacy Holman Jones, I want to write “a world in a state of flux and movement” that “creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change,” one that is “more than a little utopian in its call to disrupt, produce, and imagine a breakthrough in – and not a respite from – the way things are and perhaps should be.”<sup>7</sup> What follows, then is daringly honest, refusing to be what it is ‘supposed’ to be because it can only be what it *wants* to be: a charged dance of

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Atchity, *A Writer’s Time: Making the Time to Write*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1995), xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 764, 763.

memory, ideology, language, and faith; a ghost light with a specific point of view illuminating a probing performative investigation involving real human beings in actual time and space. I recognize the self-righteous and (at times) indignant tone I often take throughout this writing – in my critique of the conventions of traditional scholarship, the state of American theatre, the very institution that produced my production – fully aware of the precariousness of my position as a ‘young’ scholar at the beginning of his career. But my antagonism is necessary, an act of extreme vulnerability that might just be bold enough to make a tangible impact. Anne Bogart asks: “Are you attracted to people who want to change the circumstances or to those who have accepted them?,” and answers: “I find that the most attractive individuals are those caught up in a heat of living, deeply engaged and tempting the limits of their given circumstances.”<sup>8</sup> Agitation, in my mind, equals advocacy and thus engenders change. I will not bow down to convention simply because ‘that’s the way things are done.’ Forced propriety in the name of established protocol and politics – a propriety, I expect, that often masks our true feelings – is an empty gesture, ultimately useless in its lack of embodied significance. Stepping out from behind the mask of cool objectivity, I hazard fervent emotionality in order to communicate a model of how we might better get along with each other in the world. “To write vulnerably,” says Ruth Behar, “is to open a Pandora’s box. Who can say what will come flying out?”<sup>9</sup> So here I stand, naked before God and everyone, the faith in my convictions outweighing the danger of the road I travel.

However, please understand that what follows is less a distasteful, relentless diatribe than a passionate sermon fueled by my love of theatre and my deep-seeded belief in what I

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 19.

feel the theatre can achieve. I find it impossible to exclude *feeling* and *belief* from my work, agreeing with Jill Dolan that “theater and performance studies scholars speak too rarely about how theater moves us and inspires us in our public and private worlds.”<sup>10</sup> Like performance scholar David Román, I am all too aware of the fact that “the fear that our love of theatre will call into question our critical capacities follows from our field’s efforts to credentialize itself against the charge of inconsequentiality. To indulge in our feelings of pleasure and more to the point, to write about them, is viewed as unprofessional [and should be] left to our private theatre journals . . . We are bullied into keeping our love of theatre outside of our scholarship.”<sup>11</sup> Regardless of my marginal position within the academy, I refuse to be bullied by the fear of its rejection. Indeed, in my attempt to provide a sharp analysis of the historical events I reconstitute among these pages, I actively seek to *integrate* emotion in an effort to preserve what Dolan calls “the affective gifts” such events inscribe.<sup>12</sup> I know I risk sentimentality with this work, but I suggest that analysis and emotion are not mutually exclusive; they are, in fact, inseparable, as emotion enhances and completes – rather than lessens and depletes – intellectual understanding. In this conception, objectivity is a mere fiction, challenging, in the words of pioneering ethnographer Dwight Conquergood, the positivistic notion that “being ‘too close’ is akin to losing perspective and lacking judgment.”<sup>13</sup> Behar observes that “emotion has only recently gotten a foot inside the academy and we still don’t know whether we want to give it a seminar room, a lecture hall,

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<sup>10</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 65.

<sup>11</sup> David Román, “Comment – Theatre Journals,” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2002): n.p.

<sup>12</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 355.

or just a closet we can air out now and then.”<sup>14</sup> As long as it is populated by human beings, emotion *always* has and will live inside the academy; until recently, it has been locked in the closet under the stairs, the troublesome step-child nobody wants to talk about. In an attempt to write emotion into visibility, I stand on the sturdy shoulders of those trailblazers who have come before me and position my work as proof that one *can* engage in a strong, critical reflection while accommodating what Dolan calls the “languages of emotion and images, of passion and fervor as part of a necessary, crucial representational counterdiscourse.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet, as Toni Morrison says, “if writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, even as I seek to bridge the practice/theory divide through the integration of intellect and emotion, I cannot escape the fact that this writing is born of my memory, and depicts a process that continues to live in a liminal space somewhere between intentionality and intuition. Recognizing that things don’t always resonate in ways we can understand, whatever writing does involve, it does *not* involve a mere connecting of the dots. That would be far too simplistic to encapsulate a performative process so infused with a sense of the miraculous: those unexplainable but deeply felt interventions of the supernatural into mundane existence, those splendid moments of luminosity that cannot be predetermined, those bits of light Pielmeier speaks of in the voice of his Mother Superior, lamenting a modernized world that leaves no room for miracles. Experimental performance scholar Jane Goodall asserts that “there is always special cultural power in that which cannot be told, especially if the

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<sup>14</sup> Behar, *Vulnerable Observer*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, rev. ed., ed. William Zinsser (New York: Mariner Books, 1998), 192.

inability to tell is an indicator of some phenomenon beyond the limits of what is known and definable in human experience.”<sup>17</sup> I am not writing because I’ve answered all my questions. Quite the contrary: I am writing because I am *still asking* those questions, and wish to evoke the special power of which Goodall speaks. My work enters into conversation with others while simultaneously writing itself into a conversation of its own. This writing, then, requires more than that it simply be read; it requires engagement and dialogue, it requires *participation*.

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*The Teacher whacks His staff against the floor once more. Your eyes fling wide open; your whole body jerks as it does when you suddenly awaken from a dream in which you imagine you are falling from a great height. In a thunderous tone, He commands you all to take positions along an imaginary grid pattern etched into the floor. He implores you to “BE READY FOR ANYTHING.” You think: There is nothing I have been less ready for in my entire life. As if He can hear your thoughts, the Teacher smiles at you, half in understanding, half in the sadistic pleasure of one who recognizes the difficulty of the task at hand as much as He believes in its necessity.*

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Anne Bogart – a professor, artist, and scholar who has mothered profoundly my personal aesthetic – wrote her recent collection of essays *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* in response to a post-9/11 American theatre she sees “mostly steeped in an old-fashioned aesthetic and performed on weak knees.”<sup>18</sup> The cover of the book depicts a young man engaged in a difficult high dive maneuver; immediately Bogart beckons the reader to ‘take the plunge;’ to risk for the sake of the future of a cold, fast-paced society. Demanding a bolder, more honest, personal, and intimate American theatre, Bogart states that “in the *trying*, we attempt a miracle,” but admits that she prefers ‘tempt’ over ‘attempt,’

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 18-9.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act*, 4.

as the former term embodies risk and daring.<sup>19</sup> “A risk is a leap in the dark,” she says, “a jump off a high diving board ... With no risk or leap, the available energy deflates rather than multiplies. It takes energy and courage to meet an obstacle or to tempt a miracle. When our intention is ‘to try,’ we are required to awaken sleeping parts of ourselves and to tempt in more extremes.”<sup>20</sup> And so I thank you, dear reader, for entering the dark with me. Know that I am invested in you, because I hope that what I write will make a difference to you. With the recognition that a safe space is not necessarily a comfortable one, we are in this together, you and I, and if you are willing to give yourself over to the provocation of ‘tempting’ – and I do hope you are – then we can allow our energies to multiply and our courage to fortify in traversing the difficult terrain of the frightening and exhilarating uncharted territory that lay before us. In this way, we can truly ‘tempt the miracle’ of innovation and transformation.

The polite thing to do would be to ask if you are ready. But, as I imagine you’ve already discovered, such delicacy is not what this work is about. If you’ll indulge me for just a moment, I ask that you to imagine you are standing on the edge of that high diving board, your toes curled around the sides, made white from the tightness of their grip. Now, I ask you to forgive me a moment’s impropriety as I push you over the edge.

The exercise has already begun ...

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 34.

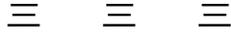
<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 35.

“We *can* find [answers].”  
“We can *look* for them. There’s a difference.”



Figure 2. *From left to right:* Milbre Burch as the Virgin/Mother, Katherine Hamlett as Doctor, and Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom as Mother. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

Interlude  
*architecture:*  
*dancing with the physical environment*



Writing isn't a straight line but a process where you have to get in trouble to get anywhere.

- Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons*

Performative writing is ... a form of writing desperately clinging to the embodiment of an utterance: look, a body was here! A form of writing eager to mirror performance patterns – ritual especially, but others as well. A call for the celebration of aesthetic writing as scholarly writing; a critique of the norms of academic writing. A sensuous reporting of observations external and internal, but mostly where such distinctions collapse into one another. A lie; a joke; a tall tale; a conflation; an exaggeration; a series of strategic elisions; narratives that are unabashedly deceptive and brutally honest. An excuse to laugh; an opportunity to cry.

- Jonathan M. Gray, quoted in Lynn C. Miller and Ronald J. Pelias, *The Green Window*

Because everyone “has” a memoir, we all have a stake in how such stories are told. For we do not, after all, simply *have* experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something – make something – with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing ... Memoir must be written because each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and history ... We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning. You tell me your story, I'll tell you mine.

- Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*

Ethnography is interaction, collaboration. What it demands is not hypotheses, which may unnaturally close study down, obscuring the integrity of the other, but the ability to converse intimately.

- Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*

Is there another language, just as exacting for the author, as a language of words? Is there another language of actions, a language of sounds – a language of word-as-part-of-movement, of word-as-lie, word-as-parody, of word-as-rubbish, of word-as-contradiction, of word-shock or word-cry? If we talk of the more-than-literal, if poetry means that which crams more and penetrates deeper – is this where it lies?

- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

What happens when we perform the artist performing the artist, repeating the act of connection and creation, breaking that experience out of one form and context and remaking it in another?

- Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political”

New theoretical wine requires new presentational bottles.

- Victor Turner, “Forward,” in Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*

## Movement 1: Methodologies of the Heart

*stomping:*  
*concentrating strength*

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*About to initiate you into the central exercise of the training, the Teacher issues an injunction forbidding any and all talking, transforming the atmosphere from tentative intrigue to solemn intensity. You are wearing two pairs of socks, and have your pant legs rolled up so that the Teacher might see your ankles. The Teacher commands you to assume the ready position: Your abdomen and buttocks are held inward, your knees are slightly bent, and your pelvis is tilted forward and down. Your shoulders are relaxed, and your neck and head are held straight in a natural extension of the torso. Your arms are down and slightly arched away from your body, your hands forming loose fists as if you were holding poles parallel to the floor. Your feet are slightly apart and parallel to each other, your heels centered under your hips. You fix your gaze directly in front of you, inhabiting a neutral – or ‘cool’ – face, and focusing, with your mind’s eye, on the image of something – anything – you both fear and desire. You are preparing for three minutes of vigorous Stomping along the imaginary grid to rhythmic music. This involves the alternate raising of each leg from the knee as high as possible and Stomping directly and forcefully down with your entire foot, striking the floor violently in a fierce, swift motion. You are to move continuously and from your center, with no sudden changes of direction. Your upper body must not move; if one were to stretch a curtain across the room at waist height, it should appear to her as if you are floating around the space. You are told you must Stomp one-quarter of an inch into the hard wooden floor as if you were reaching the center of the earth. You wonder how all of this is possible, and fear for the safety of your legs and feet. Uncertain about both the demands and the merits of the activity, the first strains of the fierce, driving music fills the space. The Teacher once again bangs His staff. You raise your right leg, and ...*

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Eugenio Barba says, “Memory guides our actions. It is memory which makes it possible for us to penetrate beneath the skin of the times and to find the numerous paths which lead to our origins, to our first day in our craft.”<sup>1</sup> Anne Bogart believes “the act of memory is a physical act and lies at the heart of the art of theatre. If the theatre were a verb, it would be ‘to remember’.”<sup>2</sup> In Richard Schechner’s theory of restored behavior – or “the key process of every kind of performance” in which bits of previously behaved behaviors “can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed” – Baz Kershaw uncovers the notion that because “memory is the process through which performance is transmitted, ... restored behavior is memory made manifest.”<sup>3</sup> Kershaw then establishes a doubled sense of memory on which all performance depends: memory *in* performance and memory *of* performance, ultimately finding that “exactly *how* performance plays with the doubled past is what gives it its ... radical edge in the present.”<sup>4</sup>

I like these characterizations of memory as a corporeal activity, for that is how I experience the conjuration of the past in my own body. Although I don’t suppose any of us is immune from remembering things the way we may wish to remember them, my own life experience has taught me that I have an incredibly precise and accurate memory inexorably tied to my senses, rendering it rather difficult to explain. The recollection of a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, trans. Richard Fowler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 34-5; Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), 173.

<sup>4</sup> Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 174.

pastime through one or more senses immediately engages the others. The slightest taste or smell transports me to another time and place and I can see and feel my surroundings with incredible clarity. This works in the reverse: I can smell and taste things I have experienced in the past as if I were once again delighting in their goodness or turning my nose up in disgust. I can hear things said in the past, articulated in the present as if they had been recorded and replayed. Images of the past rush back to me in a very real sense; I can feel their sensations coursing through my veins and see them playing out like an old home movie before me. I often say: 'If you could videotape what I am experiencing right now, and go back in time and compare the tape to what actually happened, the two versions would be nearly identical.' This time-traveling lucidity is sometimes a burden, as I'm certain each of us has things we'd rather *not* remember. But in the case of the *Agnes of God* process, I am all too happy to plumb the depths of my memory to recapture the vitality of each wonderful moment. In this manner, this writing is itself a restoration of behavior, behavior that Schechner tells us is separate from its origin "and therefore can be 'worked on,' changed, even though it has 'already happened'."<sup>5</sup> Inasmuch as the form of this writing is a performance in its own right, its *content* is itself a dynamization of past events. I am actually re-performing – and unavoidably re-shaping – these events on the page in an attempt to restore behaviors originally behaved so many months ago. Thus, in "simultaneously having been, being, and becoming," this writing constitutes *and* continues the process discussed herein through the lens of my own memory.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Kershaw believes that this “everyday cultural practice” of “reminiscence-as-performance ... may reconfigure a sense of history in the present, and that this may be empowering not just for the reminiscer but also for the audience. Such reconfigurations,” he says, “may be radical, and when they are they might just give us a glimpse of a genetics of performance.”<sup>7</sup> It is that very glimpse that I am tempting here: a reconfiguration of history in the present tense so that we may enter its dimensions and submit to its sensations. Thus, as I am about to engage with Kershaw’s notion of doubled memory – memory *in* the crafting of this performance writing (form) and *of* the performance I am writing about (content) – it seems only natural that this performance be staged as a memoir, a close cognate of the French *mémoire*, meaning memory.

In *I Could Tell You Stories*, an elegant collection of essays that has shaped my own understanding of memoir writing in innumerable ways, Patricia Hampl says: “I don’t write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know,” thus acknowledging the tangibility and processual nature of reflection.<sup>8</sup> As if in collusion with Anne Bogart, Hampl speaks of the “implacable command” to “remember, remember (*I dare you, I tempt you*),” instigating a restoration of behavior with the notion that “to write one’s life is to live it twice.”<sup>9</sup> And so armed with the desire to continue the conversation, I take up the baton of Hampl’s dare, understanding that memoir, as the “minion of experience ... is not in the service of the past; it is the future which commands its presence.”<sup>10</sup> Crafting the written

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<sup>7</sup> Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 177.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 223, 180.

manifestation of the *Agnes of God* process as a memoir not only allows the work to live in a more durable form, but, perhaps most importantly, it allows the work to press forward.

However, I do this with a crucial awareness that essential questions of narrative authority arise when the primary account is used not as material *for* history and analysis, but *as* history and analysis itself. Where are you to put your trust<sup>2</sup>, you might wonder. If memoir is “literature’s changeling, the bad apple, ever suspect, slightly illegitimate,” then I seek to challenge that notion by crafting what Cheri Register calls a “fully realized” memoir that situates “personal memory in precise public places, the specific geographical, historical, and cultural settings where life-shaping events occur.”<sup>11</sup> In working to negate the notion that memoir is a “flabby genre with the habit of dithering aimlessly,” I recognize, along with Hampl, that memoir “can present its story *and* consider the meaning of the story,” and, along with Register, that to engage your interest, I must situate my personal recollections in a public space and “push beyond description to interpretation.”<sup>12</sup> After all, I am not interested in asserting authority but rather am tempting a sincere, active, and *inviting* rendering of experience. More than mere nostalgia, what follows tempts a critical *and visceral* testimony, an engagement with and in the transience of my memory as I traverse the thin line between the personal and the public. Despite the fact that I was graced with a multitude of remarkable collaborators – named throughout this writing, and you, dear reader, included – I cannot deny the fact that I was the ultimate instigator of the process, inspired by a lifetime of events that, for now, culminates within these very pages. As I seek to capture the immediacy of the

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Hampl, “You’re History,” in *Tell Me True: Memoir, History, and Writing a Life*, ed. Patricia Hampl and Elaine Tyler May (St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2008), 141; Cheri Register, “Memoir Matters,” in Hampl and May, 149.

<sup>12</sup> Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*, 202, 33; Register, “Memoir Matters,” 153.

process here reconvened, I can only hope that my passion, attention, and depth of investigation in some way speak to the potency and possibility of the events I reinscribe.

In the closing pages of her essay, Register cautions: “Memoir introduces us ... to someone we may not know, but unless it also tells us something we could not imagine without the author’s testimony,” our readers will experience little vested interested in our work.<sup>13</sup> Does it matter to you to know what has inspired me and provoked me to engage in this work in the first place? To know that I am short, white, male, gay, come from a middle-class background, and am left-handed? To know that I lived alone with my ninety-six year old grandfather and took care of him for over a year before moving half-way across the country to return to school to complete my doctorate? To know that I have a partner I am in love with and who is in love with me, and who has made this work – from its inception through to the last key stroke of this writing – financially, emotionally and intellectually possible? To know that I have little patience, don’t stand for mediocrity, and live by the credo “You do it or you don’t”? To know that I love “celebrity,” am having a love affair with the television, and have memorized more movie and television trivia than might be considered seemly? To know that I am a self-confessed ‘pop culture junkie’ who has given seminar papers on *The Golden Girls* and national conference papers on *The Wizard of Oz*, my absolute favorite movie of all time? To know that I was alone with my grandmother when she died, and watched her draw her last breath? To know that I am a confirmed Roman Catholic? To know that although theatre is now my religion, I still believe in God and in the power of prayer? To know that I believe in miracles? You may find this information tangential, but I assure you the threads that make up the fabric of my experience inform my consciousness of perception in ways too profound to ignore. The integration of my life-story in this writing may seem

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<sup>13</sup> Register, “Memoir Matters,” 160.

pretentious, but Carolyn Ellis – in a “Methodological Novel” that serves as model for my own scholarly narrative – finds that it is actually “self-absorbed to pretend that you are somehow outside of what you study.”<sup>14</sup> I tempt the notion that ‘personal’ does not equal ‘self-indulgent,’ and have the temerity to believe that the more I reveal about myself intellectually *and* emotionally – the more context you have for the site of instigation of this work which, after all, is *me* – the more meaningful and affecting the work will be to you.

However, while I will be brutally forthcoming, I will be brutally forthcoming with a point. This is not a free-for-all; I do not intend to trace every last moment of my nearly thirty years on this earth. William Zinsser, a former professor of writing at Yale, makes a clear distinction between autobiography, “which moves in a dutiful line from birth,” and memoir, which “narrows the lens, focusing on a time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid,” an apt description for the process depicted herein.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, I am crafting this memoir with a crucial recognition of Ruth Behar’s notion that bits of autobiographical information are “only interesting if one is able to draw deeper connections between one’s personal experience and the subject under study,” a process that requires “a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied.”<sup>16</sup> I am not only reconstituting live, once-in-a-lifetime events that occurred in history and now exist in the ephemeral realm of my memory, but I am also situating those events within the specific context of various

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<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 34.

<sup>15</sup> William Zinsser, “Introduction,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, rev. ed., ed. William Zinsser (New York: Mariner Book, 1998), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

experiences that, without them, our production of *Agnes of God* would have never manifest itself as such.

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*You have been Stomping for nearly one minute now, and your leg muscles are burning. It is becoming harder and harder to raise your knees and your focus wafts between a concentration on your image and a self-conscious awareness of exactly what it is your body is doing. You notice tension in your arms, shoulders, and back, and do your best to assuage it, remembering the Teacher's command to prevent your energy from traveling upward by controlling it in your core. Sweat has begun to pool at your hairline and run down your back. Your heels ache, and the Teacher screams and bangs His staff to the beat of the music when you and your fellow neophytes give in to exhaustion and allow sluggishness to seep in. Determined, you press on, not entirely certain how much more of this you'll be able to take.*

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As I confront the conception of memory as 'unofficial' knowledge, it would be irresponsible of me to neglect the dubious position personal narrative holds within the realm of scholarship. Hampl and co-editor Elaine Tyler May assert that "memoir has become the signature literary genre of the age," and Zinsser proclaims that "this is the age of memoir ... Never has personal narrative gushed so profusely from the American soil ... Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it."<sup>17</sup> Ruth Behar wonders: "At a moment when the autobiographical voice is so highly commodified ... shouldn't scholars write against the grain of this personalizing of culture rather than reproduce it?"<sup>18</sup> Yet, she ultimately concedes that "autobiography has emerged, for better or worse, as the key form of storytelling in our time," and makes a startling provocation: "Isn't it a pity that scholars, out of some sense of

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Hampl and Elaine Tyler May, "Introduction," in Hampl and May, 5; William Zinsser, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>18</sup> Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 25.

false superiority, should try to rise above it all?”<sup>19</sup> What Behar is writing against here is the academy’s propensity to insulate itself from the general public, an act that, in my estimation, renders it inconsequential. And so in the necessary act of making my work accessible to anyone and everyone – from my mother to the most learned scholar to the casual theatre goer to the non-theatre goer – this writing is conceived as my own humble attempt to continue to work against the misguided notion that the academy would profane itself were it to express itself in disturbingly personal – and *present* – terms.

In *Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing* editors David Bleich and Deborah Holdstein open their discussion quoting controversial scholar Michael Bérubé, who reminds us that “as long as the scholarship in question concerns humans and is written by humans, readers should at least entertain the possibility that nothing human should be alien to it.”<sup>20</sup> While I find this notion as “self-evident” as Bleich and Holdstein suggest, they make the astute observation that it “is only now becoming acceptable in the humanities ... to admit the full range of human experience into formal scholarly writing.”<sup>21</sup> This involves permitting “the risks, the personal reflections, the experiments, the errors, the awkward moments characteristic of ... real research,” and offers “understanding that is more helpful because more clearly anchored in human experience.”<sup>22</sup> The agency of *experience* in scholarship seems particularly called for in theatre, a subjective discipline by definition that situates the body as its primary instrument and emotion as its raw material. However, Bleich

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Bérubé, quoted in David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein, “Introduction: Recognizing the Human in the Humanities,” in *Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing*, ed. David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein (Logan: Utah University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>21</sup> David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4, 7.

and Holdstein make apt use of the urgent present participle form of the verb ‘to become;’ my own recent experience of the resistance to this kind of work is indicative of the fact that the acceptance of experience in scholarship is still very much *in process*. Earlier this year, I was preparing an article for publication regarding my non-drag, gender-confounding solo performance of Academy Award-winning actress Joan Crawford adapted from archival materials. The article included significant sections of what I thought were vivid descriptions of what actually occurred during the adaptation, rehearsal, and performance process, I was continuously asked to pare back my “narrative sections” – the editors also used the word “story,” diminutively wrapped in quotes, as if I had submitted a Mother Goose nursery rhyme! – and/or support them with “academic fact.” Of course, in my eyes, the narrative of my process *was* my “academic fact.” Actually, I was interested in facts or proof or evidence in the authoritative sense the editors apparently preferred. Was my work insignificant because it wasn’t merely relegated to a stringing together of other ideas and/or because it involved research beyond the confines of a library? The editors found my work assumptive and seemed to trivialize what I was doing because my work lived *physically* in real time and space. Their disdain appeared grounded in what is perhaps one of the greatest fears of the academic: the fear that they might not know something, or better yet: the fear that they are being confronted with something they can’t understand in the same way they understand, say, that five plus five equals ten. In other words, I was presenting them with scholarship that lives in the body and defies objective prescription and a linear sense of logic; I take it as no small victory that the editors apparently found this rather unsettling. But is that what scholarship has become, I asked myself, an endless recycling of the ideas of others bereft of the danger of the real-life implications work of this nature tempts?

And so my work enters the struggle to situate prominently the position of human experience in scholarship, taking up the challenge set out by Arthur P. Bochner in his beautifully written essay “Narrative’s Virtues”: to expose “the suppressed emotionality that motivates academics to oppose innovations.”<sup>23</sup> Bochner indicts the “scientific conventions that equate knowing with seeking from a distance,” conventions that “foster the illusion that our own relationships have little impact on our work: what we see, how we reflect on and interpret our results, what questions we ask, what answers we expect, and so on.”<sup>24</sup> He believes “the call of stories” serves as our inspiration “to find language that is adequate to the darkness and obscurity of experience ... Narrative is true to experience in the sense that experience presents itself in a poetic dimensionality saturated with the possibilities of meaning, however perishable, momentary, and contingent.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this “poetic dimensionality” is what Patricia Hampl speaks of when she says “the roots of memoir are ... in poetry. The chaotic lyric impulse, not the smooth drive of plot, is the engine of memory. Flashes of half-forgotten moments flare up from their recesses.”<sup>26</sup> In my writerly rendering of the *Agnes of God* process, I locate my use and understanding theory *within* personal experience; my practice as a theatre artist cannot – and should not – be separated from my intellectual musings. With each word I type, I issue a call out into the chaos of my memoried experiences, to bring back from “darkness and obscurity” material of personal and public value and interest, so that I might recollect the significance of past experiences and transform them into a work that is as effective as it is tangible.

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur P. Bochner, “Narrative’s Virtues,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7.2 (2001): 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>26</sup> Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*, 224.

The weaving of personal experience and theoretical discourse in this writing is indeed a turn to the poetic, what Adrienne Rich describes as “an instrument for embodied experience.”<sup>27</sup> In *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher’s Body*, Ron Pelias sets out four criteria required by the poetic essay as a means for rendering performance: coherence, plausibility, imagination, and empathy. A coherent poetic essay contains parts that must “become intertwined” and “find relationships with one another”; a plausible poetic essay is one that “seeks an internal logic, one that may be filled with ambiguity, tension, and contradictions,” and, “held against the external world, ... it illustrates the possible”; an aesthetic poetic essay “privileges the sensuous, the figurative, the expressive,” and calls for “an aesthetic transaction, an encounter between writer and reader”; finally, an empathetic poetic essay “strives to feel with others, to understand what others see,” and “invites dialogue.”<sup>28</sup> It is with these criteria that I will consistently check myself, for this kind of embodied scholarship does not necessitate the abandon of analysis and the embrace of the willy-nilly. Rather, it calls for a more fully engaged scholarship, a visceral kind of scholarship: one that lives in the whole of the body, with the heart functioning as its nerve center. It doesn’t bypass the mind, but rather engages the intellect via a sensuousness that unsettles, calls into question, and takes a deeper look at anything and everything that falls under its purview.

The muscularity of this writing is enacted through a kind of embodied poetic writing that captures my production’s “artistic pulse” through, in Pelias’s words, “the dual presence of art, that of the original performance event being discussed and that of the performance

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<sup>27</sup> Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: Norton, 1993), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald J. Pelias, *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher’s Body* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), xiii.

event occurring on the page.”<sup>29</sup> We call this performative writing or, according to Jonathan Gray, “a recognition of the ability of words on the page to perform and an attempt to write in such a way that draws attention to that performance ... a strategy of discursive production that turns against its tendencies to sediment meaning and shape perceptions.”<sup>30</sup> Gray’s comments come in *The Green Window*, essays from a performative writing conference hosted by Southern Illinois University’s Department of Speech Communication in 2001, the proceedings of which conference conveners Lynn C. Miller and Ron Pelias capture fittingly when they say that performative writing is “where the body and the spoken word, performance practice and theory, the personal and the scholarly, come together.”<sup>31</sup> Like Peggy Phelan, “rather than describing the performance event in ‘direct signification’” I want this writing “to enact the affective force of the performance event again,” playing itself out in an “ongoing temporality” that is squarely focused on tempting the consorting of the supposedly disparate sensibilities Miller and Pelias identify.<sup>32</sup> In this way, as Miller has noted elsewhere, this type of work “allows one’s life stories to signify and resonate within multiple layers of consequence: marking the private, spiritual configurations of self in a public arena and creating a space for new possibilities for transformation and communion between

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan M. Gray, quoted in *The Green Window: Proceedings of the Giant City Conference on Performative Writing*, ed. Lynn C. Miller and Ronald J. Pelias (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), vii.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn C. Miller and Ronald J. Pelias, “A Beginning Preface,” in Ibid., v.

<sup>32</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 11.

performer and audience.”<sup>33</sup>

In an effort to craft such a vibrant performative memoir, I take up the charge of these scholar/artists who advocate a “sensuous scholarship” that “eject[s] the conceit of control in which mind and body ... are considered separate.”<sup>34</sup> If, as in Tami Spry’s conception, performative writing truly “composes the body into being,” then my work brings such sensuousness to the forefront in writing about a performance in which theoretical suppositions and innovations were literally explored *in* and transmitted *through* the bodies of the participants, suffusing the performance with vitality rather than transforming it into a purely intellectual exercise devoid of feeling or sentiment.<sup>35</sup> As this work privileges the body as a site of knowledge, it beckons the invisible into a tangible, visible *presence*. As you will see over the course of pages forthcoming, the notion of *presence* is integral to our conception of the sacred, and so now is important to note how expertly performative writing cradles this discussion. This is because, according to Della Pollock, “performative writing is evocative. It operates metaphorically to render absence present – to bring the reader into contact with ‘other worlds,’ ... worlds that are other-wise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight.”<sup>36</sup> This sentiment describes not only the *Agnes of God* process itself, but also the potential effectiveness of the performance playing out on the page. If I am truly to evoke what I name, then I must situate

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn C. Miller, “Witness to the Self: The Autobiographical Impulse in Performance Studies,” in *Communication: Views from the Helm of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Judith S. Trent (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 321.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xvii.

<sup>35</sup> Tami Spry, quoted in Miller and Pelias, ix.

<sup>36</sup> Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 80.

you, dear reader, within that very same experience, not in a simulation of it. Performative writing as “an inherently dialogic endeavor” that “renders absence present by evolving a world of meaning upon which the reader may now enter” enables me to generate no less a galvanizing experience than you would have received had you joined us in the process of training, performance-making or performance-witnessing.<sup>37</sup>

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*Two minutes have now passed. Your heart is beating like a jack hammer, sweat is pouring out of every orifice imaginable, your feet throb and your legs feel as if they are filled with cement. In your periphery, you catch a glimpse of the Teacher's knowing glare as He stalks back and forth in the small lane in the 'downstage' area of the workspace that serves as a receptacle for remnants of the outside world: water bottles, knapsacks, and notebooks. By now, through a combination of willpower, focus, and faith, you have involuntarily begun to give yourself over to the work. You notice that although you feel corporeal pain, somehow you seem internally energized, more awake than you have felt in a long time. But it is not, you realize, a wakefulness that could otherwise be achieved through a sound night's sleep or a lessening of your daily responsibilities. You seem to be standing outside yourself, your senses acute in a deep vulnerability to your external surroundings and internal reflections. Unexplainable as it is sensuous, a deep fire is beginning to burn in your core, driving you to work even harder.*

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Although Zinsler believes memoir to be “the perfect product of our confessional times,” Hampl finds that memoir is actually “less an intrusive lust for confession than a hankering for the intimacy of this first-person voice, the deeply satisfying sense of being spoken to privately. More than a story, we want a voice speaking softly, urgently, in our ear.

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<sup>37</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 194.

Which is to say, to our heart.”<sup>38</sup> The sensuous intimate conversation of which Hampl speaks is enacted in the performance of this writing within the scope of auto/ethnography, a “methodology of [my] heart” that privileges “passions, puzzles, and possibilities” and functions as the foundation of this entire investigation.<sup>39</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner define auto/ethnography as

writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural . . . In [auto/ethnographic] texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as . . . stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language.<sup>40</sup>

In their conception of auto/ethnography, Ellis and Bochner significantly situate writing, research, and embodiment with a singular praxis, one that is subjectively aware of its surrounding circumstances and features concrete action through the direct revelation of such action. Dwight Conquergood calls the work of auto/ethnography an “*embodied practice*, . . . an intensely sensuous way of knowing” that challenges the construction of a mind/body hierarchy, disallowing “mental abstractions and rational thought” to be taken as “superior to sensual experience, bodily sensations, and the passions.”<sup>41</sup> According to D. Soyini Madison, when, in performative writing, “we recognize that the *body* writes, . . . meaning and experiences in the field are filtered and colored through sensations of the body – that is,

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<sup>38</sup> Zinsser, “Introduction,” 3; Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald J. Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic & Daily Life* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>40</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000), 739.

<sup>41</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 352.

through body knowledge. If we accept that knowledge has infinite origins and forms, we are able to accept knowledge from and of the body.”<sup>42</sup> The *Agnes* production process was a sweaty, carnal practice built upon the principle that the truest impulse is that of the body, and it demands a writing just as fleshy. In this manner, performative auto/ethnographic writing – “writing that does what it says it is doing by doing it” – seems to be the most effective marriage of content and form, because “in performative writing things happen; it is writing that is consequential, and it is about a world that is already being performed.”<sup>43</sup> My work is conceived as what ethnographer John Van Maanen might call an “impressionist tale,” or an “imaginative rendering of fieldwork” that, through metaphor, imagery, and an “expansive recall” of the fieldwork experience, tempts “to draw an audience into an unfamiliar story world and allow it, as far as possible, to see, hear, and feel as the [researcher] saw, heard, and felt.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than presenting the product of an auto/ethnographic investigation, I will instead unfold an auto/ethnographic exploration still very much *in process*.

In an excellent essay on scholarly memoir, Margaret Willard-Traub significantly groups memoir and ethnography as “reflective” academic practices that are “situated with regard to the subject position of the writer/researcher” and, in part, “define themselves against traditional expectations for ‘objectivity’ that require, for instance, a scholar to adopt a personal detachment from his or her object of study or to maintain a certain distance from

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<sup>42</sup> Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 195.

<sup>43</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2003), 93-4.

<sup>44</sup> John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 102-3.

potential audiences.”<sup>45</sup> Historically, ethnographic memoirs are rooted in the diaries of pioneer field researcher Bronislaw Malinowski, especially 1967’s *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. The title of that work speaks to the fact that, as Carolyn Ellis points out, personal tales of what went on ‘behind the scenes’ of a research project were usually relegated to a volume separate from that of the research document out of a fear that the research wouldn’t be taken seriously.<sup>46</sup> Fortified with the belief that an investigative process must be rendered within its full context, my work participates in what Barbara Tedlock identifies as a shift in the 1970s from an emphasis on participant observation to the “observation of participation” and to the process of writing.<sup>47</sup> Madison asserts that “in writing from our body, we are writing from the memories (and field notes!) of our embodied space and impressions in the field.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, memoir, as act, active, and action, answers the call of what Norman K. Denzin defines as the “seventh moment of [qualitative] inquiry, a postexperimental period of writing and representation,” that seeks a highly reflexive and subjective form of ethnography and is “in the business of not just interpreting but of changing the world.”<sup>49</sup> The intimate, sensuous alternative practice of scholarly memoir displays “that such reflexivity is not beside the point of good academic work, but instead is central to rigorous scholarly practice,” and, I

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<sup>45</sup> Margaret Willard-Traub, “Scholarly Memoir: An Un-‘Professional’ Practice,” in Bleich and Holdstein, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Ellis, *Ethnographic I*, 50.

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Tedlock, “From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41 (1991): 69-94.

<sup>48</sup> Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 195.

<sup>49</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*, 80, 124.

hope, can stimulate our imaginations and ask the questions we dare not ask in any other arena.<sup>50</sup>

Like Pelias, I “put on display a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer” to that which we are writing about.<sup>51</sup> Yet, my use of this highly subjective form tempts a tricky terrain, for not only, as director, did I ‘govern’ the culture I was studying, I also *created* that culture through the choice of script and the assembling of the cast. It is no small wonder that Behar asks: “How do you write subjectivity into ethnography in such a way that you can continue to call what you are doing ethnography?”<sup>52</sup> Pelias’s paradoxical handling of this quandary is both amusing and daunting: “Rule 1: Make sure the self is at the center of the report. Rule 2: Make sure the self is sufficiently in the background. Self-indulgence is not permitted. Being boring is even worse.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, I am comforted – and hope you are too – by the fact that, as Conquergood points out, “the undermining of objectivist science came roughly at the same time as the collapse of colonialism.”<sup>54</sup> Situating our ethnographic endeavors in the body instigates a tangibility that allows us to actively work at our scholarship in a concrete way both *for* and *with* our participant-collaborators, giving voice to the proprietary silence that often looms in more traditional scholarship, masking the real-life, embodied implications of such work. Joni L. Jones captures this sentiment eloquently when she says, “Body-to-body,

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<sup>50</sup> Willard-Traub, “Scholarly Memoir,” 33.

<sup>51</sup> Pelias, *Methodology of the Heart*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Behar, *Vulnerable Observer*, 6-7.

<sup>53</sup> Pelias, *Writing Performance*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography,” 351.

we are less able to retreat into the privacy of our own limited self-serving thinking, our stereotypes and biases. We have to acknowledge the validity of another viewpoint, because it is living right there in front of us.”<sup>55</sup> In this way, my work conforms to what I have believed all along: that, as Denzin says, “it is not enough just to do ethnography or qualitative inquiry. Of course we seek to understand the world, but we demand a performative politics that leads the way to radical social change.”<sup>56</sup>

As the recent return to the body in ethnography has functioned as the great unmasking of what Conquergood refers to as its “imperialist underpinnings,” so too has our return to the body within the *Agnes of God* process challenged the patriarchal notion of director-as-tyrant in the field of performance.<sup>57</sup> The training and staging methods employed in the process privilege a collaboration that, in Scott T. Cummings’s words, is “profound and intimate” and subverts “the singular authority of the director in rehearsal.”<sup>58</sup> I adopted a style of directing warranted by my ethnographic approach, one that understands, according to Tony award-winning director George C. Wolfe, that “you have to be *available* to the room, as much as you have to be in charge of the room.”<sup>59</sup> Rather than standing there and demanding that everyone come to me, I went to where my collaborators were. This kind of director, says Wolfe,

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<sup>55</sup> Joni L. Jones, “Performance and Ethnography, Performing Ethnography, Performance Ethnography,” in Madison and Hamera, 344.

<sup>56</sup> Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*, 225.

<sup>57</sup> Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography,” 351.

<sup>58</sup> Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITTI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 225.

<sup>59</sup> George C. Wolfe, “The Solution Can Come from Anybody,” in *The Alchemy of Theatre, the Divine Science: Essays on Theatre and the Art of Collaboration*, ed. Robert Viagas (New York: Playbill Books, 2006), 102.

woos their collaborators ... and challenges them to go on a journey. Then, when they get there, they feel much more empowered because they feel it's of their creation. Of course, you've guided them and you've asked the questions and you've challenged them in a way it ends up fulfilling the original vision that you had. But if it all works right, you get something that's even richer than you envisioned.<sup>60</sup>

It is not so surprising that, after seeing the show and being briefed on our unconventional process, several spectators inquired into the exact nature of my role in the process, intimating that if the actresses had actually done what they said they did, there would have been little left for me to do. Indeed, the actresses created the performance score; I simply shaped it. The performance text may have been born out of my "clarity of vision," as ensemble member Milbre Burch is so quick to remind me whenever I attempt to defer credit, but it was the discipline and intensity and artistry of my collaborators that brought that vision to life.

These collaborators were generous enough to allow me to film each and every rehearsal and to record several private conversations with them throughout the process and in the months following the production's close. In an even greater act of generosity, they have allowed me to reproduce their words and actions here, so that their thoughts and feelings can dance with my own, enhancing the dialogic nature of this work. In the telling of my own story, I am unavoidably implicating the lives of others, hence the necessity of the curious slash within the term 'auto/ethnography.' I feel a great deal of responsibility in writing about my collaborators; I care for them all dearly, and if our work together can be considered a success, it is to their benevolence of spirit and implicit sense of trust that the credit must go. Following Geertz's command "not only [to] think realistically and concretely *about*" my participants, "but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them," I enact what Michael Jackson terms a "radical empiricism," one that "stresses the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 106.

ethnographer's *interactions* with those he or she lives with and studies," a shift in ethnography's traditional approach that Conquergood identifies as the shift "from Other-as-theme to Other-as-interlocutor."<sup>61</sup> I do this in the hope that the body-to-body interfacing I engage in with my collaborators will serve as a model for how you, dear reader, might engage with *my* memoried body, inevitably written into every last inch of every last page. As Ruth Behar says: "The bottom line about ethnography is that it is about forming relationships; it is about the search for connection within and across borders."<sup>62</sup>

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*The loud percussive music is nearing its climax. Through a softening of your focus, you notice your fellow neophytes forming a line at the back of the space. You Stomp your way over to join them, your heart racing in anticipation of what is to come. The Teacher screams, "This is your last chance! Fight!" Suddenly, you feel a rush of superhuman strength come over you: you can raise your knees higher and Stomp harder than ever before. When the music finally comes to an abrupt halt, you crash to the floor as one, like marionettes with their strings cut. Exhausted-yet-energized, you hold your body in tension so that your energy does not dissipate. Afraid that the slightest misstep will incur the Teacher's wrath, you fight the temptation to relax and remain outwardly motionless as your insides pulse relentlessly. Heaving to catch your breath in what feels like an eternity of silence, you wait for the next instruction. And you wait ... and wait ... unaware that the next exercise has already begun.*

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As I read over the preceding passages, I find rekindled within myself a sense of why I am crafting a performative auto/ethnographic memoir in the first place; once again, I stand

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<sup>61</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 23; Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 3; Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography," 354.

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Behar, "Ethnography: Cherishing Our Second-Fiddle Genre," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28 (1999): 476.

awestruck in the promise of ethnography's potency. I first discovered this method of inquiry at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the classes of Dr. M. Heather Carver and Dr. Elaine J. Lawless, who taught me that my passion for theatre belonged in the classroom, and that my passion for research belonged in the rehearsal hall. My initiation into the training methods employed in the *Agnes* process completed an empty picture: their intense physicalizations instilled a craft and an artistry within the whole of my body that the more intellectualized methods of acting training never could. In much the same way, my study of ethnography now completes an empty picture twice over, for it is the corporeality of the practice of ethnography, perfectly wedded to the practice of the theatre, that has allowed me to function as a scholar/artist in the most complete envisioning of myself yet. The discovery of ethnography as a sensuous methodology that problematizes our relations with each other as human beings allowed me hit my investigative stride. Disinterested in the safe remove of depersonalized scholarship, ethnography has allowed me push past the tedium of studying historical events and working with theoretical discourses in a disembodied – and ultimately inconsequential – manner.

A scholar/artist in her own right, ethnographer Anna Deavere Smith believes that how we live and how we treat each other should be at stake in our work, and that performance artists, as caretakers *and* creators of culture and the human condition, give “us the allowance to imagine things another way.”<sup>63</sup> She continues: “One of the best things about being an artist is ... sharing vulnerabilities, sharing the things that make us human.”<sup>64</sup> *Troubling Violence: A Performance Project*, Heather and Elaine's recent auto/ethnographic work, is an excellent example of the dynamic humanitarianism of which Smith speaks. The book,

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<sup>63</sup> Anna Deavere Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

conceived as a conversational play script in a flawless marriage of form and content, is a moving piece of performative writing that deftly traces the “multiple and circular patterns” of their development of troupe in which performers deliver true narratives provided by women (and men) who have experienced domestic violence.<sup>65</sup> I am one such performer, and can recognize in the written account the power I have felt in moments of performance and post-performance discussions. Through synchronicity, or the attempt to be present to “moments in our lives when the potential for things to come together is ripe with possibility,” Heather and Elaine say they “seek to provide more of a holistic experience” for the reader, one that acknowledges “the footsteps and the landscape of the terrain of this work.”<sup>66</sup> Their highly collaborative “dances into new territory” are, to me, a success: the book is a dialogue in the literal sense, is critically aware of its position within the ethnographic conversation, bravely exposes the true real-life messiness of their work, and packs a powerful emotional punch while still rigorously engaging the reader’s intellectual faculties.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, their work is an example of what Jill Dolan calls a “utopian performative,” those “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”<sup>68</sup> Continuing in Heather and Elaine’s legacy, I conceive of *this* work as “a civic, participatory, collaborative project”

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<sup>65</sup> M. Heather Carver and Elaine J. Lawless, *Troubling Violence: A Performance Project* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

projected through a “pluralism that challenges existing ways of knowing and representing the world.”<sup>69</sup> I can only tempt such scholastic and artistic heights in my own performative act, an act that seeks, in the end, to make tangible a vision of how we might better function as embodied, empowered, and empathetic world citizens.

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<sup>69</sup> Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*, 17, 8.

“May I be present?”  
“Yes. Of course.”

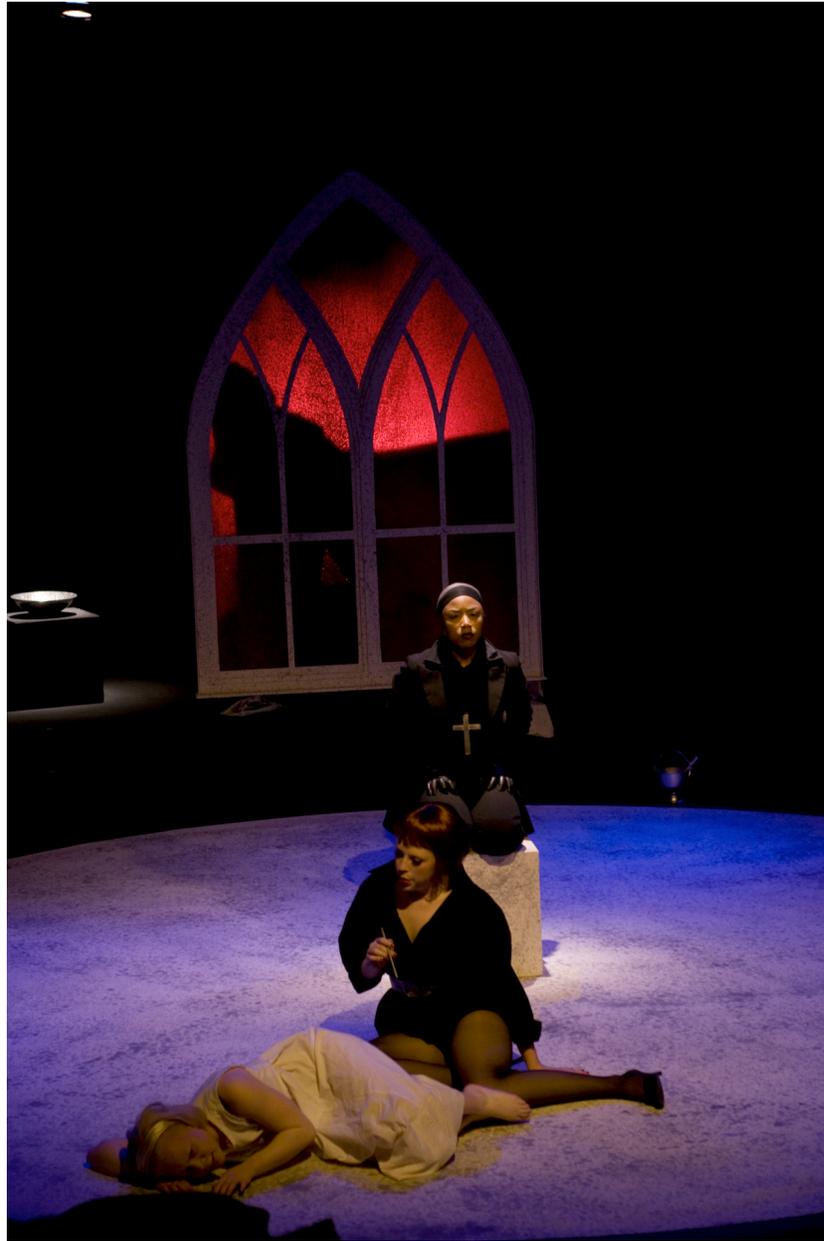
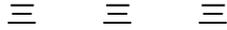


Figure 3. *From top to bottom:* Milbre Burch as the Virgin/Mother, Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom as Mother, Katherine Hamlett as Doctor, and Ashley J. Hicks as Agnes. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

## Interlude

*shape:*  
*contouring the body in space*



We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theater, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being.

- Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

Theatre [is] ... a privileged, intimate area of human experience within which one can demand that the promise of another dimension of existence be revealed, and that the impossible be achieved/experienced here and now, in the presence of other living human beings – *the impossible*, namely a sense of unity between what is usually divided in our daily life: the material and immaterial, the human body and spirit, our mortality and our propensity for perfection, for infinity, for the absolute.

- Virginie Magnat, "Theatricality from the Performative Perspective"

The business of art itself is an encounter with what may appear unfamiliar ... in order to challenge the limits of the 'known', the accepted, the comfortable; and that to accept this challenge both defines 'art' as a two-way participatory activity, and situates it as a process of transformation which has both ethical and personal consequences.

- Ralph Yarow, *Sacred Theatre*

I think theatre has a lot to do with putting the audience in contact with the gods, whatever that means. That's where theatre comes from.

- Robert Lepage, quoted in Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, *In Contact with the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre*

What this practice has done for me has been more in terms of how I work with people and in some ways articulating certain things I was never able to articulate. For example, one of the things that artists do is to tolerate hanging out in the unknown. That is a process most people don't want to undertake. It's trying to deal with things that are unnameable, trying to be very present,

- Eleanor Heartney, quoted in Bonnie Marranca, *Performance Histories*

The Oliviers and the Gielguds and Richardsons and Peggy Ashcrofts ... had a feeling that it was a responsibility and a glory being one of those elected to tell the story of a tribe ... There was a sense of doing something valuable and important and unique. But now there's an idea that it's just a job, just a craft – get on with it. Your objective is ordinariness: that the man on the street becomes the man on the stage, and the man on the stage becomes the man on the street ... You want to go see a Ralph Richardson or an Ethel Barrymore because they are extraordinary, because they tell the truth in a very interesting way. The job of acting is to be memorable. And nourishing. We want acting to be a banquet, not a snack.

- Simon Callow, quoted in Anne Nicholson Weber, *Upstaged: Making Theatre in the Media Age*

What we are is more than what we know.

- Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies*

Movement 2:  
Theatreing the Sacred  
*shakuhachi:*  
*channeling energy*

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*Suddenly, a few bright chirps of a distant flute fill the space, and you raise your head in sharp attention. In contrast to the driving force of the preceding music, this melody has a gentleness to it, a lightness that beckons you towards your image now fixed somewhere out across the void downstage. You see a grotesque scene of immense devastation before you, calling your body to standing as it transforms into an abstract, sculptural shape. You feel like a statue, and notice that you must fight, within an external stillness, to maintain your sense of centeredness. Summoning the heightened energy you gathered during Stomping, you begin to progress downstage, your body engaged in fluid, expressive moment that challenges your sense of centeredness. The Teacher intones, “Do not disturb the air around you!,” and you stand paralyzed in fright for a moment before continuing. Although still rather self-aware, you allow, for perhaps the first time since you were a small child, your body to lead you, and you enjoy the accompanying sense of euphoria as you traverse the space.*

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In an interview with multimedia performance artist Meredith Monk in 2009’s special issue of *PAJ* concerning the relationship of art and spirituality, Bonnie Marranca asserts that Monk’s “turn to a spiritual subject matter has brought an elegance to the contemporary theatre that has previously been lacking.”<sup>1</sup> Monk responds with, in my estimation, an accurate assessment of the state of American theatre that is worth quoting at length:

I think that the world we are living in now desperately needs to have experiences that are direct, that are not filtered by discursive thought. Our culture is built on encouraging indirect experience – you either evaluate it or you narrate it. All these devices that are in our culture, like the computer, television – the speeding up of experience, the fragmenting of experience – are designed to distract you from direct experience. So everything is like secondary experience. I think that live performance gives you the possibility

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Marranca with Meredith Monk, “Performance and the Spiritual Life,” *PAJ* 91 (2009): 31.

of actually having direct experience ... We don't think of art anymore as offering ... I just feel that it is really important in this world to know that we are not the be-all and end-all of existence, and that there is a larger picture that we need to keep in mind. And, you know, there is a sense of magic that we are losing. Another thing I love so much – I've said it many times about live performances – is that we are in the same moment in the same space. There is a congregation of human beings, including human beings who are performing and, in a sense, are so vulnerable. That level of communication is very important in the world that we are living in ... In this society where we are continually diverted from the moment, where everything is being numbed, I feel like performance can wake you up to the moment. All we actually have is the moment.<sup>2</sup>

The seeking of direct experience, the struggle against mediatization and commercialism, the reintroduction of the theatre's ancient animating forces, the acknowledgement of the larger powers that guide the universe, the conjuration of a sense of mystery and magic, the nerve to situate human beings in fellowship in the close body-to-body proximity of a shared space, all done in an effort to wake us up to those pregnant-yet-fleeting moments when we raise our noses from the ground – or the computer, as it may be – face each other as human beings, and allow ourselves to be open and vulnerable to the possibilities of growth and change that lay before us: on an international scale, this is what Monk is after. In a small, dank theatre in a converted Baptist church in the middle of Missouri in the dead of winter, this is what my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I too were after.

We have to keep doing challenging and fulfilling work in ramshackle spaces in the middle of nowhere if we are ever going to do anything about a commercial theatre that *Forbidden Broadway*, the doyen of Broadway parody, can't even satirize because, after the influx of Disney and a recent season including a *Shrek* musical and yet another revival of *Gypsy and Dolls*, writer-director Gerard Alessandrini is faced with the fact that “when Broadway becomes too theme-park-like, it makes it difficult, and it just looks like it's becoming overly commercial the next couple of years ... as I look at this upcoming season,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 31-2, 34.

it seems very repetitive.”<sup>3</sup> If we are ever to change this, we must commit ourselves to work that is *experimental* in the truest sense of the term. It is significant that etymologically speaking, ‘experiment’ and ‘experience’ come from the same Latin verb *experiri*, meaning to try or to test, “an exposure to peril or risk, a source of fear,” in anthropologist Victor Turner’s sense.<sup>4</sup> Unless we engage in work that is innovative, subversive, dangerous even – work that requires a sensuous transmission and overthrows notions of authority – the theatre will continue to devolve in an endless, deadly cycle. We must recognize that, according to Peter Brook, “as a whole, the theatre not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly even entertains,” ultimately facing “the simple unattractive fact that most of what is called theatre anywhere in the world is a travesty of a word once full of sense.”<sup>5</sup> Brook wrote those words over forty years ago, yet to me they still ring true, perhaps now more than ever. My problem is that the theme park-like atmosphere of the popular theatre perpetuates a notion of ‘good theatre’ that I find entirely hollow: millions of dollars poured into big sets, on which big stars do a great deal of big acting (if you could call it that) and big singing, after which audiences leave inspired by the literal hunger of their stomachs as opposed to the essential hunger of their hearts and of their minds. Here, theatre is produced only if it is believed people will pay to see it, not because of some vital need compelling artists to offer a particular vision. Rather, I say we call the experimental out from the shadows and reimagine the misguided notion that dismisses the experimental as “that weird shit” – as I have actually heard it called – so that we might reset in a place of prominence the vitality of the live

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Bloom, “‘Forbidden Broadway’ Curtain to Go Down,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 10, 40.

theatrical event and provide an enlivening and holistic experience for both performers and spectators that has the potential to impact society.

Monk's eloquent call to arms is charged and highly evocative, a utopian vision of the theatre, an atavistic reaction against the numbing effect of modern technologies. But how do we embody her poetry? How do we tempt the weighty task of experimentation through the reintegration of primal forces? How do we to reconnect with and remain committed to metaphysical energies? With the indolence of mediatized, "secondary experience" settling in, we as theatre artists must work harder to wake people up from their disembodied slumber, to repair, in Jane Goodall's words, the "loss of connection to origins, a rupture in the lines of communication and vital impulse connecting the whole culture to its deepest sources of inspiration."<sup>6</sup> But *how*? For my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I, dear reader, this involves the profoundly unsettling process of what we call "the theatreing of the sacred."<sup>7</sup>

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*As you move about the space in your lane – the narrow expanse that confines the trajectory of your movement, stretching from the downstage edge of the training space all the way to the back wall – you fight to maintain your sense of exhilaration. It is a struggle to remain energized whilst being lulled by the tranquil flute music, and you hazard the assumption that it is no accident that the previous three minutes of extreme force are followed by another several minutes of extreme calm. In your attempt to contain your bodily force, you occasionally become so self-aware that at times you loose connection with your image. Although you envision this image in the abstract, and, if asked, could not properly depict with either words or paintbrush what you see, you are aware of the difference in sensibility. When you are focused, you feel infused with articulation and power; when you disengage, you feel as if you are simply recapitulating predetermined choreography. In one*

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Yarrow, "What is the Sacred?," in *Sacred Theatre*, ed. Ralph Yarrow (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 13.

*such moment, you catch a glimpse of the Teacher in your periphery. He stands motionless, His staff held tightly in his left hand vertically perched less than an inch off the floor. Only His eyes move, darting around the room like searchlights that can penetrate your soul. You wonder if He can read your thoughts as you attempt to set yourself back on course.*

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In preparation for the *Agnes of God* process, I was engaged in a Directed Reading with Associate Professor of Religious Studies Dr. Richard “Chip” Callahan, a wonderful mentor who first introduced me to the academic study of religion. I was in the library one day, paging through various books in an effort to establish a reading list, when I reached up to retrieve some book or other, only to have its neighbor crash to the floor. The book landed on its front cover, and, ever the curious one, I picked it up and turned it over to discover its title. And there it was, surrounded by a kind of white starburst pattern situated in a sea of black: *Sacred Theatre*. The only thing missing was an Alleluia chorus. The book – released some seven months prior – would function as our inspiriting force, providing the conceptual bridge from theory into training and performance, from a discourse on the conjuration of the sacred through embodied practices to the actual practice of embodying that discourse.

*Sacred Theatre* was devised and edited by Ralph Yarrow – Professor of Drama and Comparative Literature at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom – as a means of exploring in a non-authoritarian way the sense shared among he and his collaborators that the sacred, “as experience, ... is central to theatre practice, which thereby locates a radical refiguring of engagement with the world.”<sup>8</sup> Yarrow’s focus is not on sacred drama – “dramatic texts within or on the edges of a doctrinally prescribed definition of what the sacred is” – but rather

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 10.

to see what, in the event-structure called theatre, may generate or open up to something which isn't definable within conventional categories, maybe not within any kind of category; moments when you fall through the interstices of categories and into a kind of amazement. Sacred theatre may be searching for the generators or equivalents of the condition of being 'beyond', 'between', 'outside' or 'before'.<sup>9</sup>

This idea was for me an immensely lush and succinct way of articulating the process I had set out before me, a process I understood empirically but had yet to acquire the vocabulary to describe. With his "may"s and "maybe"s, Yarrow's availability to the unpredictability of the moment is generous and infectious, setting us up for a rather discomfiting and active period of exploration. This is because of Yarrow's view of theatre as an "event-structure," significantly implying *activity* in his use of the term. And this is how we understand the sacred: that it is an *experiencing* that must be *conjured*, that it is an entirely vibrant and disturbing *eventing* with transformative consequences rather than a mode of being enduring inherently at a specific point in time or place, waiting for our contact.

"If there is a sense in which the sacred is an entry to a particularly vital condition," says Yarrow, then "theatre – as a praxis – is one of the primary sites for its activation."<sup>10</sup> If the sacred must be activated – and indeed it must – then "to take the receiver [of sacred experience] out of the ordinary is the task here; not just in the sense of presenting something slightly unusual, but much more 'radically' or fundamentally opening up the capacity for seeing anew."<sup>11</sup> Again, the sacred engages us in the rigorous and ultimately more affecting activity of *opening up* to the extra-ordinary rather than the bland passivity of *presenting* something. Although *Sacred Theatre* operates on a largely unspoken distinction between the ordinary and the *non-* or *extra-*ordinary, we can understand this as the distinction between the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

daily and the *extra*-daily, “a virtuosic [and] cultivated [mode] of embodiment” engaged via specialized training that encourages a heightening of mental and physical activity that transcends the habitual and the mundane.<sup>12</sup> Citing the work of performance scholar Phillip Zarrilli, Yarrow asserts that this process of rising above the ordinary engenders a “more ‘holistic’ kind of knowing” that “requires at a critical juncture some kind of ‘unlearning or ‘deconditioning’,” thus producing a “non-ordinary state of awareness.”<sup>13</sup> What is at the heart of this “unlearning” is not the acquisition of abilities but rather a process of *stripping away*, what Jerzy Grotowski called “a via negativa – not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks” eliminating the performer’s resistance to her “psychic process” and allowing her “most intimate layers” to spring forth.<sup>14</sup>

Yarrow characterizes sacred experience as something akin to “the sudden realization of the possibility of falling from a high mountain, of not being grounded or simply not being, whilst at the same time aware of the enormous extent of the hills and the sky,” identifying shock as one aspect of this process, because “it may well be a shock to find oneself ‘outside’ what one thought of as oneself and the configuration of the known world.”<sup>15</sup> Anne Bogart recognizes the necessity of disturbance within the artistic act: “I have found that theatre that does not channel terror has no energy. We create out of fear, not

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Zarrilli, “Negotiating Performance Epistemologies: Knowledges ‘About,’ ‘In,’ and ‘For,’” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 21 (2001): 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph Yarrow, “Performing and Knowing,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 28-9. See also Zarrilli, “Negotiating Performance Epistemologies,” 33-4.

<sup>14</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 17, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 16, 15.

from a place of security and safety.”<sup>16</sup> Yarrow’s metaphor, then, is a particularly appropriate depiction of the *Agnes of God* process: night after night, my brave collaborators and I, inspired by the grandeur and promise of the landscape before us, consistently allowed ourselves to fall from the high mountains of our routine perceptions, breaking ourselves down, challenging ourselves to see with our ears and hear with our eyes in a sensuous, essential sort of awareness, and, as you will see, shocking ourselves with what we uncovered.

Significantly, Yarrow situates his conception of the sacred within the tradition of Zarrilli and Grotowski, and also Peter Brook, Antonin Artaud, Richard Schechner, and Eugenio Barba, those “raiders of the eastern ark” who have influenced *my* artistic life so thoroughly and who “look to theatre practice to provide an entry into kinds ... of physical, imaginative or psychobiological conditions which lie in some way beyond or outside ‘normal’ daily functioning.”<sup>17</sup> With the work of these great scholar-practitioners at his back, Yarrow asserts that “the sacred of theatre may be its capacity to activate a particular quotient of energy, a form of active and holistic knowing, qualitatively different from ‘normal’ ... cognition,” because “theatre as practice, more than text or institution ... is always a doing, a setting in motion, a mode of creation in which what is created identifies itself as and how it emerges ... [I]t is not confined to texts and buildings; it is a form of cultural dialogue.”<sup>18</sup> Yarrow significantly underlines the entire discussion with this notion of *practice*, refusing a romanticized interpretation of the sacred with the recognition that “there is work to be

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

done” to conjure sacred experience, that it is “not simply given, out there waiting to be accessed.”<sup>19</sup>

Corporeal training is key here, and as my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I well know, the theatreing of the sacred is grueling, sweaty work. The Suzuki Method is a physically rigorous training developed by innovative Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki and is founded on the codified forms of *noh* and *kabuki*. Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints is an interactive, collaborative, and improvisational philosophy of movement translated into a technique for training performers, building ensemble, and creating movement for the stage. Composition, as “a structure for working from our impulses and intuition,” locates the body as a kind of living, moving sculpture.<sup>20</sup> Situating Suzuki/Viewpoints<sup>21</sup> training and the Composition method as sacred praxes, allowed us – with the fierce intentionality of a predator stalking its prey – to conjure an embodied and ultimately unsettling performative style that shows that the sacred “is available, though only in and as a kind of participation or active processing, to those who work in training or in production, and to those who receive the complexity and multiple layering of ‘text’ in performance.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, the sacred, defying the banal consequentiality of time and place, operates – and it does *operate* – not as a theory but as a practice of inducing experience.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Although Suzuki and Viewpoints are separate disciplines, they have been taught prominently in tandem for nearly twenty years, and that is indeed the only way I myself have experienced them. Thus, I prefer to use the more vernacular ‘Suzuki/Viewpoints’ unless circumstance dictates I speak of them separately.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Yarrow, “Coda,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 201.

The theatreing of the sacred, then, may be understood as the radical and revitalizing practice of the conjuration of extra-ordinary energies that lead to new ways of perceiving self and world. And inasmuch as sacred praxes materialize such energies, they render these ordinarily imperceptible energies palpable to performer *and* spectator; that is: *through the body* the invisible is made visible. Eugenio Barba says that “for the performer, energy is a *how*. Not a *what* ... *How* to make her/his own physical presence visible and *how* to transform it into scenic presence, and thus expression. *How* to make the invisible visible....”<sup>23</sup> *Presence* is the key word here, that ineffable quality given a thorough and riveting interrogation in Jane Goodall’s recent work *Stage Presence*. For her part, Goodall defines presence as “a coalescence of energy, mystery and discipline ... culminating in a renewed experience of being alive to the corporeal world.”<sup>24</sup> She opens her entire discussion with Patrice Pavis’s belief that “‘to have presence’ in theatrical parlance, is to know how to capture the attention of the public and make an impression; it is also to be endowed with a *je ne se quoi* which triggers an immediate feeling of identification in the spectator, communicating a sense of living elsewhere and in an eternal present.”<sup>25</sup> Pavis, of course, was writing in French; Goodall’s revealing inclusion in her translation of the appropriated French phrase – indicating a quality that cannot be described or easily named – presents itself less as a specific choice than an unavoidable testimony to what Barba calls the “intangible, indescribable and unmeasurable

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<sup>23</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, trans. Richard Fowler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Patrice Pavis, quoted in Goodall, *Stage Presence*, 1. See also Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du Théâtre* (Paris: Messidor, 1987), 285.

quality” at work in a performer who is functioning for the spectator “by means of concrete and tangible exercises.”<sup>26</sup>

The paradox of the metaphysical conjured through the physical – or, if you will, the rendering of the invisible in visible terms – occurs via

the moment by moment actuality of a live theatre performance [that] perhaps appeals to some haunting sense that we are never quite present in our own lives and [that] the stage performer who seems so fully and powerfully there in front of us, steering our reactions through unpredictable turns into spectacular terrain, can bring about a temporary reunion with lost aspects of our own being.<sup>27</sup>

Here, Goodall emphasizes the theatre’s tendency to convert presence from a state of being into an *act*, compelling associations of performance and, importantly, performance training. Indeed, it is not so surprising that performance scholar Stephanie Coen titled her essay regarding Suzuki/Viewpoints practice “The Body is the Source”: “The work relies on us,” says practitioner Ellen Lauren, “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 ... We’re out there doing it and laying ourselves down.”<sup>28</sup> Coen touches upon something fundamental in the title of her essay: the *body* is indeed the source of the theatreing of the sacred, for – and I cannot emphasize this enough – it is *via the body* – “a denser, brighter and more incandescent body than the bodies we possess” in everyday life – that we, in collaboration with spectators, “make incursions into zones of the world that [seem] out of [our] reach.”<sup>29</sup> What can happen in theatre like this, “or *as* this,” says Yarrow, “is an unmaking, a realization that world isn’t

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<sup>26</sup> Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, trans. Richard Fowler (London: Routledge, 1991), 74.

<sup>27</sup> Goodall, *Stage Presence*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Lauren, quoted in Stephanie Coen, “The Body is the Source,” *American Theatre* 12 (1995): 34.

<sup>29</sup> Eugenio Barba, quoted in Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 20.

like this, like we thought or hoped it might be, and that most of all ‘we’ are not at all the sort of relatively secure and knowledgeable monads we thought we might aspire to be; this realization occurs ... through psychophysiological rather than merely ‘intellectual’ means.”<sup>30</sup> And along with this daunting experience comes, of course, the hope of renewal. Poet Joseph Brodsky captures this sentiment beautifully when he says, “Art is not a better, but an alternative existence; it is not an attempt to escape reality but the opposite, an attempt to animate it.”<sup>31</sup> Substitute ‘art’ with ‘the sacred,’ and there, dear reader, is the express charge of the *Agnes of God* process. Working *in extremis* in the privacy of the rehearsal hall so that we might set ourselves ablaze in the public offering of performance, we set for ourselves a goal nor more lofty than a communal reinvigoration of the live theatrical event, an endeavor enacted with the hope of changing the world.

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*You feel as if you have been working for an eternity. Your eyes sting from sweat, your legs shake from fatigue and your feet have numbed considerably. You have managed to reconnect with you image, however, and sense that Providence has once again taken over. As sure as you are that you will be sore tomorrow, you are pleasantly surprised by the varied contortions your body has taken on, playing with varying shapes, rhythms and tempos. You can't remember having played like this since you were a small child, and although this is perhaps the hardest physical labor you've encountered in your entire life, you are somehow grateful for it. The world doesn't seem to look the same anymore; your sense of perception has become extrasensory and you are tuned into a field of vision beyond the confines of this dingy workspace. You feel 'on top of the world,' as it were, and enjoy the sense of having mastered yet one more supposedly insurmountable obstacle in your life.*

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<sup>30</sup> Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “The Child of Civilization,” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 123.

The sacred is a necessarily complicated issue, and it is important to take note of *Sacred Theatre* contributor Carl Lavery's rejoinder that "the sacred is an elastic concept whose meaning is dependent on the discourse used to interpret it," especially when the irrepressible experiences – recognized or otherwise – of the interpreter flexes conception into a nebulous landscape that defies a stable approach.<sup>32</sup> No matter how affecting *Sacred Theatre* was, it was not my first encounter with a theory or, actually, a practice of the sacred. My understanding of the sacred is inexorably bound to that of pioneering religion scholar Mircea Eliade, as well as my Catholic upbringing.

Under the tutelage of undergraduate mentor and friend Dr. W. Douglas Powers, I was introduced to the idea of the sacrality of performance in a tangible way. Through the interpolation of Eliade's theories, Doug, as we affectionately called him, taught us the stage could be transformed into a sacred space, a mysterious and powerful locus requiring a craft and discipline that must be actively and consistently worked on, instilling in us a sense of the intensity and depth of investigation that must drive the artist. I was given the privilege of performing the role of Estragon in Doug's production of Samuel Beckett's absurd tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot* in a kind of senior showcase that was to be the culmination of four years of undergraduate training. Performing in what many consider to be the greatest play of the twentieth century was an arduous but ultimately rewarding experience that lives in a particularly vivid way at the front of my memory: two and a half exhausting, sweaty hours spent furiously traversing the stark scenscape. At the center of the void stood the infamous tree, the solitary sign of life across the vast emptiness. In Doug's conception, this became for us what Eliade would call an *axis mundi*, a "sacred pole" or "cosmic pillar . . . which at once connects and supports heaven and earth," consecrating a place as sacred, and

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Lavery, "Modern Views of the Sacred," in *Sacred Theatre*, 39.

orienting the world below and facilitating communication with the world above.<sup>33</sup> The performance began with me sitting on the upward-spiraling mound that surrounded the tree, tugging at my boot. To facilitate my entrance, the lights illuminating the stage during the pre-set were momentarily extinguished. Each night, I would stand in the wings with my arms outstretched, waiting in hot anticipation for the lights to begin their descent into blackness, at which time I would lower my arms along with the lights, as if I harbored some superhuman power that could command electricity at will. Then I would walk out into the darkness, sit down, and lift my foot to my chest with my head pointed down so that I could simultaneously raise my head and bare my face to the audience as if I were brining the lights back up. I have always had a curious feeling about the shifting of light cues: if you listen closely, you'll notice that lighting instruments emit a faint hum, and when they vacillate between intensities that hum becomes exaggerated into a fuller, trembling buzzing sound. I have always said – half-joking, half-hoping – that if I was ever to be a guest on James Lipton's *Inside the Actor's Studio* and be asked what turns me on via his Bernard Pivot-inspired questionnaire, that buzz would be my answer. That buzz is an embodied moment, a promise of change you can see, feel, *and* hear. You can sense the tension, the resistance, the struggle, but the lighting changes anyway, endlessly shifting to the next moment, a continuous cycle of renewed illumination. For me, dear reader, this is sacred.

However, this does not *exactly* fit into the Yarrow's explication of the sacred I have outlined above as the conceptual foundation of our process. In Eliade's most famous work, *The Sacred and the Profane*, he proffers a concept of religion founded on his observation of "archaic man ... those people who lived in prehistoric times or who live today in tribal societies and rural folk cultures, places where work in the world of nature ... is the daily

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<sup>33</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1959), 33-37.

routine.”<sup>34</sup> Life in such societies, he says, are lived on two distinctly different planes: the sacred and the profane. The profane, in the words of religious studies scholar Daniel L. Pals, is conceived of as “the realm of everyday business – of things ordinary, random, and largely unimportant.”<sup>35</sup> Eliade’s view of the sacred is just the opposite: “It is the sphere of the supernatural,” continues Pals, “of things extraordinary, memorable, and momentous.”<sup>36</sup> Eliade wrote with an admitted influence in the work of German theologian and historian of religion Rudolf Otto who, in his well-known *The Idea of the Holy*, characterized the sacred as “a distinct and dramatic kind of individual human experience” in which “people feel in touch with something otherworldly in character; [people] feel they have brushed against a reality unlike all others they know, a dimension of existence that is alarmingly powerful, strangely different, surpassingly real and enduring.”<sup>37</sup> In his own words, Otto describes this as a reality that is “wholly other,” that which is set apart, “quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’, ... filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.”<sup>38</sup> Eliade believed that “from the first moment human beings become aware of their situation in the world, they are seized with a feeling of absence, a sense of great distance from the place where they ought to be and truly want to be – the realm of the sacred,” and thus harbor a deep “desire to live in [this] *divine presence*,” to “live in the world as it came from the Creator’s hands fresh, pure, and

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 198-199.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>38</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 26.

strong,” because of the potential for rejuvenation and renewal engendered by tapping in to originating energies. And lest one think Eliade conceives of the experience of the sacred as an encounter with God in the Judeo-Christian sense, Lavery reminds us that Eliade considered the “rationalistic theology” of “Christian monotheism ... a flight from the sacred” because it saw “God as a Being whose presence can be known in and through conceptual understanding.”<sup>39</sup> As Pals asserts, Eliade’s “idea of the sacred is much wider than that. It could mean the realm of many gods, of ancestors or immortals, or of what some Hindus call ‘Brahman,’ the Supreme Spirit beyond all personality.”<sup>40</sup>

All this talk of the ordinary (profane) and extra-ordinary (sacred), of energy and of a return to the primal sounds oddly familiar, and *appears* to fall in line with Yarrow’s understanding of the sacred – although there is one fundamental difference. Inasmuch as the sacred “manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities,” Eliade believed the sacred was apprehended through *hierophanies*, which in its strict etymological context was intended to “designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred ... that *something sacred shows itself to us*.”<sup>41</sup> This *revelation* of the sacred is how I might describe my experience in *Waiting for Godot*, but in the case of *Agnes of God* the implied inherency of the sacred realm is not sufficient to cradle our profound task. From Yarrow, we learn that the sacred must be *activated*; it cannot, in fact, show itself to us because it is not lying within an object but is an event – we do not see it, we *do* it. Even Suzuki – who himself admits to an Eliadean influence – “wants to bring ‘the gods’ ... back into [the] theatre,” yet “his ‘gods’ are not culturally specific or anthropologically modeled, but energetic and physiological. The

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<sup>39</sup> Lavery, “Modern Views of the Sacred,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 200.

<sup>41</sup> Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 11.

performer has a sense of speaking through the gods ... but the deities' nature is not prescribed ... this [is perceived] as an altered mood, a precise external focus and physical intensity."<sup>42</sup> Of course, Yarrow – like Suzuki – is a theatre scholar and practitioner, whereas Eliade is a scholar of religion, and this distinction serves, I think, as the foundation of their somewhat divergent perspectives.

Yarrow's purpose in writing about the sacred, he says, is to "rescue the term 'sacred' from monotheological and prescriptive use" and "accumulate multi-layered and multi-perspectival understanding" so as to "release the theatre and performance processes relating to this area from claims of exclusivity and ownership by doctrines, dogmas and reified ideologies."<sup>43</sup> Complicating this secularization of the sacred is Yarrow's observation elsewhere of the "fairly overtly religious discourse" inevitably employed in the writing and in the practice of those artists whose work he cites as examples in his conception of the sacred.<sup>44</sup> The etymology of the word 'sacred' comes from the Latin *sacrare*, meaning 'holy,' and both Grotowski and Brook characterize their art in this way. Grotowski emphasized the idea of the "holy [actress]" as "a metaphor defining a person who, through [her] art, climbs upon the stake and performs an act of self-sacrifice," indicating that it is the *act* of physical surrender by one who "is not afraid to go beyond all normally accepted limits" that makes

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theater Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4-5. For Suzuki's own discussion of his Eliadean influences, see Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 40-1, 87-93.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph Yarrow, "Preface," in *Sacred Theatre*, 9-10; Yarrow, "Overture," in *Sacred Theatre*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Ralph Yarrow, "Grotowski, Holiness and the Pre-Expressive," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 7.1 (1997): 25.

her holy.<sup>45</sup> In *The Empty Space*, Brook works out his conception of “the Holy Theatre,” or “The Theatre of the Invisible – Made – Visible” which has everything to do with presence and “by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic” can fulfill our “need for a true contact with a sacred invisibility through the theatre....”<sup>46</sup> Yet, for Grotowski and Brook – and for Yarrow and myself – the holiness of theatre has little to do with creed but is rather linked to *wholeness* in physical form:

‘Holiness’ and ‘wholeness’ signify a dimension of experience of intelligence and feeling beyond the limitations of normal activity. The individual performer and/or spectator feels ‘complete’ in the sense of being in command of and able to call upon an extended range of thought and action, less confined to the everyday level of perception, understanding and expression. Mind and body, left and right hemispheres of the brain, sensing and comprehending, work together instead of blocking each other.<sup>47</sup>

As evinced in our process, holiness/wholeness is achieved through rigorous corporeal training that considers the body and the mind to operate in an intricately interrelated manner. We trained this way because we recognize that “before a theatre of wholeness can occur it must create [actresses] who can perfect the attunement of their bodies to the transmission of the full range of spiritual, emotional, sensual and intellectual experience open to human beings.”<sup>48</sup> And here is where Grotowski’s notion of self-sacrifice is so critical to the theatring of the sacred, because we are *offering* our art for communal consumption, reaching across the footlights with the recognition that “change in the configuration of self occurs in theatre through communion with others, as a public rather than private

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<sup>45</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 43, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Brook, *The Empty Space*, 42, 49, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Yarrow, “Grotowski, Holiness and the Pre-Expressive,” 26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

occasion.”<sup>49</sup> In this way, “holy theatre aims to return to the roots, to deconstruct the conventional concept of theatre by radicalizing the experience ... as a form of spiritual communion in which private and public experience meet and transform each other.”<sup>50</sup>

While hopefully clarifying our position, we still have not answered the question: What are we to make of the religious subtext underlining our conception of the theatreing of the sacred as wholeness or, in Grotowski’s words, “secular holiness”?<sup>51</sup> Yarrow notes that Grotowski’s writing regarding his particular methods of corporeal training “has a heavily Catholic flavour,” and adds the rejoinder: “The question is how far the rhetoric reflects a ‘contamination’ in the practice.”<sup>52</sup> As one raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, I might ask this question of myself. I spent much of my youth ‘performing’ as an altar boy at my local parish – St. Joseph’s Church in my hometown of New Windsor, New York – eagerly donning the costume of the long white robe to ascend the stage of the sanctuary to enact the rituals of the Mass. From the time I was six until I was nearly eighteen – years coinciding exactly with my tenure as an acolyte and as an official member of the Church – our Pastor was Father Larry Gibney. Father Larry was an inspirational, lively, warm-hearted man of the cloth who turned the common conception of a priest as a narrow-minded dogmatcian on its ear. He was a radical, a man of the people who did not hide himself or his faith behind the safety of the pulpit. He encouraged babies to cry and humorously prodded all parishioners to sing along with the hymns (which he always knew by heart). “*Sing out, my man!*,” he would say to me when, for example, we sang “Happy Birthday” to Jesus on Christmas; I am smiling as

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>51</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> Yarrow, “Grotowski, Holiness and the Pre-Expressive,” 30.

I write this because I can still hear his famously deep and quavering voice commanding me to express my faith mightily. His homilies – often peppered with personal anecdotes and *always* delivered from memory – were usually given in the aisles of our modest church, facilitating a direct connection with the congregation. Rather than engaging in patriarchal Bible-beating, Father Larry preached the Word through a genuine sense of compassion, kindness, and humor. His Masses were vibrant, communal and both physically and *metaphysically* affecting, and so it does not escape me that in the absence of formal performance training in those early years Father Larry – as a virtuosic, dynamic and unconventional celebrant – was my first performative mentor.

Father Larry was endowed with what Pavis identified earlier as the *je ne se quoi* of presence, those special powers that offer “a vision of life enlarged beyond the parameters of” quotidian cognition, “an expression of life force in the moment, so that the moment itself is transformed in a way that has an impact on all who witness it.”<sup>53</sup> Father Larry himself was a supremely gifted performer: charismatic, yes, and charming, very persuasive; he had the ability to transform his congregation, refiguring any listless sorrow or disenchantment with the world into the active search for hope among the ruins. Communicating that all-important sense that there is something out there larger than ourselves, Father Larry inspired me to participate and believe, not because I felt I had to, but because I genuinely *wanted* to. For me, Father Larry, a bright spot in what I often see as a rapidly darkening world, facilitated a close relationship with what I would *also* call the sacred.

Anne Bogart has said that “for me, life is unbearable, and if I didn’t make theatre, I’d probably be extremely fat, extremely unhappy, and I would be in an entropic state, rather than a forward-moving state. If I walk down the street and I see somebody suffering, I

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<sup>53</sup> Goodall, *Stage Presence*, 45, 46.

suffer. I think the world is unjust.”<sup>54</sup> Bogart made these comments in a video interview, and I wept the first time I heard it. I have replayed this brief moment over and over again because I understand her sentiment wholeheartedly, because Father Larry, in his own way, was the first person to teach me about the transformative power of performance that Bogart alludes to: the ability to reshape anguish into action. Several years ago, Father Larry passed away after suffering the ravages of Parkinson’s Disease. One of my closest childhood friends – a fellow altar boy and one-time seminarian – was one of the last people to see him alive. He told me that Father Larry, whom I had not seen nor spoken to in years, asked for me from his sick bed. Father Larry said: “Tell Matty he always was a good boy.” I continue to work up to that image of myself.

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*“JUMP!” barks the Teacher from the bottom of his voice, accompanying his intonation with a sharp rap of His staff against the floor. You freeze immediately. Feeling as if you have been woken up from a deep sleep with a torrent of ice water, this shocking moment of violence against the cool serenity of the exercise thus far has left you at a complete loss for how to proceed. The Teacher flies into a rage and bangs His staff once more, again demanding you and your fellow neophytes to “JUMP!” This time you do as He commands, and nearly topple over as you land in an unsteady dismount. “NO!” He screams, “Do not disturb the air around you. This is unacceptable!” There is a brief nanosecond of silence that seems to extend into eternity, an endless moment where everything seems to shake in the balance. For fear of incurring the Teacher’s wrath any further, you fight to reconnect with your center, yet continue to wobble slightly from side to side as. As you falter, it occurs to you that just when you thought you had mastered this particular form of the training, the training reminds you that mastery is actually not possible. The Teacher continues to glare, but you notice that your*

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<sup>54</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre: Preserving the Legacy Volume Three*, DVD, Theatre Communications Group Oral History Project, produced by The Ford Foundation, The Allen Foundation for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003).

*fellow neophytes have begun to move through the space again. You take a deep breath, and attempt to continue your work, tempting the impossible.*

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I have come to recognize that what all those years of religious instruction and worship have done is to influence me in such a way that forged what art critic Eleanor Heartney calls a “Catholic imagination,” a kind of religious sensibility that “is not simply a matter of official church doctrine ... but brings together the pomp and beauty of Catholic ritual and the seductiveness of traditional Catholic art.”<sup>55</sup> In respect to our corporeal process of theatring the sacred, it is significant that Heartney asserts the Catholic imagination is “very deeply involved in what can be called the ‘incarnational’ emphasis of Catholicism: the importance of the physical body, which runs through all of the big mysteries of Catholicism on up through the Mass, the great ritual in which Catholics actually believe that bread and wine is turned into the body and blood of Christ” via the process of transubstantiation.<sup>56</sup> Heartney recognizes that the Catholic imagination is not “about church doctrine or even about people who in their adult lives have a firm belief and devotedly practice their religion,” but is rather focused on “the way in which someone who is raised Catholic ... gets imprinted with this view of the world, so that no matter what happens it becomes a very important part of how they think about reality.”<sup>57</sup> As a confirmed Catholic crafting a *sacred*

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<sup>55</sup> Eleanor Heartney, quoted in Bonnie Marranca, *Performance Histories* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2008), 157-8. Heartney admits she borrowed the term “Catholic imagination” from Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Heartney discusses the idea further in her own book-length study: Eleanor Heartney, *The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Heartney, quoted in Marranca, *Performance Histories*, 158. Indeed, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* one of the earliest usages of *presence* was in association with the Eucharist.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

rendering of a play written by a Catholic that features nuns as characters and is permeated by Catholic dogma, I supposed the *presence*, if you will, of my Catholic imagination was indeed unavoidable.

Heartney asserts that “we need to expand our definition of what it means to be religious” because “someone can manifest a religious imagination without be a practicing, card-carrying member of that religion.”<sup>58</sup> Here, she not only recognizes that one’s religious beliefs are as individual as a fingerprint, but is infinitely more respectful of how I currently live out my personal faith, a faith more interested in *spirituality* than organized religion and featuring a belief in a higher power that is, as Heartney suspects, unavoidably influenced by the Catholic notion of God but is now conflated with the contemplation and self-surrender of Eastern mysticism that appears more connected to my understanding of the sacred as an energetic eventing. In the aforementioned volume of *PAJ*, both Monk and Marranca make a curious choice of the term ‘spiritual’ to describe the performance aesthetics of which they speak. In a subsequent article, Edmund B. Ligan explores the distinction between spirituality and religion, highlighting the fact that religion is usually conceived as “more restrictive than spirituality,” requiring “the acceptance of prescribed rules, beliefs, and practices,” whereas spirituality implies a contemplativeness that denies prescription and rejects “the tendency to answer the ultimate questions.”<sup>59</sup> Ligan asserts – and accurately so, in my estimation – that spirituality “is more readily experienced than defined,” which makes it difficult to talk about in abstraction but remains no less a reverberant way to encounter

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>59</sup> Edmund P. Ligan, “The Alchemical Marriage of Art, Performance, and Spirituality,” *PAJ* 91 (2009): 39-40.

faith in an embodied sense.<sup>60</sup> Spirituality, I believe, recognizes the various ways that people actually live their particular faith, a provocative unsettling of the assumptions of doctrinal immutability that fall under the purview of the study lived religion. Religious studies scholar Meredith B. McGuire defines lived religion as the acknowledgement of “how multifaceted, diverse, and malleable are the beliefs, values, and practices that make up many (perhaps most) persons’ own religions.”<sup>61</sup> In this conception “spirituality is closely linked with material human bodies – and not just bodies in the abstract ... human bodies that labor and rest, bodies that create and destroy.”<sup>62</sup> Spirituality, then, is about the *practice* of faith in all its multifarious glory, and, in a way, formed the mystical glue fortifying our entire theatreing of the sacred.

Seen in this light, the work of ethnographer and religious studies scholar Robert Orsi – who also has an Italian-Catholic mother from the Bronx! – is also important to my understanding of the sacred. Orsi actually stands at the forefront of the discourse of lived religion, what is in his conception “religion as people actually do and imagine it in the circumstances of their everyday lives.”<sup>63</sup> His most recent work, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, is an eloquent and passionate confrontation of the traditional objective study of religion that importantly recognizes “our lives and our stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>61</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 158.

through which we ... engage and encounter ... religious worlds.”<sup>64</sup> Following Sartre’s command that “research is a relationship,” Orsi advocates a study of religion that focuses not on ideas but on “practices [and] presences,” and believes that research in religion should “attend to the experiences and beliefs of people in the midst of their lives, to encounter religion in its place in actual men and women’s lived experience, in the places where they live and work.”<sup>65</sup> Proclaiming, as I do, that “to emphasize practice is not to deny reflection,” Orsi advocates a sensual study of religion, one that seeks understanding directly through embodiment, a “realness of sacred presence” that recognizes “the saints, gods, demons, ancestors, and so on are real in experience and practice, in relationships between heaven and earth.”<sup>66</sup> Although Orsi’s conception of the sacred owes more to religion in the canonical sense than Yarrow ostensibly would prefer, it is Orsi’s rendering of religion in *practical* terms that allows me to appropriate his theory of the “corporealization of the sacred” into our theatreing of the sacred, for we understand Orsi’s notion as “an experience in a body ... so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of [sacred] presence for oneself and for others.”<sup>67</sup> This is a process that involves “not things but practice,” and receives a thorough unpacking in my forthcoming discussion of the interpolation of the added character of the Virgin/Mother, perhaps the most visible manifestation of my Catholic imagination coming to bear on our secular – and, it would seem, not-so-secular – theatreing of the sacred.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 174, 147.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 10, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 74,76.

In my efforts to “examine openly and critically the emotional and intellectual sources of [my] own implications in the practices and beliefs [I] study,” I hope, dear reader, that I have not confused an already complex issue.<sup>69</sup> It is undeniable that my early Eliadean influences and the activities of my Catholic imagination contaminated, to borrow Yarrow’s term, our *practice* of theatreing the sacred in recognized and unrecognized ways. While I will not trouble them any further here, it is inevitable that they will impact – and certainly already have impacted – this writing. Even so, I stand by my previously stated notion that our theatreing of the sacred can be understood as *the radical and revitalizing practice of the conjuration of extra-ordinary energies that lead to new ways of perceiving self and world*. At the outset of *Sacred Theatre*, Yarrow says he wants avoids the tendency “to ‘positivise’ the sacred by making it knowable” in a supposedly objective way or to reduce it “to a set of precepts or commandments,” recognizing that “you cannot schematize a felt sense of the infinite in the language and categories of the finite.”<sup>70</sup> And so I wish to honor Yarrow’s generous non-authoritarian stance, and tempt what I hope will be for you, dear reader, a disorienting and enlivening decentralization of experience as the foundation of this entire writing. I am crafting neither a recipe nor a road map, but rather am – in the spirit of the sacred – generating the circumstances for an *experience*, one that begs your full attention and, through a sensuous means, expects you to take from it only what you will.

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*You are nearing the end of this particular leg of your journey, a supposed finality that you meet with equal parts joy and sorrow. While you will welcome the release into some much needed time spent offstage, you have found yourself inexplicably drawn to the work. Like a dangerous lover, the training has seduced your initial curiosity into a profound need. You have uncovered a new palate of emotional and physical possibility, and,*

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>70</sup> Yarrow, “Preface,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 9, 10.

*like an addictive drug, you are willing to take the pain to fulfill your endless desire for more. As the flute sounds its final chords, you evolve intuitively into a final statue at the extreme downstage edge of the space. You are standing on tiptoe and have your knees bent; your right leg is beneath you and your left leg is stretched out in front and turned inward, your left foot perpendicular to your right. Your torso is slightly pitched forward as your arms appear to cradle an imaginary object in front you, nearly obscuring your line of sight as your right palm is turned inward and your left palm is turned outward. The music gradually segues into an overwhelming silence, and, again, your insides race as you try to keep your outward sensibilities completely still. Your left leg shakes uncontrollably in its extreme position, and, like the Tin Man, you long to put your arms down. Yet you dare not move as the Teacher carefully patrols the small space between the wall and the line of neophytes; you fear that without warning he might lunge at you like a ravenous jungle animal. Suddenly he stops and says: "Extend into your image." Before you can think about what that means, your body has already begun to adjust itself ever-so-slightly so that your statue becomes even more difficult to maintain and you deepen your sense of concentration and focus. You remain in this position for sometime, and suddenly you notice a single tear begin to stream down the left side of your face. Pushed to your limits, you have explored heights – and depths – previously unknown, culminating in this ripe moment that points to the future as much as it is rooted in the past. This is what it must be like to see God, you think, even if you are unsure as to what that really means for you.*

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Jane Goodall perceives a "curious orientalist tendency" arising "from a sense of incompatibility between modernity and metaphysics" among "those who seek," as we did, "vital forms of renewal for cultures that have been comprehensively transformed by science and industry."<sup>71</sup> Indeed, our corporeal methods seem to confirm Goodall's suspicion that "indigenous traditions can seem ... to have more powerful training regimens for cultivating

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<sup>71</sup> Goodall, *Stage Presence*, 3-4.

the energies of the human body.”<sup>72</sup> And although I am fully aware that this tendency can be evinced in the preceding passages, I want to be clear that our work explicitly resists what scholar Edward Said famously referred to as Orientalism, “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” that emerged as a way of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>73</sup> In Said’s observation, the Orient is an invented concept of the Far East – “China and Japan, mainly” – that allows “‘our’ Orient” to become “‘ours’ to possess and direct” so that we might domesticate its philosophies and wisdoms for our use.<sup>74</sup> Promoting “understanding and intellectual exchange,” Said preferred that rather than concentrating on this “manufactured clash of civilizations” we focus on the “working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any ... inauthentic mode of understanding can allow.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, recognizing that “there is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence ... and enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control,” our combined use of Japanese and American methods of training and performance-making embodied an “international interconnectedness” that is “vital to the creation of new approaches to acting” and new ways of thinking about the function of theatre.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 3-4, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., xviii, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., xxii, xxix.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., xix; Eelka Lampe, “Collaboration and Cultural Clashing: Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki’s Saratoga International Theatre Institute,” *TDR* 37 (Spring 1993): 148

To begin, it should be known that it is no innovation of mine to employ Suzuki and Viewpoints within a singular training atmosphere.<sup>77</sup> In the summer of 1988, Anne Bogart was part of a small American delegation organized by the Theatre Communications Group that traveled to Japan to meet with Tadashi Suzuki and experience his summer theatre festival in Toga-mura. “In sharing ideas,” reports Eelka Lampe, Bogart and Suzuki “found that their concerns about the state of theatre worldwide were excitingly similar. Both believe in a physical approach to the art of acting as theatre’s cornerstone ... and both endorse theatre’s responsibility in larger cultural and political matters.”<sup>78</sup> Theatre artists in the United States first became aware of Suzuki’s practices when renowned Asian theatre scholar James R. Brandon spent over a month training with Suzuki in Japan in 1976 and published a detailed description of the trainings as well as excerpts from an interview with Suzuki in *The Drama Review* in 1978.<sup>79</sup> In 1979, Sanford Robbins was forming a new professional acting training program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and traveled to Japan to investigate traditional modes of training. Once there he met with Suzuki, became interested in his methods, and then invited Suzuki and his company – SCoT, or the Suzuki Company of Toga – to come to UWM to perform their production of *The Trojan Women* and to work with the student thespians. Over the course of the 1980s, SCoT lead workshops, taught

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<sup>77</sup> It should *also* be known that my work does not reconfigure *exactly* the work done at SITI Company. I have not trained with the collective, and my teacher’s own training predates SITI’s existence. Moreover, these are embodied practices in the most literal sense; it may be said that these methods only exist insofar as they are practiced. It is important to know that there is no prescriptive schema for the transmission of Suzuki/Viewpoints training, or the Composition method, for that matter. Unlike the techniques of Michael Chekhov, F. Matthias Alexander, or Kristin Linklater, one cannot become “certified” to teach or practice Suzuki/Viewpoints or Composition; these methods are passed down in a kind of oral tradition that speaks through the body of each individual practitioner.

<sup>78</sup> Lampe, “Collaboration and Culture Clashing,” 147.

<sup>79</sup> James R. Brandon, “Training at the Waseda Little Theatre: The Suzuki Method,” *TDR* 22 (1978): 29-42.

classes, and toured productions throughout the United States. As his influence grew, Suzuki began thinking about forming a base of operations in America, “partly to provide a place for his American disciples to create work and partly to gain leverage in cultural politics back home in Japan.”<sup>80</sup> With the encouragement of then executive director of TCG Peter Zeisler, Suzuki turned to Bogart. Suzuki’s proposal was for “a new kind of cultural organization,” that would be “part theatre company, part training center, part creative think tank, and part international forum.”<sup>81</sup> The Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI Company) officially formed in the summer of 1992 with the goal of “the creation of new work, the training of young theater artists, and a commitment to international collaboration.”<sup>82</sup> In a effort to “redefine and revitalize contemporary theater in the United States through an emphasis on international cultural exchange and collaboration,” SITI Company aspires to the harmony engendered when “something stronger is made from two different things.”<sup>83</sup> As SITI philosophy states: “It is through the dialogue between Suzuki and Viewpoints, these two, very distinct, yet complimentary approaches to the art of acting that the intercultural philosophy and technique of SITI Company is continually explored, revitalized, and articulated.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 90.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> SITI Company. History. <http://siti.org/> (accessed September 27, 2009).

<sup>83</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in Lampe, “Collaboration and Cultural Clashing,” 152.

<sup>84</sup> SITI Company. Training Overview. <http://siti.org/> (accessed September 27, 2009).

This anti-essentialist method of intercultural communication models, I believe, the “humane goal” of “coexistence” that Said advocates.<sup>85</sup> Suzuki and Viewpoints are not fused into one methodology but rather are respected as separate disciplines: “The two disparate approaches to ... training produced a great alchemy,” says Bogart,

With no premeditated design or plan to put the two trainings together, it turned out that they served to counterbalance one another and the result was fortunate. Quite different in approach and derivation, the Suzuki method and the Viewpoints became the heart of the SITI Company’s training and teaching. Introducing these two training methods into the same body results in strength, focus, flexibility, visibility, audibility, spontaneity and presence.<sup>86</sup>

Scholar Scott T. Cummings observes that while both trainings “inhibit the tendency of [the actress] to think too much, to impose premature judgments on work in progress, and to rationalize the creative process instead of trusting intuition, impulse, and accident,” Suzuki and Viewpoints are really “yin and yang. While both trainings work towards placing the [actress’s] focus outside of the self,” he continues, “Suzuki training starts off as a private discipline for the [actress]” whereas “Viewpoints develops the ensemble and the [actress’s] ability to join the group in a manner that is active and unselfish.”<sup>87</sup> SITI Company member Barney O’Hanlon observes that “Viewpoints is very free and Suzuki is very formal: Viewpoints can bring to the Suzuki body aliveness and fullness and Suzuki training can bring to Viewpoints an incredible understanding of the body in space, a 360 degree awareness.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, as Grotowski has noted, “the true lesson of the sacred theatre . . . [is the] knowledge

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<sup>85</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xxiv.

<sup>86</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 17.

<sup>87</sup> Cummings, *Remaking American Theatre*, 125, 130.

<sup>88</sup> Barney O’Hanlon, quoted in Eelka Lampe, “SITI – A Site of Stillness and Surprise: Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints Training Meets Tadashi Suzuki’s Method of Actor Training,” in *Performer Training: Developments Across Culture*, ed. Ian Watson (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2001), 189.

that spontaneity and discipline, far from weakening each other, mutually reinforce themselves; that what is elementary feeds what is constructed and vice versa, to become the real source of a kind of acting that glows.”<sup>89</sup>

In this way, Suzuki and Viewpoints “are not just practical skills; they are moral principles,” and the manner in which the two trainings collaborate actually served as a paradigm for our entire process, engendering a generous air of respect and wider sense of perception that is “not interested in imitating other cultures” or other peoples but rather is “interested in them changing the way [we] think.”<sup>90</sup> Fundamental to the theatreing of the sacred is the risk of being knocked out of our narrow-minded and dissociated ways of understanding self and world, and so, in the words of Suzuki, “the question is not choosing one [philosophy] or the other,” but “what is the philosophy that emerges out of looking at both simultaneously.”<sup>91</sup>

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*Just when you think you can't maintain your position any longer, the Teacher positions himself directly in front of you, daring to look you directly in the eyes. It is an enticement, a temptation, an invitation: 'Try me,' the Teacher is saying, 'Just try me.' Yet, barely holding on, your breath heavy and your sweat pouring, you meet His provocation with one of your own: in an audacious display of courage, you dare to stare back. The Teacher bangs his stick, and while you expect to be commanded into yet another impossible physical challenge, He simply says "Release." Although you suspect you might be imagining it, as you relax your body you notice on the Teacher's visage the recognition that you have earned it.*

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<sup>89</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 121.

<sup>90</sup> Cummings, *Remaking American Theatre*, 110; Anne Bogart, quoted in Lampe, “Collaboration and Culture Clashing,” 155.

<sup>91</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in Lampe, “Collaboration and Culture Clashing,” 156.

Implicated in our conception of the theatreing of sacred – of the rendering of the invisible in visible terms – is another rather complex issue: *liveness*. Like Phillip Auslander in his groundbreaking *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, my interest in sacred theatre as a way to rejuvenate live performance “derives directly from my sense of living in a culture in which something I continue to value seems to have less and less presence and importance.”<sup>92</sup> Actually, it occurs to me that liveness has everything to do with presence. Roger Copeland observes that the long-held assumption of what is unique to the theatre, what differentiates it from the movies, literature – a painting even – is “that it can put us in the *presence* of other living breathing human beings.”<sup>93</sup> Theatre ostensibly places the spectator in nonrestrictive contact with the performer at the very moment of her performance, something that film and television cannot do. If we are indeed seeking direct, somatic experience unfettered by anything that isn’t initiated from the flesh, then, in the words of Tadashi Suzuki himself, “in an age when a mechanized culture is developing rapidly and methods of mechanical reproduction have become increasingly efficient, only the theatre can offer an experience that is never twice the same. We need the theatre because the theatre needs us, a group of live individuals.”<sup>94</sup> It is the lack of the theatre’s ability to reproduce – its very impermanence – that makes it truly magical: that I will never see *that* again – that gesture, that glint of the eye, that calling to the gods, that telling of the truth – even if I come again tomorrow night or even if I watch what I saw tonight on videotape. This conception of liveness is inevitably positioned as a reaction against what Baudrillard called the *hyperreal*, “a reality so mediated by media,” says Copeland, “that we’re no longer capable of distinguishing ‘the real thing’ from

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<sup>92</sup> Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

<sup>93</sup> Roger Copeland, “The Presence of Mediation,” *TDR* 34 (Winter 1990): 31.

<sup>94</sup> Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, 78.

its simulation.”<sup>95</sup> And it is significant that Copeland qualifies his assessment of Baudrillard’s theory with his own supposition that “maybe it’s just that we so often seem to prefer the simulation to the real thing.”<sup>96</sup> This is exactly what I fight against in advocating for the intensity and indestructibility of the body-to-body interrelatedness of the live theatrical event: a society inhabited by people that generally prefer a distance and detachment in their everyday lives. Direct experience is a scary proposition: it dares you to *get involved*, to welcome surprise, to open yourself up to the unknown.

Jane Goodall asserts that if “presence is quite literally about the here and now, technologies of representation may be seen as its enemies.”<sup>97</sup> Auslander observes that “our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, mass media representations in general, and television in particular.”<sup>98</sup> It is interesting to note that in the era of television’s infancy, the few programs populating the screen were actually live, meaning the events depicted were literally occurring *somewhere* at the very instance of their transmission. Television was marketed as a way to bring the viewer to the heart of the action while allowing her to remain in the comfort of her home. But what makes television immediate – in the sense that it projects into your living room scenes from other times and other places – also renders it safe: there is no imminent fear that you might actually be confronted with or challenged by anything. The people on the screen *cannot* reach through the screen and actually touch you or physically indoctrinate you in their extra-ordinary rituals. If you do find a particular image or theme overwhelming, you can change the channel or simply hit the off

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<sup>95</sup> Copeland, “Presence of Mediation,” 29.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Goodall, *Stage Presence*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 1.

button. But there is no ‘off’ button in the theatre. You are *in the room* with the performers as they endlessly inundate you with movement, dialogue, and thematic subject matter, calling on you to engage fully your intellectual and emotional faculties. In the theatre, you are effectively trapped: the stage necessarily holds your attention and it is not so easy to turn away or tune out. Actually, the stage forces you into activity in a way television does not: you have to make the effort to take yourself to the theatre, and, once there, if you find something disagreeable, you *can’t* turn the stage ‘off’ or busy yourself with some secondary activity. The only way to shut the theatre off is to get up and leave, an act that, in my mind, actually *demonstrates* the potency of the live event.

However, my deep-seeded personal relationship to television complicates my artistic campaign for live experiences. I agree with *New York Times* writer Richard Fox, who has said “one of television’s mysterious powers is to give us the illusion of immediate presence, but, in fact, it gives us the world through a lens darkly,” indicating the false sense of intimacy encouraged by television because we see its images up close and in our living rooms.<sup>99</sup> I also agree with performance artist Eric Bogosian, who with his characteristic bravura conceives of live theatre as “medicine for a toxic environment of electronic media mind-pollution,” describing theatre as “ritual,” as “something we make together every time it happens. Theater is holy. Instead of being bombarded by a cathode ray tube we are speaking to ourselves. Human language, not electronic noise.”<sup>100</sup> Yet, I have always described my relationship with television as an affair – implying surreptitiousness as much as romance – and by testifying in print to my agreement with Fox and Bogosian, I can’t help but feel as if I am cheating on a lover. This statement not only indicts my entire argument made but one

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<sup>99</sup> Richard Fox, “The Reality Box,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1992.

<sup>100</sup> Eric Bogosian, *Pounding Nails in the Floor with my Forehead* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), xii.

paragraph earlier, but, owing to personal experience, has me wondering about the possibility of its validity.

The first gift I ever remember receiving was a television. I was four years old, and it was artfully packaged in Paddington Bear wrapping paper by my parents. From its perch on the couch, my first television beckoned me to remove it from its box – a Pandora’s box of sorts – and initiate a life-long relationship with my very first window to the world. I inherited my love of television from my mother. The television was always on in my house growing up, but *not* as a kind of electronic baby sitter. David Mamet likens television viewing to an “intellectual hibernation” encouraging “lobotomized immobility,” a kind of “censorship-through-information” in which the “purpose of ‘information’ is not to share truths but to immobilize and enervate the mind,” changing us from active communicants to passive consumers.<sup>101</sup> Although I don’t necessarily agree, I understand his sentiment, for surely not everyone was afforded the generous opportunity to reap the intrinsic benefits of the television as I have. In *my* home, rather than sit lethargically on the couch, eyes blank and mouths drooling, my mother and I engaged intellectually with the television: high value was placed on seeing major events, including those from the realm of popular culture – the final episode of *Cheers*, the Academy Awards, or a season finale of *Law & Order* – as well as those events that would one day make it into our grade school history books: coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing or the impeachment of Bill Clinton or Clarence Thomas’s controversial Senate confirmation hearings. It was not only important to watch these events unfold, but also to know exactly who these cultural and historical figures were – as well as the names of actors, what other shows and movies they had been in, what awards they might have won, and, in a display of my more morbid side, if they were dead and, if so, what had

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<sup>101</sup> David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 55-57.

killed them. So much television viewing taught me a great deal about the world ‘out there,’ engaging my intellectual faculties from an early age. I always seemed to have a firmer grasp of the difficulties and messiness of existence often hidden by the romanticized view of the world proffered by the easy, superficial ‘children’s programming’ enjoyed by my peers. As an only child who voluntarily spent much of his time with adults, I preferred to submerge myself in complex, sophisticated subject matter. I don’t think most five-year-olds were watching a naked Michael Douglas laying on an equally naked Kathleen Turner in *Romancing the Stone*. I didn’t always readily understand the material, but such heady viewing inscribed my inquisitive nature: ‘Why are they naked?’, I wondered. My mother hesitated a moment, then replied solidly, ‘They must have just come back from swimming.’ For the record, I now know why they were naked, and my mother and I often laugh about this scene, a laughter always capped by her knowing and gentle Bronx-accented rebuke: “You asked lots of very big questions from a very young age, Matty, lots of questions.” Television deeply enriched my knowledge-base: quite often, I will come across a word or a bit of history or a concept or a complex idea only to recall that my initial confrontation with such material was not from reading about it in a school book but rather from encountering it in context on television. Television gave me a great deal of detailed intelligence to hold in my little head – a great deal of material to work with in the future; an enormous palate of historical, cultural, and aesthetic references – and it was a site of pride in my home to remember the intricacies of this endlessly streaming input. I have always felt that television viewing is what encouraged the strength of my memory, and in turn, I have always felt that such a sturdy memory is why I did so well in school in my formative years. Even now as I craft this writing, the television *must* be on. Episodes of *CSI*, *Cold Case*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Nanny*, *Law & Order*, *Columbo*, and my all-time favorites *The Golden Girls* and *Murder, She Wrote* keep

me company in my lonely labor. So how do I reconcile my fight for the live with my love of television? Maybe I love television so much because I need the break from the intensity of the embodied interconnectedness I foster in my classroom and in the rehearsal environment? Maybe such vitality is just too much for my small frame to withstand?

Were Phillip Auslander to read this writing, he might accuse me of perpetuating the “traditional, unreflective assumptions that fail to get much further in their attempts to explicate the value of ‘liveness’ than invoking clichés and mystifications like ‘the magic of theatre,’ the ‘energy’ that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event, and the ‘community’ that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, after reading this statement it is not hard to see why, by his own admission, he is sometimes “mistaken for someone who does not value – who is even antagonistic toward – live performance.”<sup>103</sup> Although he is a scholar of great esteem, it seems to me that he knows not of what he speaks, at least in an experiential way. Had Auslander ever been party to a truly galvanizing experience in the theatre, I don’t think it would be so easy for him to dismiss – with his often arrogant and positivistic jargon-laden academese – the sheer difficulty of rendering in concrete terms evidence of an ephemeral, sensuous nature. The same could be said for the equally smug Roger Copeland; I find myself personally offended by his belief that “to assume that a few hours of ‘live’ theatre will somehow restore a healthy sense of ‘being there’ is naïve and self-deceptive ... a sheer bourgeois sentimentality.”<sup>104</sup> Although on its own a few hours is surely not enough, we must still *try*: if I am encouraged to evoke a few hours of live theatre here, and you evoke a few

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<sup>102</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>104</sup> Copeland, “Presence of Mediation,” 42.

hours there, and she evokes a few hours over there, and so on and so on, that adds up to a full assault on the deadliness and ‘human-less-ness’ pervading today’s theatre, a wonderful moment of camaraderie in which the theatre shows its true colors of fellowship and rebellion. Film and television are certainly endowed with their own effective powers, but, as the great theatre theoretician Herbert Blau says, “It’s hard to imagine any image on the screen ... that could match the close-up effect upon spectators of an [actress] ... in the extremities of performance.”<sup>105</sup>

‘Live’ means so many things to so many people; I can only work from what the term means to me. I am reminded of a passage from Lorna Marshall’s *The Body Speaks* in which she says that the body “is the sole mediator of human experience. It is our body that climbs the mountain, whispers in another’s ear, trembles with excitement, notices the light change, grips the bag, tenses with fear, laughs with delight. It is our body that actually lives our life ... it is the body that directly experiences the reality of the world.”<sup>106</sup> And *this* is what live means to me: the *presence* of bodies. But not just *any* bodies: bodies literally in the room with you, bodies that you can reach out and touch, vulnerable bodies, bodies engaged in the “extremities of performance” that tread a fine line between this world and a parallel one, a dynamic world that is possible but as yet exists just beyond the scope of normal cognition. It is these bodies and these bodies only, a group of human beings standing naked in front of a bunch of other human beings, that – when endowed with special characteristics via sacred praxes – can make us see this possible world. These bodies harbor the magical power to

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<sup>105</sup> Herbert Blau, “Virtually Yours: Presence, Liveness, Lessness,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, rev. ed., ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 542.

<sup>106</sup> Lorna Marshall, *The Body Speaks* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), xii.

convert the invisible into the visible, and can communicate an enlivening picture of how the world might be if we were all that fearlessly attentive to it.

Anne Bogart has said: “A media-drenched culture aims aggressively at our psyches with a constancy that breaks and numbs the spirit. This dangerous environment offers us an opportunity: the chance to think and act.”<sup>107</sup> For my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I, this thinking and acting necessitated the full-scale theatreing of the sacred: a return to a more primal sense of human connectedness that requires bodies to be present (both corporeally and emotionally) in the same space engaged in somatic communication that tempted – through equal parts tenacity, diligence, and a belief in the miraculous – to resituate the live theatrical event in a place of prominence within the cultural economy. With this work, my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I boldly say: *This, dear reader, this is what the theatre **must** do.*

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<sup>107</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 147.

“Well, I prefer to look upon it as opening her mind ... to herself. So she can begin to heal.”



Figure 4. *From left to right:* Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom as Mother and Ashley J. Hicks as Agnes. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

## Interlude

*tempo:*  
*tempting extremities*

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I often wish that I had a sort of a codified way to begin each project because it's a thing that I don't have ... Each job comes and I think [*gasps, sharp in take of breath, eyes wide*]. I don't know how I'm going to approach it and it would be good to have one sort of way ... I'm always accused of being a technical actress, and I'm probably the least technical – in what people think of as technical – actress in the world, because I have really no way to talk about [the craft of acting] ... I don't really know how people teach acting. I really don't.

- Meryl Streep, comments made to James Lipton during *Inside the Actor's Studio*

The [actress's] art cannot be taught. [She] must be born with ability; but the technique, through which [her] talent can find expression – that can and must be taught.

- Richard Boleslavsky, quoted in Arthur Bartow, *Training of the American Actor*

I would undertake to teach anyone all that I know about theatre rules and technique in a few hours. The rest is practice.

- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

Mind you, only physical actions, physical truths, and physical belief in them!  
Nothing more!

- Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*

A great artist ... must be shaken by the naked truths that will not be comforted. This divine discontent, this disequilibrium, this state of inner tension is the source of artistic energy.

- Goethe, attributed

It is nothing more than a codification, in the form of extra-daily technique, of the position of an animal ready to attack or defend itself.

- Eugenio Barba, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*

It is not just a matter of splashing about in self-indulgent euphoria as outsiders often suspect for it aims at bringing the [actress] again and again to [her] own barriers, to the points where in place of new-found truth [she] normally substitutes a lie.

- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

The physical exercises are always spiritual exercises.

- Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe*

Any method that's going to revitalize the art form is going to have to revitalize the people who are doing it.

- Leon Ingulsrud, *One Step on a Journey: Tadasbi Suzuki in Australia*

Movement 3:  
Muscles of Presence  
*center of gravity exercise number one:*  
*risking control*

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*A quick sip of water has barely caressed the arid length of your esophagus before the Teacher raps His stick against the floor and you are once again called to action. You are drenched with sweat and exhausted, and your muscles ache from their unfamiliar employ. Yet you feel a sense from somewhere – your core, perhaps? – that drives you to press on. You find yourself alongside your fellow neophytes in a horizontal line at the rear of the workspace, facing the Teacher as if He were a one-man firing squad. Your arms are at your sides, gripping the same imaginary poles as they were during Stomping. Your knees are bent – “ALWAYS!” the Teacher constantly reminds you, to keep your lower body energized. Your feet meet at the heels and point away from one another in a forty-five degree angle, as in ballet’s first position. The Teacher leaves you in this position for several breathless seconds, watching you intensely and, you think, scornfully. Finally, he barks “ICHI” – the Japanese word for ‘one’ – in a harsh, grating tone before violently whacking His stick against the floor. You raise your right leg slightly forward and Stomp directly to the right, nearly toppling over when your foot lands in an unstable, heel-first meeting with the floor. “NO!” the Teacher thunders, “The Stomp is with the whole foot. And you must not lead from the foot or from the shoulder or from the hip, but from center. Always, always, always from center, from the core of your humanity!” He then admonishes you for the listlessness of your left leg. “The straight leg must remain firm, energized!” After a moment spent in silent disgust, He commands everyone to return to the starting position of the form. As you prepare to begin again, you feel the sense of accomplishment garnered in the previous exercise drain out of you.*

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Over the course of this writing, I have had the great, good fortune to train with Suzuki/Viewpoints Master Teacher Annamaria Pileggi, a Senior Lecturer in the Performing Arts Department of Washington University in St. Louis. Twice a week, in the wee hours of

the morning I venture out into the rush of St. Louis city traffic to transport myself to the architectural austerity of the Annelise Mertz Dance Studio in the Mallinckrodt Center on the University's gorgeous Danforth Campus. Anna, a demanding provocateur driven by the heart of a great nurturer, extended to me the invitation to train sight unseen, and indeed it has been a rare gift and at times a saving grace to continue training whilst writing. These brief, sweaty and frustrating holidays from the chair – comfortable as it is – and laptop that enslave me keep me disciplined and inspired, animating my writing and saving me from physical entropy. On these mornings, I am amongst – none of us getting paid, none us receiving any sort of tangible credit except that which can be read on our bodies – colleagues of the flesh: we began at the start of the semester without much fanfare or the labor and awkwardness of proper introductions; I don't know everyone's name, and I am certain few people know mine. Rather, we greet each other in the heat and depth of the journey through the kinesthetic communication of bodies *in extremis*, bodies reaching just beyond the reachable, trying to make the work beautiful, to please the gods, aware that we are struggling and failing every single moment, the sting of recognition mixed with the somewhat sadistic euphoria that pain and the collapse of the ego are exactly the point.

Just this past week, we gathered to begin training for a new semester after a nearly two month break. We began, as we always do, by “doing the Walks,” as we say, a central Suzuki exercise that involves moving across the space with great restraint in a linear fashion in a continuous sequence of nine divergent steps. Normally, we do each Walk in a diagonal loop across seventy-five agonizing feet of studio space in pairs; on this day, our numbers small, we proceeded in a single-file fashion. In a twist of fate – or whatever it may be said that decides these things – I found myself at the front of the line. After reminding us to look the gods straight in the eyes and to Stomp with all our humanity, Anna played the music and

I was off. My legs – quite often held in a sort of pretzel formation across the seat of my expensive, cushy leather writing throne – burned to an almost unbearable degree. But this burn reminded me of the dynamic and endlessly unpredictable value of keeping the journey full, the tempting of the possible by doing the *impossible* that is characteristic of Suzuki training. Pouring buckets of sweat, nauseous and bleary-eyed, my insides were on fire; I scratched at my skin, made prickly from the heat amassing just below the surface. This heat was a reminder of why I get up so early in the morning – which I am loathe to do – and drive through traffic – which I am equally loathe to do; of why – when I have the immense task of this writing in front me as well as a job and a myriad of attention-diverting, mundane tasks such as washing clothes and paying bills – why I would go somewhere I don't have to go to do something I don't have to do, something uncomfortable, stressful, painful even. It is a reminder that it is not enough – unacceptable, in fact – to go through the paces, that we have to *chose* to be present, and that that is a discipline. This heat was a reminder that sculptor Anne Truitt couldn't have been more on point when she said that the “most demanding part of living a lifetime as an artist is the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one's own most intimate sensitivity,” that an actress must work towards *something*, she must have a vision, an aesthetic dream rooted in a profound self-knowledge that transforms her from a mere cog in a machine into a craftsman, into an *artist*.<sup>1</sup> It is a reminder, too, that she must have a method for realizing this specter of an aspiration of how she will wield the power of her art because, in the words of the great Stephen Sondheim, that provocative and innovative craftsman of the musical theatre, “without craft

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Truitt, quoted in Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), 68.

... all art is nonsense – it’s a sort of masturbation whereas, with craft, it’s a form of teaching, which, I have said innumerable times, is the noblest profession on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

Anne Bogart has said “that artists are not teachers. They are, on the contrary, learners.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, it has always been my belief that ‘learning’ is – or certainly should be – *implied* in ‘teaching.’ Bogart’s own examination of the etymology of the word ‘education’ gives credence to that notion: from the Latin verb *educare*, ‘to lead out,’ and also the Greek *enkyklios paideia*, which is usually taken to mean ‘general education’ but can be literally translated as ‘training in a circle,’ indicating a “circular process of sharing” that to Bogart – and myself – “feels more accurate.”<sup>4</sup> This, I can only assume, is what Sondheim intends with his laudatory conception of art as teaching: not, in the words of Grotowski, the “instruction of a pupil but utter opening to another person” so that “our common growth becomes a revelation.”<sup>5</sup> This idea of a symbiotic, soul-bearing process is exactly what I was tempting to engender, first between myself and my collaborators and then between the entire ensemble and our audience. But to do so, we must necessarily tune our own instruments – we must *train*, as it were – in order to position ourselves as conduits for sacred experience.

I believe in performance training with every fiber of my being. Technique is the performer’s life-blood: one must have a consistent, tirelessly and specifically-honed approach to one’s art because “[a]t some point youth, passion, talent and experience can fail an

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Sondheim, quoted in Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 168.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 25.

[actress], and without a reliable technique, there will be nothing else to rely on for support.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, training does not automatically equal success; it is the performer’s *application* that matters. As such, training is not only a sort of insurance for longevity, but perhaps more importantly, it is an effective tool for legitimacy and is the difference between the amateur and the *professional* – and we need professionals desperately. Earlier, I quoted David Román’s astute assessment that one’s love of theatre kept out of one’s scholarship “follows from our field’s efforts to credentialize itself against the charge of inconsequentiality.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps there would be no charge of inconsequentiality if some of us didn’t perpetuate the notion that *anyone* can do theatre. One of my earliest mentors once said: “There aren’t community hospitals. You can’t just go and do brain surgery if you feel like it. There shouldn’t be community theatre either.” This isn’t elitism so much as an expression of frustration over the hokey, ignorant ‘Hey Judy, let’s put on a play!’ aesthetic that seems to run rampant and debase our art.<sup>8</sup> Despite popular belief, acting is not about looking pretty while saying lines a certain way, and doing theatre is not simply about having a jolly good time with ‘the gang.’ If you’ve ever seen *Waiting for Guffman* – Christopher Guest’s devastatingly accurate send-up of community theatre – then you know of which I speak: the local Oliviers and Streeps and perhaps even a Redgrave or a Barrymore or two gather together after a long day at work at their day jobs to make facial expressions – which is *not* acting – emote their little hearts out – also not acting – and strut around the stage – *still* not acting – all the while exuding an aura

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Bartow, “Introduction,” in *Training of the American Actor*, ed. Arthur Bartow (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), xii.

<sup>7</sup> David Román, “Comment – Theatre Journals,” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2002): n.p.

<sup>8</sup> I don’t mean to essentialize *all* community theatre as the enemy of ‘art.’ The theme-park aesthetics, consumerism, and air-brushed acting promulgated by the so-called professionals of the commercial theatre is no better. But that is another discussion entirely. Rather, I offer these as examples from *my* experience of what I see as giving the theatre its proverbial ‘bad name.’

that says “Look how brilliant I am!” They are play-acting: mugging rather than exploring motives, ideologies, histories, etc. What is most disturbing is that the public absolutely eats up every minute of the unintentional farce, and even I have to ask myself why I toil so exhaustingly at making *art* if this is all people want or expect. But I will not accept this; if, as I have previously quoted Anna Deavere Smith as saying, “the artist gives us the allowance to imagine things another way,” then we *must* work with an insatiable desire to do so, and we *must* be driven by – at least in part – something other than the satisfaction of our own egos.<sup>9</sup>

Actually, the brilliance of *Waiting for Guffman* is that within the uproarious satire, Guest has captured an intense pathos. The title is, of course, a clever play on Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*: as it happens, *Guffman*’s characters – a dentist, a Dairy Queen worker, married travel agents, a car repairman and their never-has-been director/choreographer – stage their play with incredible vigor because they are led to believe that a Broadway producer – one Mort Guffman – is coming all the way from New York City to their fictional small town of Blaine, Missouri to see their little play. They wait for Guffman anxiously, and, much like in Beckett’s tragicomedy, he never comes, curbed from travel by a snow storm. The repercussions are as moving as they are devastating: Parker Posey’s Libby Mae Brown sitting at a picnic table outside the Dairy Queen lethargically chewing at her gum while resigning herself to a lifetime of making ice cream sundaes gives me goose pimples every time I see it. In the aftermath, the corny veneers drop, and you see these people in all their humanity: yes, they may be vain and horribly inept, and they may be terrible performers, but beyond that you sense a genuine desire to be ‘good,’ to commune with an audience, to be something, to say something – better yet: to *do* something. And, as frustrating as it is, you can see how important theatre is to the people of Blaine: how it enlivens them, gives them a

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Deavere Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 6.

sense of purpose and brings them together as a community. *Waiting for Guffman* is an excellent film because, even though on the surface it pokes fun of small-town types and amateurish theatre people, deep down it is an affirmation of the power of theatre as a vital, hardy thread in the fabric of a society.

In *Waiting for Guffman* – and often in life – we are simply faced with people who just don't know any better, people who have no means of channeling the energy of their imaginations, and, in some cases, perhaps they aren't meant to. I am all for inclusiveness, but it is naïve to think that *anyone* can act, direct, write plays, etc., as it is to think *anyone* can be a social worker, or an elementary school teacher or a police officer. We can't all follow the same path and, thankfully, we are all wired to be individuals with our own unique skill sets. Each and every one of the nearly seven billion of us brings a different perspective to the world table, and it seems that the work of the theatre is to deepen and proliferate our understanding and sincere consideration of these perspectives. Anna Deavere Smith asks: “Are you becoming an artist because you want the world to look at *you*? Or are you becoming an artist because you would like to use your ability to attract attention ... in order to cause [people] to see themselves and the world differently *through* you?”<sup>10</sup> I, of course, advocate for the latter, yet we cannot engage in such activity without a sturdy, burrowing approach to becoming the vessels for truly galvanizing performative experiences that plumb the depths of the human condition.

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*Barely able to reset yourself, the Teacher again bellows “ICHI!” following it with a characteristic hit of His stick. Once again you Stomp out to your right, only this time you do so with an increased degree of authority. Your Stomp lands flat-footed and you sense that your left leg is straight and held in dynamic tension. A hot silence envelopes the room as you fight to maintain stability. The Teacher is in a crouching position,*

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist*, 203.

*motionless except for his piercing eyes, darting across your body and the bodies of your fellow neophytes, hunting for the slightest imperfections. He stands suddenly in a swift, effortless motion, pauses for a moment, and then begins to move towards you. You fear for your life: your heart races as you attempt to maintain a cool exterior. He puts His hand on your right shoulder and you flinch. He stands there for a moment with His hand on your shoulder and then says matter-of-factly: "Breathe into my hand." You begin to breathe deeply, imagining that respiration is occurring not through the mouth or the nose but through your shoulder muscles. An increased sense of alignment washes over you. "You have much tension here," the Teacher says, and, for the first time, you become aware of how the strain of your work – a life of writing and computing engaged only through the apparatus of your right hand – has warped your body. You nearly relinquish focus to tell the Teacher as much, but He returns abruptly to His place at the front of the space, perhaps sensing your near blasphemy. Returned to His position, He continues to scan the space.*

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Although the performance cultures of the East have enjoyed a long systemic tradition – Japan's *noh* theatre, for example, dates from the fifteenth century – acting training in the Western world "is a phenomenon of the twentieth century."<sup>11</sup> Acting departments began their gradual introduction into American universities beginning with the University of Michigan in 1906, but Arthur Bartow reports that "it was not until conservatory-style preparation was introduced into universities in the 1960s that such programs became major training grounds for professional" performers.<sup>12</sup> It doesn't seem much of a coincidence that intensive training should come into vogue at a time of immense artistic and cultural exploration and experimentation. Yet, 'come into vogue' might be an overly bullish turn of phrase, for the type of training described by Bartow works against a commercial theatre that

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<sup>11</sup> Alison Hodge, "Introduction," in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Bartow, "Introduction," xix.

sets a different sort of standard, one that seeks quirky, idiosyncratic, one-noted individuality, favoring personality in a single role over imaginative creativity born of a lifetime of honing one's craft. Could the casting of Laura Bell Bundy's replacement as Elle Woods in the Broadway musical *Legally Blonde* via a reality television competition be any more disheartening?

In his 1969 welcoming speech to the students of the Yale School of Drama, then-Dean Robert Brustein remarked that "the notion of strict attention to training" was

not in tune with the going thing; it runs counter to the current cultural fashions; it is neither voguish, nor modish, nor popular at the moment ... It just happens, in my own opinion, to be the only way we are ever going to get American theatre off the ground, to make it an expression which is neither at the mercy of commercial interests, [nor] the interests of the currently fashionable avant-garde, an expression of civilized and humane men [and women]. If this country is ever going to have a theatre, it is you who are going to create it. But you won't be able to create very much at all until you are in complete control of your talents and abilities.<sup>13</sup>

These comments were made over forty years ago, yet in today's celebrity-obsessed culture in which our most popular "artists" are cultivated from the ranks of so-called reality television, the charge extended to those of us working in higher education seems more dire now than ever. More recently, innovative opera director Peter Sellars has reminded us that the "arts are being defunded every minute right now" and that the "universities will probably end up being the last patrons of the arts in our culture."<sup>14</sup> He continues with an ambitious vision of the role of university theatre: "Let's hope that the university will realize that the practice of the arts is about getting rich, but not in a monetary terms. But, as human beings as a culture, as a society, and as people. And that kind of wealth truly needs to be cultivated. Let's hope

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Brustein, *Revolution as Theatre: Notes on the New Radical Style* (New York: Liveright, 1971), 159.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Sellars, quoted in *Chaos and Order: Making American Theater*, DVD, directed by Tim Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Science, 2006).

that a university is a place where they can value those returns.”<sup>15</sup> In early 2010, Jedediah Wheeler – Executive Director for Arts and Cultural Programming at Montclair State University – declared that “higher education has a significant role to play in moving a culture forward, and that role shouldn’t involve taking cues from box-office sales.”<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, these comments came in a *New York Times* article questioning the mission of newly-minted American Repertory Theater Artistic Director Diana Paulus and her brand of “populist” theatre, an aesthetic that unnerves those who feel her work “sacrifices serious art to lowest-common-denominator spectacle” and will “simply entertain” rather than continue A.R.T’s three-decade long distinction – begun by Brustein himself – as a “beacon for serious and avant-garde aesthetics” meant to “instruct and transform.”<sup>17</sup> Our work indeed was founded on the notion that the university atmosphere may be one of the last vestiges for creating truly vibrant, invigorating, and original theatre. With not hubris but humility, my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I proceeded boldly, fortified by Brustein’s wonderfully rebellious advocacy for craft, Sellars’s radiant vision for potent and powerful university theatre, and Wheeler’s unwillingness to compromise and his disinclination to equate the popular with the acceptable. Seeking to instruct *and* transform, with an open and generous spirit our work refused to pander to any sort of preconceived expectations, but rather to engender an intellectually and emotionally rigorous extra-ordinary experiencing. The road to kindling this kind of adventure is the same road one takes to Carnegie Hall, as the old saying goes: *Practice, practice, practice!*

Anne Bogart points out that two recent bestselling books – Malcolm Gladwell’s

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Healy, “High Art Meets High Jinks Onstage,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

*Outliers* (2008) and Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code* (2009) – are “popularizing neuroscience’s hot discovery that only after 10,000 hours of practice is real progress and innovation possible.”<sup>18</sup> Bogart voices this important proclamation in “The Benefit of Deep Practice,” the November 2009 entry of her monthly blog in which she galvanizes us with her usual prophetic candor:

I know now that when I stop practicing I will stop transforming ... Practice, it turns out, changes the actual makeup of the body ... Deep practice is a slow and uncomfortable interaction with something that is just out of your grasp and just beyond your capabilities. To practice deeply is to live deliberately in a space that is uncomfortable but with the sense that progress can happen. Hope, determination and inspiration are the fuel that can sustain the necessary sweat and frustration of deep practice.<sup>19</sup>

I wish to wear these words like a sign for those so-called artists I seem to encounter constantly, those same people who fuel my perennial irritation with the failure to understand that real art is real work and that anything less than a profound interrogation of a piece and those entrusted to give it life is offensive. But rather than degrade into profitless irascibility, I try everyday to take up Bogart’s “hope, determination and inspiration” and continue to be a positive – if fiery – advocate for the proper education and training of all theatre artists. I say *try*, of course, because as this writing itself shows, some days I will succeed in proffering hope and other days I will inevitably descend into cynicism and negativity. This is a practice in itself, and as I work at it, I remember that it will be an “uncomfortable” confrontation with something “just beyond [my] capabilities.”<sup>20</sup> I remember too Grotowski’s lush vision of the benefits of deep practice, a vision that recognizes the radical and complex unlearning

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<sup>18</sup> Anne Bogart, “The Benefits of Deep Practice,” Anne’s Blog, entry posted November 3, 2009, <http://siti.groupsie.com/post/november-2009-the-benefits-of-deep-practice> (accessed November 3, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

required of the theatreing the sacred as well as the torment that will certainly accompany an ardent interrogation of one's most private parts: "It gives the [actress] a series of shocks: the shock of confronting [herself] in the face of simple irrefutable challenges; the shock of catching sight of [her] own evasions, tricks and clichés; the shock of sensing something of [her] own vast and untapped resources; the shock of being forced to question why [she] is an [actress] at all. A way of life is a way to life."<sup>21</sup> Might, then, a theatreing of the sacred in theatre by performers fully in command of their being and trained in such a way to evoke "something beyond immediate felt states of ordinary waking consciousness" be one way to finally "get the theatre off the ground," as Brustein put it?<sup>22</sup> To render profound, enormous, scintillating moments between human beings in close, sweaty contact?

It is significant that in *Sacred Theatre* Yarrow attends to the importance of training performers "because it looks as though [trained] performers can access some kind of 'heightened' condition of sensitivity, mental and physical functioning and being-in-the-moment," and, importantly, then "act as a means to deliver a similar kind of access to spectator-participants."<sup>23</sup> Yarrow cites Phillip Zarrilli's assertion that these "'intuitive' abilities are *only* gained ... through the tempering work of psychophysiological discipline."<sup>24</sup> This involves a "specialized training [of] the bodymind ... to become accomplished in attaining a certain specialized state of consciousness" because "you need some form of training or development to be able to function continuously from the condition of ...

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<sup>21</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Yarrow, "Preface," in *Sacred Theatre*, ed. Ralph Yarrow (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Yarrow, "Actor-Training," in *Sacred Theatre*, 160.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30. See also Phillip Zarrilli, "Negotiating Performance Epistemologies: Knowledges 'About,' 'In,' and 'For,'" *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 21 (2001): 44.

sacredness.”<sup>25</sup> Zarrilli’s use of the term “bodymind,” of course, implies the *holiness/wholeness* spoken of earlier as the interrelationship of physical and mental activity. In the words of Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa, rather than asking ““What *is* the relationship between the mind-body?”,” psychophysical<sup>26</sup> training wonders: “How does the relationship between the mind and the body *come to be* (through cultivation).”<sup>27</sup> In this way, our theatreing of the sacred emerged as “an active, embodied doing” in which “[e]xtraordinary energy, time, and resources [were] ... invested.”<sup>28</sup> We employed the extra-daily practice of psychophysical training methods as a means to awaken in the actress “what neurologists have identified as the proprioceptive or sixth sense, our sense of body awareness, or mind-body integration.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, because “learning always involves unlearning,” this type of training “can and should be a form of ‘unconditioning,’” an “extraordinary process” in which performers “strip away or wipe away any kind of habitualised ... behavior.”<sup>30</sup> In respect to the *Agnes of God* process, this translated into a rabid interrogation of our individual and collective circuitries, leading us “to uncover and bring to the surface [a] physically perceptive

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<sup>25</sup> Zarrilli, “Negotiating Performance Epistemologies,” 33-4; Yarrow, “Actor-Training,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 160.

<sup>26</sup> Across his various writings here cited, Zarrilli uses the terms “psychophysiological” and “psychophysical” interchangeably, perhaps preferring, as I do, the less clunky and more common term “psychophysical” as evidenced in the straightforward title of his most recent work: Phillip Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski* (London: Routledge, 2008.)

<sup>27</sup> Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, ed. Thomas P. Kasulis, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>28</sup> Zarrilli, “Negotiating Performance Epistemologies,” 34.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “A Critical and Interpretive Approach in Medical Anthropology,” in *Medical Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Method*, ed. Thomas M. Johnson and Carol F. Sargent (New York: Praeger, 1990), 57.

<sup>30</sup> Zarrilli, “Negotiating Performance Epistemologies,” 40.

sensibility,” a heightening of our “innate expressive abilities.”<sup>31</sup> As Lorna Marshall has observed, it “makes sense to engage with your body ... when you work. After all, it has lived, felt, experienced the world ... It is you. Not something separate and apart. To ignore it is to ignore the fullness of yourself. To refuse a major source of information and insight.”<sup>32</sup>

At this point, I would be remiss to omit from the discussion Konstantin Stanislavski,<sup>33</sup> the Russian revolutionary who “has had a greater impact on American acting than any other figure.”<sup>34</sup> Stanislavski was the first to use the term psychophysical “to describe an approach to Western acting focused equally on the [actress’s] psychology and physicality.”<sup>35</sup> Admirably, Stanislavski spent the better part of his life attempting to craft a codified technique for acting training, drawing on the work of French psychologist Théodule Armand Ribot – who claimed that “emotion cannot exist without a physical consequence” – and his limited experience of Indian yoga to solidify his approach.<sup>36</sup> According to scholar Jean Benedetti, Stanislavski consistently worked to overcome what divided “mind from

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<sup>31</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, “Culture is the Body,” trans. Kazuko Matsuoka, in *Acting (Re)Considered*, ed. Phillip Zarrilli (London: Routledge, 1995), 155.

<sup>32</sup> Lorna Marshall, *The Body Speaks* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Various scholars and translators spell Stanislavski’s first and last name in a variety of ways. I will privilege Jean Benedetti’s spelling of his name – “Konstantin Stanislavski” – owing to Benedetti’s reputation as a preeminent Stanislavski scholar and for the currency of his recent translations. Any other spelling of Stanislavski’s name in this writing is included to respect the author of a direct quotation.

<sup>34</sup> Rhonda Blair, *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience* (London: Routledge, 2008), 28.

<sup>35</sup> Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Hodge, “Introduction,” in Hodge, 4.

body, knowledge from feeling, analysis from action.”<sup>37</sup> In Stanislavski’s own words: “In every physical action there is something of the psychological, and in the psychological, something of the physical.”<sup>38</sup> It is unfortunate that this coalescent aspect of his training seems to have been lost in its transfer to America. Benedetti laments: “Konstantin Stanislavski is the most significant and most frequently quoted in the history of [acting] training. He is also the most consistently and widely misunderstood.”<sup>39</sup> In the early 1920s, Stanislavski toured America with the Moscow Art Theatre, a company he co-founded with Russian playwright and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1897 as a laboratory for the nearly forty years he spent attempting to formalize the practice of acting. Stanislavski’s theories were in an early stage of synthesis, and thus Americans “came to know a particular version of Stanislavski,” reports Zarrilli, based on the company’s presentation of a realistic repertory that included his early productions Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters* and that obviously excluded Stanislavski’s later experimental work, such as his productions of the symbolist plays of Maurice Maeterlinck.<sup>40</sup> Regardless, the appearance of the Moscow Art Theatre in the States “planted the seed of desire,” says Arthur Bartow, “for deeper American acting and set the stage for [what would] eventually define the American acting style.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1982), 66.

<sup>38</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, quoted in Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1998), 178.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor* (New York: Routledge, 1998), vii.

<sup>40</sup> Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Bartow, “Introduction,” xx.

By the 1950s, the “major US acting teachers ... Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Lee Strasberg ... all laid claim at one point or another to using the ‘true’ principles initially articulated by Stanislavsky – and all misunderstood aspects of his work.”<sup>42</sup> This “troika of Stanislavsky-based approaches to American acting” promulgated “a Freudian-based, individually oriented ethos [that] privileged the psychological techniques of Stanislavski’s System over those of the physical,” specifically focusing on the employment of “therapeutic techniques meant to free the inhibited [actress] from long-lived repressions.”<sup>43</sup> In common parlance, this is often called *sense memory*, or “the recall of emotional moments in one’s personal past.”<sup>44</sup> America’s fascination with the exploration of emotion through an actress’s psychological processes and with the ultra-realistic representation of human behavior occluded any comprehensive understanding of Stanislavski’s later development of the Method of Physical Action that he taught in the last years of his life as an exercise in “the external, physicalised [*sic*] construction of character.”<sup>45</sup> Of course, Elizabeth Hapgood’s “highly problematic” English translations of Stanislavski’s various writings only further confused matters.<sup>46</sup> Hapgood based her translations – *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1949), and *Creating a Role* (1961) – largely on drafts and compilations of various articles left unfinished in the wake of Stanislavski’s death in the summer of 1938.<sup>47</sup> Even *An*

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<sup>42</sup> Blair, *Actor, Image, and Action*, 26.

<sup>43</sup> Bartow, “Introduction,” xxiv; Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 1, 57-58.

<sup>44</sup> Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Hodge, “Introduction,” in Hodge, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Stanislavski’s works have finally been reexamined and retranslated into what are largely considered to be more authentic publications by expert Jean Benedetti: Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), and

*Actor Prepares*, published in his lifetime, was hopelessly dated, failing to capture a system that had already evolved beyond it. “What does it signify,” asks Stanislavski, “to write down what is past and done? The system lives in me but it has no shape or form. The system is created in the very act of writing it down. That is why I have to keep changing what I have already written.”<sup>48</sup> Regardless of misinterpretations, Grotowski was correct, according to Jennifer Kumiega, in asserting that Stanislavski’s “primary legacy – his ‘great service’ to the profession – was the establishment of the Western [actress’s] obligation to daily work and training in addition to performance.”<sup>49</sup>

What the misinterpretation of Stanislavski’s theories has done, says Alison Hodge, is to “obscure his belief in the symbiosis of the mind and body.”<sup>50</sup> Anne Bogart has been openly vocal about her distaste for “the stale influence of a watered-down version of the Stanislavsky system.”<sup>51</sup> Although Stanislavski abandoned his early experiments with sense memory in favor of those involving physical action and the “psycho-physical unity of experience,” Bogart warns us that “it was too late. Americans had already grabbed on to a severely limited aspect of his ‘system’ ... The Americanization, or miniaturization, of the Stanislavsky system has become the air we breath and, like the air we breathe, are rarely aware of its omnipresence.”<sup>52</sup> Bogart situates Viewpoints, then, as a training that “allows

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Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work on a Role*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, quoted in Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, xxii.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Kumiega, *The Theatre of Grotowski* (London: Methuen, 1985), 110.

<sup>50</sup> Hodge, “Introduction,” in Hodge, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 25.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

untamed feeling to arise from the actual physical, verbal and imaginative situation in which [actresses] find themselves together,” rather than focusing on the “Herculean effort to pin down a particular emotion [that] removes the [actress] from the simple task of performing an action,” thereby distancing performers “from one another and from the audience.”<sup>53</sup>

Speaking of Bogart in words that explain their mutual affinity, Suzuki asserts she “is taking on the backbone of American theatre: realism, and the Stanislavski derived system of acting which supports it. By refusing to breathe the theatrical air that is so-all pervasive around her, she has created a vacuum that demands to be filled by something new.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I met Bogart’s demand head-on, tempting to fill this dangerous empty space with *our* fresh, imaginative vision for the future of the theatre.

Itself an acting training that enables stylistic departures from more orthodox modes of presentation, Suzuki’s aesthetic emerged as a heated assault against his own culture’s realistic style: *shingeki*, a mode of Japanese theatre that is imitative of Western European naturalism, “a rational and literary” mode that consciously departs “from premodern Japanese poetic aesthetics (ambiguity, spirituality and the supernatural), embodied in *noh* theatre in particular.”<sup>55</sup> Although Suzuki himself has not remarked on the work of Stanislavski, it is worth noting that renowned American acting teacher Steve Pearson – who, along with Robyn Hunt, teaches “‘a new American system’ that combines the expressive discipline of Tadashi Suzuki and the psychological verity” of Stanislavski’s training – insists

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<sup>53</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 16.

<sup>54</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, “Creating a New/Different America,” trans. Leon Ingulsrud, in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1995), 85.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theater Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17.

that if they could meet, “Suzuki and Stanislavski would be friends.”<sup>56</sup> Pearson and Hunt focus their training on the physicalization of an internal state so that “the body’s vocabulary begins to come up with the sophistication of the mind’s analytical articulateness,” a “three-dimensional experience with the body.”<sup>57</sup> Steve Pearson now teaches with Robyn Hunt at the University of South Carolina, but in the early 1980s Pearson was a movement teacher at the University of California-San Diego and was one of the first Americans invited to train with Suzuki at his compound in Toga-mura, Japan. One of his MFA Acting students at the time was Maria Porter, who in her second year of study was selected to go to Japan and study with Suzuki and his company and, in her third year of study, was taught Viewpoints by Anne Bogart herself. She is currently a professor of acting, voice and movement at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University where – some twenty years after her initial training in Suzuki and Viewpoints – she instilled those same trainings in the mind and in the body of, dear reader, your most humble guide through this wild and rocky terrain: the author, *me*.

I graduated from Post with a Master’s degree in Theatre in 2005, after an intensive two years of Suzuki/Viewpoints training with Maria. I enrolled at Post on a whim, completely ignorant of the fact that Suzuki/Viewpoints even existed. I remember walking into the theatre building on one of my first days in the program to find a note on the callboard that read: “Attention Suzuki students! Dress appropriately. We *will* be Stomping on Tuesday!” Stomping? I wondered if I hadn’t somehow joined a cult. I remember observing a Suzuki/Viewpoints training session for the first time: I was completely transfixed, my mouth

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<sup>56</sup> Terry Donovan Smith, “Method(ical) Hybridity: Stanislavsky Meets Suzuki: An Interview with Steve Pearson and Robyn Hunt,” in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, ed. David Krasner (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 246; Steve Pearson, quoted in Smith, “Method(ical) Hybridity,” 247.

<sup>57</sup> Robyn Hunt, quoted in Smith, “Method(ical) Hybridity,” 249-250; Pearson, quoted in Smith, “Method(ical) Hybridity,” 249.

hanging open in utter amazement. The work was visceral, animalistic, sweaty – erotic even. I knew immediately that this was for me. Indeed, my inevitable experience of this work was wholly transformative. It allowed me to overcome underlying fears about my physicality, my intellect, and my ability to make strong, clear artistic choices. It allowed me to channel my excessive frenetic energy into a useful tool. It taught me for the first time to truly *listen* to the other artists in the space with me, to deepen my humanity, to be open to making actual human connections.

Looking back through my journals, I find a particularly significant entry:

Our drab studio has become a sacred space for me. Working in the space with my colleagues, guided by Maria, I feel like I'm working in another dimension. The outside world and all its trappings don't exist: there's just myself, my classmates, and the work. Today I was discovering new modes of behavior within me that I did not know existed, and was filling choices with a deeper truth than ever before ... It's like crossing into something unknown – something great – something that will move me beyond anything I've ever known ... This has meant so much to me ... I can't imagine what I'd be like without it ... it's so real to me that it feels just like home.<sup>58</sup>

Suzuki/Viewpoints training allowed me to fully physicalize my craft. Finally, I was able to work in a tangible way, as I actually had specific things to *do* with my arms, my legs, my *feet*, things that required attention and precision, things that provided me a concrete method of entry into a heightened, more elemental, more intrinsic store of artistic possibility. I come across another entry in which I call this a process of “moving out of the mind and into the soul ... I feel like I'm actively working to better myself and those around me. *I finally feel like a real artist.*”<sup>59</sup> And there, in the margin, are two unassuming three letters words written in the lyrical scrawl of Maria's red pen: “You are.” No exclamation point, no capital letters, just the essential sort of communication that only those who experience this work can engage in. I

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<sup>58</sup> Matt Saltzberg, personal journal, October 4, 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., November 13, 2004.

remember retrieving my journal from the theatre office after Maria had read and ‘graded’ it during winter break. It was snowing rather heavily and I was thoroughly encased in a plush winter costume. Even so, I removed my gloves as they were too cumbersome to leaf through the journal and I could not wait to get home to read Maria’s comments. As I trudged through the typical Long Island slush, my hands numbed to a bright red and an endless barrage of snowflakes left their unique watermark on the flimsy pages of my Mead composition notebook, the badge of honor and most cherished possession of a Post theatre student. Finally, I turned to the mid-November entry that bears Maria’s brief-yet-galvanizing comment. I can remember the hairs standing up on the back of my neck and my cheeks warming in spite of the bitter cold. It was a euphoric moment, a confirmation that I did indeed earn my place – literally *and* figuratively – on the stage of our training space, a shot of hot inspiration in the middle of a snow storm in the middle of an island. Yet, somehow I was not alone in my exhilaration: as unique as the moment was, part of the beauty of this work is that it defies the secreting of these difficult-to-describe yet deeply felt sensations. My success in training had just as much to do with my sense of commitment and discipline as it did with that of my colleagues. We weren’t empty vessels for Maria to fill; rather, we all learned together in a sensuous way that defied chalk boards and PowerPoint presentations, multiple choice tests and lecture notes. In a way, the challenge of transmitting the work *becomes* the work, and this transmission, dear reader, is the miracle I tempted in each and every *Agnes of God* training session and rehearsal and continue to tempt now over the course of this very writing.

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*The Teacher bangs His stick against the floor and commands you to lift your left leg. He is testing you: all your weight should have been transferred to your right foot during the Stomp, and you should not need to move your torso any further right to facilitate the raising of your straight leg. When you do so without moving any*

*other part of your body, you enjoy a fleeting moment of pride before that pride catches you teetering precariously on your foot. You flail your arms in a vain attempt to balance yourself. Finally, you crash to the floor with a thud, blushing with embarrassment. Instinctively, you look to the Teacher to register His reaction. You catch Him staring at you stoically – or is that a slight smile you see stretching across His stern visage? His gaze fixed solely on you, the Teacher raps His staff and commands your fellow neophytes to replace their raised leg without any excess movement. You stand up and – afraid to brush yourself off or adjust yourself – you immediately fall back in line with the others, your left leg straight and your right leg bent, your foot bearing all of your weight. After several long, silent seconds, the Teacher thunders “NI!” – Japanese for ‘two’ – and you swiftly draw your left leg in so that your heels meet once again. You relish in the momentary relief provided your strained right leg.*

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Concentration, precision, physical engagement: to put it simply, this is what innovative Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki asks of his unflagging pupils. This is not a polite interrogation, for there is no room in Suzuki’s aesthetic for pleasantries: his training is hard work, a rigorous physical discipline that tests the limits of your will as much as that of your corporeal body. When you train in Suzuki, you feel as if you have submitted to the conditions of a militaristic boot camp, overseen by a menacing drill sergeant who savagely barks orders while viciously cracking his weapon of choice across the floor: a long, imposing wooden stick usually constructed of bamboo. In his recounting of one particularly harrowing encounter with Suzuki, actor Kameron Steele eloquently captures both the stringency and sacrality of the training: “The first time [Suzuki] ever really grilled me in front of everyone was my first summer in Toga ... I messed up. It was terrifying. He was screaming at me ... This was the first time I really understood what blasphemy was ... This experience made me

realize that things meant that much and were that important.”<sup>60</sup> What an incredibly moving and powerful sentiment, a sentiment full of reverence and honor for a theatre rarely glimpsed in today’s society. And it is from this sentiment, dear reader, that my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I initiated each and every step along our journey.

Suzuki first began to formalize his training in the late 1960s out of a desire “to approach and deal with problems or issues which cannot be solved by individuals in their daily lives.”<sup>61</sup> Suzuki desires to reinstate in the theatre the metaphysical quality of its origin since ousted by the influence of naturalism and human psychology. “Theatre has ceased to be something very vital,” says Suzuki, “It used to be the case that the theatre of a country would clearly reveal the spiritual and mental state of that society. But this is no longer the case. We need to re-establish this prominence and power. That is what I wish to do.”<sup>62</sup> With the conception of the body and mind as a psycho-physical unity, Suzuki tailors his training to effect the sublimation of “the ordinary, everyday sense of the body” through the reanimation of the actress’s intrinsic elemental powers, powers that have become dormant in her daily life.<sup>63</sup> In this way, Suzuki training is focused on “the discovery of an inner physical sensibility ... the recognition of an inner and profound memory innate to the human body. In other words, it is [*ji*] to do with the ability to uncover this profound physical sensibility and to give it full play.”<sup>64</sup> As Paul Allain so accurately surmises, “With the progress of civilization

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<sup>60</sup> Kameron Steele, quoted in Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in *One Step on a Journey: Tadashi Suzuki in Australia*, VHS, directed by Tony Chapman (New York: Insight Media, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 11.

<sup>64</sup> Suzuki, “Culture is the Body,” 159.

our use of the body has diminished and our physical and sensory faculties have become weakened and desensitized,” yet Suzuki training “can reinstate our forgotten or at least suppressed psychophysicality and enable fuller use of the senses.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, it is to this end that the training was employed in the *Agnes of God* process: to provide both performers and spectators access to a high-sensory realm of communication and understanding.

To stage this reanimation of ancient forces, Suzuki openly appropriates the forms (*kata*) and aesthetics of the traditional Japanese art forms of *nob* and *kabuki*, for he believes that “there must be some method to make traditional consciousness compatible with modern habits.”<sup>66</sup> Although the various codified forms of his training come from the stylization of both *nob* and *kabuki* performance, Suzuki readily admits he has never formally studied either *nob* or *kabuki*, but worked from his own observations of these traditional modes in performance. “What I am striving to do,” he says, “is restore the wholeness of the human body in the theatrical context, not simply by going back to such traditional theatrical forms as *nob* and *kabuki*; but, by employing their unique virtues, to create something transcending current practice in the modern theatre.”<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere he cautions, “We don’t copy the forms (*kata*) just as they are. We aren’t learning to perform [*nob* or] *kabuki*. It’s the feeling of the particular form that I try to teach, so the [actress] can revitalize that marvelous physicality that comes from *nob* and from *kabuki*.”<sup>68</sup> From *nob*, Suzuki finds that “virtually no

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<sup>65</sup> Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in James R. Brandon, “Training at the Waseda Little Theatre: The Suzuki Method,” *TDR* 22 (1978): 34.

<sup>67</sup> Suzuki, “Culture is the Body,” 157.

<sup>68</sup> Suzuki, quoted in Brandon, “Training at the Waseda Little Theatre,” 32.

energy that is not human goes into an artistic creation.”<sup>69</sup> Also, Suzuki discovers that *nob* “is non-realistic in its expression,” presenting a world that “consists of what cannot be seen or heard in everyday life, only what can be felt, absorbed.”<sup>70</sup> That Suzuki training adopts and makes tangible this *nob* aesthetic is, of course, extremely significant to my work, for it is here that we find in Suzuki training the sensibility of the process of the invisible-made-visible so central to our theatreing of the sacred. And this aesthetic directly relates to Suzuki’s understanding of *kabuki*, from which he learned “the joy of the body speaking onstage. I don’t mean ‘body language,’ as you say in English, where the body unconsciously reveals inner emotion. I mean the opposite: the [actress] deliberately speaks through proportion, line, movement, form of [her] body. The body creates the picture.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, with the intention of “a complete physicalization of acting,” in Suzuki training you learn to communicate literally *through the body*, for the body is a medium “through which the [actress] develops a hyperawareness and sensibility which is a *total* psychophysiological engagement of the bodymind/spirit in the activity.”<sup>72</sup>

In *The Way of Acting*, Suzuki famously refers to his training as “the grammar of the feet,” for he further absorbed from *nob* and *kabuki* the essential relationship of the [actress’s] foot to the floor. “A performance begins,” says Suzuki,

when the [actress’s] feet touch the ground, a wooden floor, a surface, when [she] first has the sensation of putting down roots ... The [actress] composes

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<sup>69</sup> Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, 29-30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Brandon, “Training at the Waseda Little Theatre,” 42.

<sup>72</sup> James R. Brandon, “Contemporary Japanese Theatre: Interculturalism and Intraculturalism,” in *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own, and Foreign*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Josephine Riley, and Michael Gissenwehrer (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), 92; Phillip Zarrilli, “Introduction to Part II,” in Zarrilli, *Acting (Re)Considered*, 79.

[herself] on the basis of [her] sense of contact with the ground, by the way in which [her] body makes contact with the floor. The performer indeed proves with [her] feet that [she] is an [actress] ... The various pleasures that an [actress] feels as [she] comes in contact with the ground – and the growth in the richness of change in [her] bodily responses when [she] is in contact with the ground – constitute the first stage in [her] training as an [actress].<sup>73</sup>

Fortified with the conviction that “an [actress’s] basic sense of [her] physicality comes from [her] feet,” Suzuki training is steeped in the notion that “the ground and the body are not two separate entities,” and that “the [actress] has to have solid foot work before action can spring from the body with power.”<sup>74</sup> Although the majority of Suzuki’s forms include arm movements, the real work of the training occurs in the lower body with the expectation that the actress always moves from her center of gravity, or her *core*: an abstract notion of centeredness located in the lower abdomen. Through a vocabulary of footwork, the upper and lower body are, in effect, separated, as the upper body remains still and ‘moves’ as far as possible upwards while “the lower body attempts to descend in a kind of counter-movement,” revealing a “sense of intimacy with the ground.”<sup>75</sup> This attention placed on the lower body instigates a sharpening of the actress’s sense of control and concentration, as she awakens the spirits of – and gathers energy from – the earth. “That the energy of the spirits can be felt through the feet to activate our own bodies is a most natural and valuable illusion for human beings,” says Suzuki, for “the feet are the last remaining part of the human body which has kept, literally, in touch with the earth, the very supporting base of all human activities.”<sup>76</sup> Citing the work of influential Japanese culture scholar Origuchi Shinobu, Suzuki reminds us of the “consistent desire” of Japanese traditional arts “to strike a rhythm

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<sup>73</sup> Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; Brandon, “Training at the Waseda Little Theatre,” 35.

<sup>75</sup> Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, 10-11.

<sup>76</sup> Suzuki, “Culture is the Body,” 160.

with the feet; this practice on stage doubtless derives from the powerful foot-stamping originally used to magically ward off evil.”<sup>77</sup> In Suzuki’s conception, Stomping, the signature form of his training, is a direct descendent of the *sanbaso*, an ancient dance still performed in *nob* that includes a “kind of foot-stamping that was designed to create a sense of peace and harmony as the performer moves around a fixed space.”<sup>78</sup> In a mode similar to *kabuki*’s *aragoto*, or “rough style” – characterized by exaggerated movement, vitality, and raw spirit appropriate to the display of superhuman powers – Stomping “gives the [actress] a sense of the strength inherent in [her] own body” that “can be interpreted to mean gesturing to the spirits, arousing that spiritual energy, confronting it, taking it into oneself. When the spirit has entered the one performing the gestures, that person in turn becomes brave and finds [herself] ready for deeds of strength and valor.”<sup>79</sup>

Suzuki has said, “If I am to explain my so-called ‘Suzuki’ method of training and why I insist on teaching leg movements and the use of a great deal of energy, I would say that the world has become increasingly civilized and our use of the animal energy within us has gradually diminished. We replace it with non-animal energy and so we live longer. But the energy within us, our ability to communicate, our ability to express ourselves has been weakened.”<sup>80</sup> Foremost American Suzuki practitioner and teacher Ellen Lauren explains that the conjuration of animal energy allows us to break “open in a creative, expressive way the

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<sup>77</sup> Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, 11. Both “Stomping” and “Stamping” are used to describe this central articulation of the form. I will privilege “Stomping,” as that is the only way I have ever encountered the term in practice.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> James R. Brandon, William P. Malm, and Donald H. Shively, *Studies in Kabuki: Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978), 40, 68; Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, 12, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in *Theater in Japan*, VHS, directed by Shelley Williams (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2000).

potential that plays once had to express the human spirit,” facilitating the discovery of “what it means to be human in its fully capacity.”<sup>81</sup> Leon Ingulsrud is even more explicit:

The expressiveness of the human body, therefore the expressiveness of the [actress], is based on an animal energy, which is something very hot and deep and powerful in an [actress]. The ability to express with that energy has grown dormant within us. So, the process of training is a process of waking that up. There is a technical core in the training that has to do with control of the center of gravity, control of breath, control of concentration, but all of that is in service of getting that animal energy to happen.<sup>82</sup>

Yet, insofar as Suzuki training develops the performer’s capacity to initiate movement and speech from her center through the repetition of codified exercises that test the limits of control, strength, and balance, it is important to recognize that the training is neither calisthenics nor gymnastics. The intention is not to develop physically, as an athlete might, but to expose the essential aspects of our bodies. More than mere physical conditioning, the training requires emotional and imaginative engagement: there is no form without artistry; there is no artistry without form. Suzuki himself reminds us that “any time an [actress] thinks [she] is merely exercising or training [her] muscles, [she] is cheating [herself]. These are *acting* disciplines. Every instant of every discipline, the [actress] must be expressing the emotion of some situation, according to [her] own bodily interpretation. That’s ... [why] physical fitness teachers don’t go on the stage. We do. I know muscles hurt, the chest heaves during disciplines. It doesn’t matter. You have to act even so.”<sup>83</sup> Listen to Ellen Lauren speak to the extreme arduousness and inconceivable multidirectionality of Suzuki’s charge:

All of the exercises ... are basically impossible. What Suzuki is asking to do are movements that are not seen in daily life ... that take the body out of a habitual way of moving. Then he asks you to maintain an equilibrium and

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<sup>81</sup> Ellen Lauren, quoted in Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 47.

<sup>82</sup> Leon Ingulsrud, quoted in Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88.

<sup>83</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in Brandon, “Training at the Waseda Little Theatre,” 36.

steadiness as if you held a glass of water inside the body which you don't want to spill ... So you willfully create a collision in the body and try to control it, keeping a very strong specific outward focus at the same time ... Suzuki thinks the [actress] should be doing something extraordinary on the stage, something that not just anybody can do.<sup>84</sup>

In the doing of the impossible, when you push yourself to climes unknown, the possibility of growth and change lay out before you. You are opened up to the potential for something extra-ordinary to occur, a brief, rapturous moment in which your senses activate with an incredible clarity. And these are moments we must be encouraged to catch, dear reader, before they fade away ...

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*As if sensing your surrender to sluggishness – however momentary – the Teacher quickly calls “SAN!” – Japanese for ‘three’ – and you rush to the floor in a squatting position. Sensing a way to ease your physical discomfort, you surreptitiously sit back on your up-turned heels. The Teacher is at the other end of the space, examining the form of one of your colleagues. Without breaking His focus on your comrade, He commands you: “Don’t be lazy! Get off your heels!” He then takes center and implores everyone to kept their spine erect and their center projected forward, forcing you to maintain this position for what feels like an eternity. Your calves and feet tremble from the strain; you attempt to quell the vibrations but they are making their way up into your torso, and you are afraid of what the Teacher will do once he perceives them, which, inevitably, He will do.*

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Anne Bogart defines Viewpoints as “the practice of *imagination* and *spontaneity*.”<sup>85</sup>

Discouraging premeditation and habitual physical choices, Viewpoints is a set of terms given to preexisting principles of movement that constitute a theoretical/descriptive vocabulary

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<sup>84</sup> Ellen Lauren, quoted in Ian Carruthers and Takahashi Yasunari, *The Theatre of Suzuki Tadashi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97.

<sup>85</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Viewpoints Book*, 59.

for the work occurring onstage.<sup>86</sup> Rather than focusing on the *how* of acting as more psychological modes of performer training do, Viewpoints prepares the performer to *get ready* to act, developing and maintaining a dexterous physical condition and focus which prepares the actress to respond to outside stimuli at any given moment, to send and receive kinetic energy, and to engage in precise physical action.<sup>87</sup>

Bogart first encountered Viewpoints in 1979 when she began to teach and direct in the newly formed Experimental Theatre Wing of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts alongside renowned dancer and choreographer Mary Overlie. Out of an interest in releasing "the existing materials of theater, formerly organized into various rigid hierarchical orders, into a fluid state for reexamination," Overlie tempts a kind of acting that is "focused on bringing the audience beyond a definitive message, reaching instead toward a more fluid dialogue with possibilities and interaction."<sup>88</sup> Her radical revisioning of the elements of the theatre into an "extreme democracy" denies the production of "a preconceived and definitive statement created by a singular person/artist."<sup>89</sup> However, Overlie cautions that while "this may sound like a relaxed and undemanding approach for the artist ... this new type of work is enormously strenuous" in that "it demands concentration beyond the self, and a constant vigilance that you keep your own knowledge under strict control, so that you can be receptive to what the materials or events are actually trying to communicate, *beyond what you think you already know*. You might say that this new practice of art is *a practice of not*

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>87</sup> Cummings, *Remaking American Theater*, 110.

<sup>88</sup> Mary Overlie, "The Six Viewpoints," in *Training of the American Actor*, ed. Arthur Bartow (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 188.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 189.

*knowing* [emphasis added].”<sup>90</sup> Working from the philosophical perspective of “the Horizontal” that “releases the verticality of hierarchy” of theatrical elements and enables the actress “to find new entrances into action, stepping from the language of one material into another and discovering a multitude of possibilities,” Overlie articulated her original Six Viewpoints: Space (perception of physical relationships), Story (collection and analysis of information over a period of time), Emotion (perception of and entrance into states of feeling), Shape (response to form), Time (perception of duration and the regulation of duration), and Movement (identification of kinetic states through memory).<sup>91</sup> “Most of the education in Viewpoints ... training,” says Overlie,

comes from the [actresses’] direct contact with the six languages through the practices. For example, when the [actress] is allowed to stand in space as a pure language, space quickly becomes tangible and full of information that it transmits directly to the performer. In the Six Viewpoints practices, there is no need for the teacher to point out the qualities embodied in each of these languages. In fact, since the education that space has to impart to the performer is nonverbal, the instructor cannot begin to do justice to it. Through this type of training, the [actresses] become readers, mentally, emotionally, and physically, and begin to develop their own skill with the six languages ... This develops what I call the “Original Anarchist” – one who knows through experience what the right action is, and who can listen with great humility and clarity to others without losing [herself].<sup>92</sup>

Constantly seeking to push boundaries and create new forms, Anne Bogart found that “it was instantly clear that Mary’s approach to generating movement for the stage was applicable to creating viscerally dynamic moments of theater with [actresses] and other collaborators.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, Bogart, in collaboration with long-time friend and collaborator Tina Landau, has adapted, expanded, and refined Overlie’s Six Viewpoints into the nine

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 194; Arthur Bartow, “Introduction,” xxxvi.

<sup>92</sup> Overlie, “Six Viewpoints,” 195.

<sup>93</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Viewpoints Book*, 5.

Viewpoints of time and space that have been tailored to suit her own unique vision: Tempo (the rate at which an action takes place), Duration (how long something lasts on stage), Kinesthetic Response (the impulsive physical reaction to outside stimuli), Repetition (the recurrence of any and all performance elements), Spatial Relationship (the distance between bodies or objects within a defined space), Topography (the trajectory of the body's movement through space), Shape (the form of the body in space), Gesture (the movement of one or more parts of the actress's body), and Architecture (the relationship of the actress's body to the physical environment of the space).<sup>94</sup>

A typical Viewpoints session involves performers taking positions in the workspace, striking a variety of poses and noticing their proximity to others. Then, without cue or instruction, one performer will begin to move, triggering a response from one or more of the other. Soon, everyone is engaged in some form of action, playing either explicitly or implicitly within each of nine components of the Viewpoints vocabulary. Once the first move is made, performers are engaged kinesthetically and are in constant motion, even if that motion is occurring with such a high level of resistance that it is nearly imperceptible. As Scott T. Cummings notes: "The give and take of bodies in motion seems to take on an inevitable flow, as though some force of nature, a tumbling river or a chemical reaction, is at work."<sup>95</sup> Cummings's sharp observation speaks to Goodall's discovery of the centrality of "elemental powers" within the discourse of presence, powers that are "greater than any natural strength belonging to humans, called up in the place and the act of performance" in which "something beyond the natural is being evoked."<sup>96</sup> *The Journal for Stage Directors and*

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 8-12.

<sup>95</sup> Cummings, *Remaking American Theatre*, 116.

<sup>96</sup> Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

*Choreographers* has indeed called Viewpoints “a muscle of presence,” a crucial recognition of the fundamental alchemy of Viewpoints training: its ability to transform the performer into an agent of higher insights, one whose very body becomes a site of access to the sacred for herself and for others.<sup>97</sup>

It may be said the defining characteristic of Viewpoints training is play, which, etymologically speaking means not only rapid movement, gesture, and bodily activity, but also to take a risk or to expose oneself to danger. As “an invitation to see ourselves, a gateway to greater consciousness” Viewpoints encourages, says Bogart, “individuals to bust through, loosen up, play. It’s the difference between dipping your toes in the water and plunging in – Viewpoints is a plunge.”<sup>98</sup> Bogart makes a point of reconnecting performers with that sense of the primal that we engage with as children but are conditioned to repudiate as we grow older and, thus, more ‘civilized.’ Tina Landau describes the Viewpoints’ engendering of this renewed connection to our fundamental selves as the enabling of “performers to find possibility larger than what they first imagine . . . By using the Viewpoints fully, we give up our own heady decisions and judgments. By using the Viewpoints fully, we give ourselves surprise, contradiction, and unpredictability.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, central to Viewpoints training is an expanded awareness of what is going on all around you. Performers employ ‘soft focus,’ a kind of peripheral vision that senses the presence of what is just out of sight. Significantly, “Viewpoints,” says Bogart, “awakens all our senses . . .

Through Viewpoints we learn to listen with our entire bodies and see with a sixth sense. We

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<sup>97</sup> “Viewpoints: A Muscle of Presence,” *The Journal for Stage Directors and Choreographers* 12.1 (1998): 41.

<sup>98</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Viewpoints Book*, 50, 122.

<sup>99</sup> Tina Landau, “Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Composition: What Are They?,” in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1995), 24.

receive information from levels we were not even aware existed, and begin to communicate back with equal depth.”<sup>100</sup> In this way, the Viewpointing experience encourages an awareness that “is not primarily a mental or cognitive construction but a corporeal one that employs all [the performer’s] sense in a visceral and somatic relationship with the world.”<sup>101</sup>

Situating the intricate collaboration of the stringency of Suzuki training and the playfulness of the Viewpoints as a sacred praxis was, as you will see, a particularly fecund way of endeavoring our theatreing of the sacred. Ellen Lauren describes the benefit of their parallel practice as “tenacity.”<sup>102</sup> Leon Ingulsrud asserts that, together, the two trainings operate under the basic assumption that “the human body – the expressive potential of the human body – is unbounded and that you just can keep exploring.”<sup>103</sup> Barney O’Hanlon has been particularly effusive regarding the interrelationship of Suzuki and Viewpoints:

It has something to do with being in rehearsal and making choices. There is a fearlessness in making choices that is deeply influenced and fed by both trainings together. There is a presence, a listening, and an activation. You just keep going and going and going in rehearsal, with physical choices, intellectual choices, spiritual and emotional choices ... I think that the two trainings together are the fuel for that kind of presence in rehearsal.”<sup>104</sup>

Richard Schechner differentiates between training and *workshop*, or “the active phase of the performance process ... artists use to explore processes that will be useful in rehearsals and

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<sup>100</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Viewpoints Book*, 20.

<sup>101</sup> Simon Murray and John Keefe, *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007), 143.

<sup>102</sup> Ellen Lauren, quoted in Cummings, *Remaking American Theater*, 124.

<sup>103</sup> Leon Ingulsrud, quoted in Will Bond, “SITI: Why We Train: A Conversation Between Anne Bogart and the SITI Company,” in Nicole Potter, ed., *Movement for Actors* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 251.

<sup>104</sup> Barney O’Hanlon, quoted in Cummings, *Remaking American Theatre*, 124.

in making performances.”<sup>105</sup> Although he admits training and workshop “may overlap in function, ... they are experienced very differently.”<sup>106</sup> Schechner identifies training as “a long, slow, repetitive, immersive process” that should occur over the course of the artist’s entire lifetime, and, in contrast, workshops as “relatively brief, intense, and transformative” experiences in which participants “do the hard work of ... opening themselves up ... to new ideas and practices,” using “strict discipline and difficult psycho-physical exercises ... to push people beyond their ordinary limits.”<sup>107</sup> In our case, due to the unfortunate limitations of scheduling and a pittance of available rehearsal space, training – as a way to encourage the kind of primal, mind-altering presence of which O’Hanlon speaks – was experienced *as* workshop: although we continued to train throughout the entire process, we began with five days of intense Suzuki/Viewpoints training before even cracking open, as an ensemble, the script of *Agnes of God*.

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*“SHI!” the Teacher bellows the Japanese word for ‘four,’ catching you on the brink of collapse with the smack of His staff. Up go you, lurching through the air in a careless and unsteady return to the opening position of the form. “Accelerate and break,” the Teacher commands you, “Accelerate and break – no extra: nothing more, nothing less. And always from center, not from the shoulders!” Quickly, He calls “ICHI!” and you Stomp out to the left this time. Still wobbling from the previous move, you land uncertainly. Your leg trembles as you belatedly transfer all of your weight to your foot; your right leg is restless in its attempt to straighten itself out. But the Teacher leaves you little time to trouble over form: “NI!” He calls abruptly and your right foot rushes in to meet your left. Immediately afterwards He thunders “SAN!” and you dart into*

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<sup>105</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 233.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

*the squat. A split second later “SHI!” rings through the air and you shoot back up again. The Teacher fires at you like a machine gun: “ICHI! – NI! – SAN! – SHI! – ICHI! – NI! – SAN! – SHI!” He thunders in rapid succession. You fight to maintain focus and stillness – and to keep pace.*

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We began on a crisp fall afternoon in mid-October in the Theatre Department’s classroom space in the former McKee Gymnasium. Although home to the University’s Nutritional Sciences Department, the Theatre Department lays claim to room that formerly housed the building’s pool, now cemented over and ‘transformed’ – and I use that term loosely – into a gaping and squalid acting studio. Yet, this space seemed oddly suitable to our task. In *Sacred Theatre*, contributor Peter Malekin discusses Peter Brook’s theory of acting-space-as-empty-space as an “emptiness ... devoid of boundaries, an abnegation ... of our ‘identity’” that requires us “to ‘fill’ it, to ‘expand ourselves’ to more than we ordinarily are.”<sup>108</sup> Remembering the sacred is the experience of the extra-ordinary, it seems only appropriate, then, that we should have to leave the comfort of our daily lives and enter the austerity of this dingy, uncomfortable, and geographically inconvenient locale to transform ourselves into beings capable of enacting a kind of theatre that will provide “a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”<sup>109</sup> I took the several rehearsal blocks scattered about the room and arranged them to create in the far corner a rectangular work space within which we would enact our sacred training rituals, and away we went.

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<sup>108</sup> Peter Malekin, “Space,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 50-1.

<sup>109</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

Gathered at that first meeting were myself and three of the four actresses: sophomore Theatre major Katherine “Katie” Hamlett, junior Theatre major Ashley Hicks, and Master’s candidate Milbre Burch. Sophomore Theatre major Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom was confronted with a family emergency the day before training was set to begin and was at her family’s home in Chicago, unable to join us until our fourth night of training and our fifth meeting overall. I usually engage in quite a bit of ensemble-building games and exercises at the outset of a process, but knew Suzuki/Viewpoints training would necessarily engender an ensemble sensibility on its own, and, actually, the actresses and I were already bound as an ensemble in many ways. At the time, Katie was a student in my Introduction to Performance Studies course, and she, Ashley and Mallory all acted in the Department’s production of Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *New Anatomies* the previous year. Ashley and I acted together in an MU Summer Repertory production of the musical *Dames at Sea*, and again in a professional production of Tennessee Williams’s *Confessional* for which Katie served as assistant director. I also served as dialect coach for Ashley and Mallory in a production of colleague Mary Barile’s nineteenth-century comedy *The Irish Rogue*. Katie, Mallory, Ashley, and I also spent time with each other socially, either as a quartet or in various combinations of duos and trios. But it was a week-long workshop lead by internationally renowned solo performance artist Tim Miller that brought all four of us together in a way that primed us for our collaborative theatreing of the sacred, occurring but a month before our own process was set to take flight.

Our work with Tim was founded on his practice of “embodied pedagogy,” or the “exploration of the body as a site of memory, self and creativity.”<sup>110</sup> Sensing that “growing up in this society we are all veterans of non-stop assaults on our wholeness and sense of

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<sup>110</sup> Tim Miller, *1001 Beds: Performances, Essays, and Travels*, ed. Glen Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 141.

physical self,” Tim engaged us in various individual and collective corporeal exercises that were aimed at awakening the “body-narratives” rooted in the “skin, meat and bones within which we live” and that operate as “mysterious satellite dishes receiving signals from our past as well as the subtle stirred imaginings of the future.”<sup>111</sup> Our week spent with Tim was a galvanizing experience of increased awareness, acceptance, and creativity that culminated in a public performance entitled *Body Maps*, a kind of personal narrative chamber piece that focused on the dreams, obsessions, memories, and desires ingrained in our bodies. This exciting and charged exploration of the stories of our bodies led to my proud expression of my left-handedness, Katie’s witty discourse on her sensuality, Mallory’s disturbing and beautiful struggle with issues of race and beauty, and Ashley’s profound and vulnerable rendering of a life spent as an African-American beset with albinism. Indeed, this experience with Tim proved especially affecting for Ashley: her performance in *Body Maps* paved the way for us to discuss openly the ways in which her albinism magnified the mystical qualities in her embodiment of the title role *and* allowed our work with *Agnes* to serve as continuation of the process of self-acceptance she began during the *Body Maps* experience. *Body Maps* – performed in the same space we would eventually rehearse and perform *Agnes* – prepared *all* of us for this rough physicality of the *Agnes* process and broke down our personal and relational boundaries in such a way that intensified the intimacies we shared as friends and colleagues; we all felt safe with one another, and operated with implicit sense of mutual trust.

Milbre was, of course, a new ingredient in this mix, and she herself recognized that the rest of us had worked as an ensemble before: “It will be my job to find my place in this dynamic,” she said.<sup>112</sup> Via our discussions in the weeks leading up to auditions and training,

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>112</sup> Milbre Burch, personal conversation with author, October 13, 2008.

she and I were already in the process of establishing an easy familiarity, and, as I found out later, the others in the cast had also been rather welcoming to her. In an unpremeditated turn of events, Ashley, Katie, and Mallory found themselves sitting together during the interim between preliminary auditions and callbacks. Seeing Milbre sitting by her lonesome, Katie and then the others introduced themselves to her, remembering Milbre from the Department's community meeting at the beginning of the semester. "I was flattered and touched by their joint gesture of reaching out to me," Milbre said.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the generous gesture of this accidental (or was it?) encounter would prove to be the first among many writing (righting?) us into a better, more compassionate conception of the world.

Our first meeting was spent around a table and was the only moment in the entire process that involved me talking *at* my collaborators. This was unfortunately necessary, as this time was wisely spent providing the pertinent context rooting the Suzuki/Viewpoints training experience as a model for the entire process. This first meeting was also a prime example of the difficulty I had negotiating my ethnographic-self with my director-self, especially complicated by my eventual transformation into the stern taskmaster required by Suzuki training. I was determined to form us into a *company* benefited by the acknowledgement of a clear mission and similar goals: we all needed to agree on where we were going *and* on how we were going to get there. This is the only way I know to craft a truly educative and galvanizing theatrical process. Anne Bogart recognized this when asked by internationally renowned experimental French director – and founder of Paris's Théâtre de Soleil – Ariane Mnouchkine: "What are you going to do without a company?"<sup>114</sup> Bogart

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre: Preserving the Legacy Volume Three*, DVD, Theatre Communications Group Oral History Project, produced by The Ford

had “an epiphany in that moment,” she says, “which was that every great production I’d seen, with no exception, theatre or dance, was always with a company. No exception.”<sup>115</sup>

Treating the ensemble as a company not only respects each individual as a *professional* – and *not* a dabbler – but facilitates fruitful collaboration. As famed choreographer Twyla Tharp reminds us, collaboration is “how most of our ancestors used to work and live, before machines came along and fragmented society,” and that “people in a good collaboration accomplish more than the group’s most talented members could achieve on their own.”<sup>116</sup> But this means that parameters – rules, regulations, expectations – need to be set, and someone – me, in this case – must take on the difficult position of making the final decisions. As the director and designer of the production, I had a clear – but not necessarily immutable – vision within which the actresses then plied their art. Yet, this is a position of power that can, of course, be negotiated in various ways, namely by leading through sincere, compassionate and generous means.

I had to be careful not to bully my participant-collaborators into providing predetermined results that conformed to the desired outcome of the research process, yet, as you might have noticed, Suzuki training requires a certain degree of what might be perceived as bullying. Frequent Suzuki collaborator Tom Nelis makes an astute observation when he remarks that the “only experience equivalent to working with [Suzuki] is being held up at gunpoint ... What Suzuki is interested in is taboo in the United States,” he continues, “Undergraduates do not expect to be treated that way. It’s called ‘maltreatment.’ The fact

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Foundation, The Allen Foundation for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Twyla Tharp with Jesse Kornbluth, *The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons for Working Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 6, 4.

that *that's* where you have to go is totally unexpected. It's not part of our culture."<sup>117</sup>

Inasmuch as I was determined to thrust my collaborators into the militant atmosphere required of Suzuki training, I was equally as determined to treat them *as* collaborators. I did this by laying everything out on the table, as it were, at this first meeting in order to engage the actresses in every inch of the process and so facilitate “a sense of themselves as agentic and of having an authoritative voice,” even if during the Suzuki training itself that voice would be necessarily silenced.<sup>118</sup> And, after all, part of the actresses' willingness to give themselves over to such demanding work was *their* stake in the process: a deep-rooted hunger for formal acting training. It is unfortunate that the MU's Theatre Department offers, in my experience, no consistent system of acting training. Students may receive various degrees of training in various individual courses, but there is no department-wide articulation of a cohesive curriculum that sees a student through her theatre education in a progressive and foresighted manner. It is perhaps redundant of me to say that I feel that such a curriculum is beyond essential, yet it was MU's lack of said curriculum that made me increasingly vehement in my work.

In retrospect, I wonder if I was not too prescriptive in my early remarks contextualizing Suzuki/Viewpoints training. Suzuki and Viewpoints are praxes that – no matter how much one theorizes their potency – ultimately defy conceptual description. Indeed, although I have supported my discussion of Suzuki/Viewpoints throughout this writing the words of Suzuki, Bogart, and their foremost collaborators, my discussion of my own practice and teaching of these methods can only situate itself within my own embodied

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<sup>117</sup> Tom Nelis, quoted in Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 49.

<sup>118</sup> Russell Bishop, “Freeing Ourselves from Neo-Classical Domination in Research: A Maori Approach to Creating Knowledge,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11 (1998): 207.

understanding of the trainings in the experiential way I first received them. As translator J. Thomas Rimer's comments in his introduction to *The Way of Acting*: "Perhaps [Suzuki training] must even be lived through *before* it can be grasped intellectually."<sup>119</sup> Indeed, true understanding can only come as one experiences the disciplines for herself. Yet, my educator-self recognizes the importance of *context*, and so the atmosphere of full disclosure I initiated at this first meeting was, I believe, the only way to craft an environment in which the actresses felt safe to be dangerous, if you will, and could learn to trust me in my more harsh moments. Indeed, I was perhaps so fervent in my explication of how demanding I would be during Suzuki training – as opposed to the gentle nurturer I would be otherwise – that Katie remarked that she was "a little scared" about what the training would actually entail.<sup>120</sup> Of course, a process that seeks to "[enable] the shift out of the daily" necessarily considers Katie's confession a marvelous revelation.<sup>121</sup>

I began the afternoon by handing out a research packet that contained background information on Tadashi Suzuki and Anne Bogart, many quotations supporting their aesthetic visions, and the important information regarding the philosophical and methodological development of their trainings individually and as a tandem experience. The very first quote on the very first page was Suzuki's proclamation that "Theatre, like life, is understood through experience, not explanations," and I read it to the cast as the standard for our entire process, a process that would be spent not sitting around and pontificating but rather

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<sup>119</sup> J. Thomas Rimer, "Preface," in Suzuki, *Way of Acting*, ix.

<sup>120</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all comments on this first day of training were made in personal conversations with the author, October 18, 2008.

<sup>121</sup> Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 49.

“sweating our asses off,” which were, I believe, my exact words.<sup>122</sup> I explained, as I have here, the deep resonance these trainings have for me, tracing my transition from my early college days as a seventeen-year-old fame-seeking mess into an artist-craftsman interested in forging a life in the theatre spent mentoring young artists and investigating new means of keeping theatre alive and current. I showed several video clips, including an interview with Anne Bogart for the Theatre Communication Group’s *Preserving the Legacy* series, as well as Post’s 2003 production of Euripides’s *The Trojan Women* starring Maria as Hecuba. Showing *The Trojan Women*, I feel, was crucial, because it was an example of Suzuki/Viewpoints trained actors and actresses performing a piece completely in expressive gesture as developed through the Composition method.

At one point, Katie asked: “Now, you’re gonna to train us in Suzuki and Viewpoints ... [Her voices trails off in a moment’s hesitation.] ... Are we gonna, like, *know it know it?*” A fair and important question, I felt, a question that allowed me to address the nature of practice. My answer, of course, was a resounding “No.” After a brief pause, I explained: “It’s not going to happen tonight, its not going to happen by December 7<sup>th</sup> [the afternoon of our final performance], and its not going to happen probably ever. But it will get deeper and fuller.” I then expanded on this statement, beginning by reiterating Bogart’s comments on the TCG video that summarize her work with Viewpoints as born of a desire for a daily practice for theatre performers that has inspired, reified, and extended my own:

Why is it that every other art form outside the theatre has a daily practice and we don’t? We think you graduate from theatre school ... and you’re done. Why is it that we don’t have a barre for [actresses]? Dancers have barre work. Singers do their scales. Musicians wouldn’t dream of not practicing. Yet we think because we can walk and we can talk, that we can act. Why don’t we have a regular training, a mirror in which we can see ourselves develop daily? ... I don’t think of the Viewpoints or of training as a fixed thing definitely with an end. It is a process in which I can work with [actresses] daily to refine

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<sup>122</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in *Ibid.*, 32.

and develop how we create fiction in time and space. It's a practice ... I need to refresh the way I think and open my perceptions on a daily basis ... You can't just suddenly go; you have to deal with the mechanism, the oil and the joints, and the practice of making fiction. So the training is about practice.<sup>123</sup>

I communicated that my desire to engage them in such intensive training was *not* solely aimed at this particular production; they weren't so many balls of clay I could mold to my liking but living and breathing artists seeking a craft they could work at and with for a lifetime. What good would it do them if I over-coached them into solid performances in this piece and then the day after it closed they went to work with another director on a completely different play and didn't know where to start?

I again reiterated the intended rigor of our process, quoting Allain characterization of Suzuki's aesthetic in words that could very well be my own credo: "[Theatre] is an occupation that requires more than a nine-to-five existence and needs personal commitment and sustained engagement. It is not enough merely to turn up for rehearsals."<sup>124</sup> I told the actresses that we were not preparing to "just do some show," that if we were going to set our work apart, we had to set *ourselves* apart, and to do that we must engage in an exceptionally vehement process of stripping away, in Grotowski's words, "those elements of 'natural' behavior which obscure pure impulse," a reacquainting of the self with the primal aspects of our nature that modern society has trained out of us.<sup>125</sup> This is a provocative and potentially maddening process of personal sacrifice demanded by the theatreing of the sacred, I told them, that is enacted as an offering to spectators. We must confront "what we *are* in ourselves, prior to our *ideas* of ourselves," because, as Malekin and Yarrow remind us, "the most urgent need for the performer is permission ... to be able to become what (you

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<sup>123</sup> Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*.

<sup>124</sup> Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 87.

<sup>125</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 18.

think) you cannot do ... The sense that ‘I can’t do that; I have absolutely no idea how to do/be that; I cannot imagine what doing that would be like; I do not extend that far; if I am asked to do that I will be lost.’ It is absolutely necessary to ... unfind oneself. To be only a readiness.”<sup>126</sup> After all, we wanted, in the words of Anne Bogart, to encourage “the kind of humanity on the stage that demands attention and that expresses who we are and suggests that life is bigger,” to “engender moments onstage to broaden the definitions of what it means to be human.”<sup>127</sup> In speaking of this intense degree of self-penetration, I noticed Katie appeared stricken, lost in a moment of deep contemplation. I stopped mid-sentence to check in with her, and she remarked that the realization that she was going to be forced to engage in such profound explorations on “things I don’t normally dwell on” was “a lot to digest.” “That’s the idea,” was my knowing reply.

Immediately after dismissing the ensemble for the afternoon, I hurriedly exited the space to use the little director’s room. I neglected to turn off the video recorder before doing so, and in reviewing the video all these months later I came across a fascinating scene: the camera captured the actresses’ leisurely and chatty exits from the space. Over the din comes a clear-voiced pronouncement from Ashley: “This is cool,” she says with her characteristically convivial flair, “I’m excited!” Even now, this is incredibly encouraging to hear, and although at the back-end of the process I am fully aware of the rollercoaster ride of devotion and faith Ashley – and, indeed, the entire ensemble – experienced, this brief and excited concession was but one example of the full-hearted and open-minded magnanimity of each of my collaborators etched into every inch of the process and then allowed to permeate the air on those all-too-few scorching nights spent face to face with spectators.

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<sup>126</sup> Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow, “Full Stops to Full Stocks,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 199.

<sup>127</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 39.

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*Finally, the Teacher ends His merciless invective, leaving you absolutely breathless, your body suspended over a weakened and wobbly right leg. Sweat stings your eyes and you can barely see. The Teacher whacks his staff against the floor and calls for you to lift your straight leg to test your centeredness once more. You do so and surprise yourself: not only have you maintained stillness in your torso, but you also manage to maintain stability. The Teacher calls “TEXT!,” and after another strike of His staff, you begin to intone powerfully and in unison with your fellow neophytes Menelaus’s speech from The Trojan Women: “O splendour of sunburst breaking forth this day, whereon / I lay my hands once more on Helen, my wife. And yet / It is not, so much as men think, for the women’s sake / I came to Troy, but against that guest proved treacherous, / Who like a robber carried the woman from my house.” You haven’t spoken in some time, and your voice cracks under the strain of this unusual method of oral articulation. This is the most impossible task yet, you think. You are allowed only two breaths – after “wife” and “Troy” – and you must take these breaths communally, all the while perched on one foot, fighting to sustain centeredness and to maintain a cool exterior. “Let it come from your center. And listen to each other!,” the Teacher thunders, “You are not listening to each other. Unacceptable!” On the verge of absolute collapse, You notice Him ready His staff to impose yet another directive.*

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After a short dinner break, the ensemble reconvened to begin training proper. The actresses found upon returning to the space a rolling chalk board with “Rules of the Body” and “Rules of Aesthetics” written at the top. These “Rules” are made up of ten accessible and nonhierarchical maxim’s that describe the affect of Suzuki/Viewpoints training on the body and serve as reminders of what one is both working *for* and *with* in training. Although the significance of the Rules are imbedded deeply in my explication of the trainings above, this particular vocabulary cannot, to my knowledge, be found in any sort of publication.

Rather, they were conceived by Maria herself as a synthesis of decades of Suzuki/Viewpoints practice and teaching.

The Rules of the Body include: (1) Resistance, (2) Inner Movement & Stillness, (3) Control of Center of Gravity, (4) Relationship of the Foot to the Floor, and (5) Acceleration & Break; the Rules of Aesthetics include: (1) God of Perfection, (2) Clear Image & Focus, (3) Awareness of Habitual Movements, (4) Always Work with Performance Energy, and (5) Push Yourself Beyond Your Perceived Limitations. Two of these Rules have been discussed earlier as foundational characteristics of Suzuki's aesthetic: Control of Center of Gravity – the *haru*, or the actress's "psycho-physical center" from which emanates "the spiritual quality and presence a performer can acquire with maturity, insight and practice" – and the Relationship of the Foot to the Floor, the "grammar" of Suzuki's form.<sup>128</sup> Resistance and Clear Image & Focus work hand-in-hand: when training in each of the Suzuki forms, the actress must focus on an image out on the horizon, an indeterminate notion usually of an abstract and indescribable nature that she both fears and desires. This is necessary to negotiate the multidirectionality of Suzuki training: the actress's lower half quite literally Stomps into the earth to harness its primal forces while her upper body metaphorically reaches up to maintain contact with the gods. Although many of the Suzuki forms tempt this intensity of focus while the actress is moving in a forward trajectory, the training is not concerned with traveling a great distance so much as it is with the *depth* of that journey. Thus, a clear focus on an image she fears and desires will provide the actress her necessary Resistance: a specificity and integrity of movement that will allow her to proceed onward and *downward* without getting off to the races.

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<sup>128</sup> Carruthers and Yasunari, *Theatre of Suzuki Tadashi*, 80; Allain, *Art of Stillness*, 19.

Resistance is a direct reflection of Suzuki's *nob* influences, for it was Motokiyo Zeami – the founder, along with his father Kiyotsugu Kanami, of *nob* in the fourteenth century – who theorized the idea of *mokuzen shingo*: “the eyes look ahead and the spirit looks behind.”<sup>129</sup> Suzuki himself tells us that “in traditional Japanese theatrical forms ... the balance of two vectors leading towards the sky and earth, towards the heights and depths, has been very important in physical expression.”<sup>130</sup> Conceiving energy as “the consequence of tension between opposing forces,” Suzuki's balance of vectors induces a kind of “resistance-energy” that is evident in the idea of Inner Movement & Stillness, a reminder that the talk of energy and rigor and physicality of Suzuki training should not cause one to imagine a group of actresses bouncing around as so many children in a McDonald's Playland.<sup>131</sup> Stillness is a key element in Suzuki training: an outward serenity harboring an inward pulsing. What is fascinating is the metaphysical tension engendered within the actress: that palpable sense that anything could happen, that one minute the actress might be across the room and appear to be sleeping, yet in a split second be barreling towards you with all the ferocity of a hungry lion. As Zeami himself has written, when “we examine why such moments without action are enjoyable, we find that it is due to the underlying spiritual strength of the [actress] ... [She] does not relax the tension when the dancing or singing comes to an end ... but maintains an unwavering inner strength.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Zeami, *On the Art of No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Masakazu Yamazaki (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>130</sup> Suzuki, “Culture is the Body,” 158.

<sup>131</sup> Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, trans. Richard Fowler (London: Routledge, 1991), 12.

<sup>132</sup> Zeami, quoted in Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), 259.

This idea of restraint also necessarily relates to Acceleration & Break, derived from Zeami's notion of *Jo-ha-kyū*, described by Eugenio Barba as the three-phase essence of any action performed by an actress:

The first phase is determined by the opposition between one force which is increasing and another force which is resisting the development of the first (*jo*, to restrain); the second phase (*ha*, to break, to interrupt) is the moment when the resisting force is overcome until one arrives at the third phase (*kyū*, speed), when the action culminates, releases all its power and suddenly stops as if meeting an obstacle, a new resistance.<sup>133</sup>

It is the breaks, or the stops, as we say, the nearly impossible articulation of each swift individual movement that distinguishes Suzuki training and encourages the actress to proffer a specific and profound gestural life that speaks beyond the level of ordinary comprehension. "Suppression is fundamental to traditional Japanese theatre," Suzuki reminds us, "There is this almost unbearable tension in the [actress] ... using unnatural movements ... to express natural emotions ... The secret to this kind of acting is instantaneous release of suppressed action, then suppression ... release again, and so on."<sup>134</sup> Suzuki scholar Ian Carruthers explains that the actress's "ability to fascinate is created by the amount and quality of energy radiated by the body in all directions. This energy is built through a coherent system of restraint ... The [actress] builds presence by creating the will to move but deliberately holds back on doing so until the inner tension becomes unbearably high."<sup>135</sup> In training, the actress is encouraged to fight this restraint and "use all of her humanity," as Maria used to say, to bring each succinct, staccato step to fulfillment.

While tempting such an impossibly restrained enterprise, the actress must always work to please the God of Perfection. That is, she must strive for absolute perfection all the

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<sup>133</sup> Barba and Savarese, *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, 214.

<sup>134</sup> Brandon, "Training at the Waseda Little Theatre," 40.

<sup>135</sup> Carruthers and Yasunari, *Theatre of Suzuki Tadashi*, 95.

while harboring the knowledge that she will never achieve such a feat, and *something*, a being even greater than the teacher, is constantly watching and holding her accountable. This concept relates to Always Working with Performance Energy. It is important to know that while Suzuki – and Viewpoints – are inherently performative, they are not styles *of* performance. When an actress is engaged in the various forms of the training, she ‘takes the stage’ and performs for an implied audience of individually conceived ‘gods,’ or, in perhaps more popular parlance, whatever ideals she might set for herself, a vision of her craft she continually works to attain. In this way, the actress forges an Awareness of Her Habitual Movements so that she might Push Herself Beyond Her Perceived Limitations, elements of Suzuki/Viewpoints training so very integral to our theatreing of the sacred. These Rules remained ever-present in our process; we placed the chalkboard in the foreground of the space during each and every training session and rehearsal, and found it a comfort to ‘check in’ with them rather frequently when feeling ourselves falling off course.

Once we discussed each rule, I began teaching the central Suzuki form: the Stomp. I initiated their training as I was initiated: we spent nearly an hour standing in place, raising our legs up and down, only marking the eventual ferocity of the movement.. Gradually, I transitioned the actresses into moving across the floor with forceful Stomps. Before adding music and allowing the exercise to evolve into a full-out Stomping session, I had the actresses Stomp across the floor individually so I could watch more closely to inspect and correct their work. This is also the first time I brandished my Suzuki stick, a one inch dowel rod four feet in length that was gifted to myself and my Post colleagues at the completion of our classroom training with Maria, a much-anticipated and very public tradition that recognized our hard-earned maturity as theatre artists. Because to do any less than train the actresses properly would have been a *negation* of the training, I never had a second though

about using the stick. The stick summons an aggressiveness in the Suzuki master: a curt, exacting demeanor that an innocent onlooker might categorize as an angry fury unleashed unfairly onto unwitting students. This is not how one should treat his ethnographic collaborators, but owing to communication and an implied trust, the actresses had bravely agreed to be complicit in this process of destabilizing, and we each had our role to play.

Finally, I set the actresses “on the grid,” the standard movement pattern of the Stomping exercise in which one can only move in straight lines and turn at right angles. I side-coached a great deal, yelling “*FOCUS!*,” “*REALLY STOMP!*” and “*MOVE FROM CENTER!*” After a minute, I stopped the actresses. At this point, they were failing, but failing beautifully: Katie was working too hard and so consistently forced herself out of center; Ashley seemed to be marking the form almost entirely; Milbre so over-intellectualized the exercise that she could not commit herself to it completely. All were bounding around like jack-rabbits: the idea, of course, is that the work happens in the lower body while torso appears to be floating on air. I was happy to hear Ashley say that she “wanted to stop so bad, but I just kept saying to myself: ‘KEEP GOING!’ ‘KEEP GOING!’” One of the many benefits of Suzuki training is *endurance*. Indeed, Suzuki training purposefully tempts the actress to give in, to slump over, disengage the spine and move lazily about the space all the while demanding that she *doesn’t* do just that. Milbre revealed that Stomping was hard on her feet, and I sensed an attitude brewing that I worked to quash before it rippled and spread. I didn’t want to encourage anyone to lessen her intensity if she felt any sort of minor discomfort. I explained my own difficulty fighting through the trainings while suffering from terrible arthritis in my feet, knees, hips and back, an unfortunate aftereffect of the Lyme Disease I contracted in my early teens. I spoke about the necessity of the fighting spirit Ashley described, and that the spiritual, emotional and physical accomplishment of training

would outweigh any corporeal distress. I told them that most of my tenure at Post found me Stomping anywhere between three and nine times a week: all this activity did exacerbate my arthritis, but never failed to leave me energized and euphoric.

Trying to keep discussion *during* training to a minimum, I quickly set the actresses off to try Stomping to the music, a loud and brassy rhythmic melody. Again, I stopped them after one minute to check in, and this time they were none too vocal. I took this as a good sign, for they appeared almost stunned, plucked out of comfortability. The experience of Suzuki training as sacred praxis forced the actresses to question everything they considered true in the world, to show them that they have to learn how to walk again. This work is an *awakening*, and they thankfully appeared to be in the beginning stages of prying back their heavy, world-worn eyelids. Hurriedly, I turned the music back on and allowed the actresses to complete the remaining three minutes or so of the exercise. They were winded after this go-round, and I noticed them all tempering their ferocity towards the end. I spoke with them about *depth of journey*, that there is a big difference between *traveling* and *Stomping*: it does not matter how *far* you travel, I told them, but how *deep*. Whatever horizontal progression one does make can only be begotten by a significantly vertical one. This serves as a metaphor for the entire process, an aesthetic that favors profound interrogation over mere surface-scratching.

We then moved all-too-quickly into Shakuhachi, the second half of the Stomping exercise. I first learned the forms over the course of an entire semester, and here I had to cram them into five days! But this intensification of training seemed only appropriate, and my dear collaborators, exhausted but willing, were always up to the impositions of their baptism by fire. Shakuhachi, an exercise involving an overwhelming challenge to one's center of gravity, is a wonderful way to put the body to task, as you only do what *the body* tells you

to do in response to an intense relationship with image. At first go, the actresses forced unnecessary and unfocused movement: movement for movement sake without an ounce of stillness. It appeared as though they were moving in a kind of underwater ballet rather than honoring the tension and high drama inherent in the exercise. Yet, Katie reported: “It was very visceral. I was moving from the inside and my body told me where to move. It was organic,” which, she later added, was “a very different experience” for her. This was a significant step in Katie’s process: not only that she released her inhibitions but that she was *aware* of that release. Even so, the integral aspect of stillness was still absent in her work. I made sure to encourage her and still hand down the appropriate corrections to keep us on track.

We quickly moved from Stomping/Shakuhachi into the Walks, learning five of the nine separate forms. Walks provide their own unique challenges, each requiring a different relationship of the foot to the floor as its distinguishing characteristic. The Walks progress in a straight line crossing the width of the space, calling on one to endure the particular struggle provided by each individual form. Because they proceeded in a single-file fashion, I was able critique each actress much more thoroughly than in the other exercises. I harped on them to find the almost imperceptible stop punctuating each specific articulation of the form, to keep their torsos still, to proceed from center, to Stomp more profoundly into the earth, and to keep from galloping across the space. We did each Walk individually several times before performing them in succession two times through. By this point, training had been going on for nearly four hours, and when I noticed everyone dripping with sweat and spied Katie heaving, bent over a rehearsal block, I knew we must be doing something right.

At the end of the evening, I asked everyone to sit in a circle in the center of the space, prompting a collective sigh that caused us all to chuckle with the recognition of

exhaustion. The actresses confirmed that they are getting it, that it is hitting them *somewhere*, even if they can't discern where or what that something is yet: "Well, I'm aware of parts of me I haven't been aware of in a long time!" was Milbre's wry admission. Katie said she felt "majestic," like she has "quiet power," and that there was "a little vibration going on." Over the course of the evening, I was constantly admonishing the actresses to "reconnect," and I think Katie's "vibration" was the start of that association for her, and perhaps for everyone. It was a recognition that her innate primal forces, dormant since childhood, were percolating once again, beginning their long ascent to the surface.

Of course, this process was just as scary for me as it was for the actresses, if not more so. I am a Suzuki trained actor, yes, but the truth of the matter is I had never *taught* the training before. At one point I hurriedly and excitedly admitted: "I can't believe I'm doing this!" a sentiment full of fear and excitement. Fear because of the deep sense of inadequacy I felt, encouraged by the voice way in the back of mind that wonders if I have earned the right to teach these methods at all; excitement because, well, I'm not sure I can express what it was for me to do all this then and what it is for me to look back on it all now. That I should have the opportunity to study, practice and teach Suzuki outside of Post and with people who take up a different space in my life, that I was able to move these trainings out to Missouri with me and find them as wonderful a home as I had discovered for myself was a rather overwhelming experience. I never thought I'd get back to this work in such a significant way. As I review the video footage of our early training sessions, I can see that my own Suzuki work is rather strong, full of dynamic stillness and precise execution, proof of the potency of practice, the powerful effect Suzuki/Viewpoints training has on the body, that a muscle consistently trained will never lose its strength. Here, "in the space of my own

ineptitude,” as Anne Bogart says, I discovered grace: the volition to carry on buoyed by the remembrance of why I ever carried on in the first place.<sup>136</sup>

The videos *also* show that I should have been more uncompromising. I wasn’t anywhere near tough enough; I should have been more severe in my corrections. But I was asking so much of the actresses, I felt, and I was constantly bargaining within myself, negotiating the need to be demanding with the concern that they would not want to continue to commit to this work. But this is not to take away from the actresses’ brave tempting of perfection, regardless of their individual successes. It is about *practice*, after all, not a haphazard careening towards some sort of finite product. After our first training session, Katie remarked apprehensively that “this is beginning to feel important,” a statement made not pretentiously but with a foreboding sense of the full weight of the self-sacrifice our theatreing of the sacred would demand of her. And so I left the actresses that night with one final sentiment, words of honor that Maria intoned at the end of each of our training sessions: *Otsukare sama deshita*, which has no clear English translation but is usually expressed as “You must be very tired,” for if you are not sufficiently exhausted, then you have not worked hard enough.

“*Otsukare sama deshita*,” I said.

“*Otsukare sama deshita*,” the actresses repeated, and out into the night we went, the sting of reintegration met with the exhilaration of those who have just been given the key to a secret kingdom.

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*Finally, the Teacher allows you to replace your straight leg and in the same second calls “NI!” You flounder for a moment, uncertain of where you are in the progression of the exercise. “No! Back!,” the Teacher thunders, and you return to your previous position. He scans the room for one intense moment and calls*

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<sup>136</sup> Anne Bogart, “The Benefits of Deep Practice,” Anne’s Blog.

*“NI!” again. This time, Providence takes over and you know exactly what to do: your left heel rushes in to meet your right heel in one swift, outwardly effortless motion. You stand there firm and strong, proud of your struggle and the perfection of this one small articulation of the form. But it is certain, you feel, that you are not out of the woods yet.*

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With our “Rules” chalkboard firmly in place, we began the next night with Stomping/Shakuhachi at the exact minute training was to begin. “If you think you’re wrong,” I roared, “you’re not. Keep going. You’re only wrong if you stop.” The actresses’ form was significantly more solid, increasing in depth and in stillness. The work was still sloppy, but they were fighting through it more fiercely than they had the night before. This was especially true of Milbre and Ashley: the previous night’s timid commitment transformed on this night into a ferocity that said ‘I *will* get this.’ Actually, the very fact that the actresses returned for a second round at all exemplified the moxie they would reveal in ever-increasing amounts throughout the entire process.

Immediately after Stomping/Shakuhachi we reviewed the first five Walks before learning the remaining four. After working each Walk individually, they performed them in succession several times through. Again, I adopted an unmercifully severe autocratic manner, commanding the actresses to keep their heels from coming off the floor, to keep their hips from listing, and to fight through the burn. Part way through the exercise I reprimanded them: “Don’t lift out of the work! Stay in your legs!” A slight bend at the knee, central to the entirety of Suzuki’s training, serves not only as a measure of safety but also as a metaphor for the depth of journey. By ‘staying in your legs’ – that is to say, maintaining the bend at the knee – you maintain your connection to the earth, and thus to the gods, resulting in a deepening and strengthening of your work. The instant an actress ‘lifts out’ of the profundity of the form and becomes straight-legged, she will continue to cut herself off from the

deepest parts of herself and will ultimately impede her rich expressive capabilities. I noticed that after thundering this directive but once, the actresses became more present, more focused, and a hungry intensity emerged – *almost* visible – under their relaxed-but-sweaty visages.

Next I began the process of teaching what are referred to as “the Basics” by most but called the Center of Gravity exercises by Maria and thus were so-called in our work here. Regardless of what one calls them, they are practiced as a series of movements designed to throw the actress off balance, or *out of center*, as we say. Beginning a completely unfamiliar form proved a telling experience: the actresses were beginning to feel somewhat comfortable with Stomping/Shakuhachi and the Walks, but learning the Center of Gravity exercises knocked the literal and metaphorical wind out of them, and a timidity crept back in that I once again worked to dissipate. Katie reported that she found herself getting angry and frustrated, and we all concurred that frustration is a necessary ingredient in the growth of an artist. Milbre shared that she had “a lot of fear,” but quickly added that, for her, the beauty of the form is visible in each woman’s *imperfect* form.<sup>137</sup> I provided their winded and weary selves a necessary dose of reassurance by commending their progress and commitment. This was no empty compliment, I assure you, but an accurate appraisal and a sincere outpouring of gratitude. I ended the night by saying: “Beauty for *me* comes from working that hard, from recognizing that it matters that much. *Otsukare sama deshita*,” and then sent them on their way.

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*“On a count of twenty. SAN!” commands the Teacher. And so you begin your long, slow descent. Your thigh muscles burn and your calves tremble from the strain, but your sense of determination has suddenly*

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<sup>137</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all comments on this second day of training were made in personal conversations with the author, October 19, 2008.

*refreshed itself. You imagine that you are in some sort of private competition with the Teacher. He will win if He breaks you, you think, and so you are resolved to outlast His ruthlessness.*

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“We have our space, we have our rules, and we have our work,” I said at the outset of our third night of training, “We’ve been Stomping now for several days, and although most things should get easier the more you do them, this work should only get *harder*.” I paused for a moment to let that jarring assault against complacency sink in, and the actresses looked down at the floor as if they had been accused of a crime. Not wanting to encourage introspection at this particular juncture, I commanded the actresses to “Get ready for Stomping/Shakuhachi!” From here, we moved immediately into the Walks and the Center of Gravity exercises, and it began to sink in that, little by little, their bodies were modulating, shedding their daily tensions and habits and transforming into precise and energized vessels for deep, somatic expression. At this point, the actresses began to forge a physical awareness heretofore undetected, evident in their more sophisticated articulation of their freshly-harnessed carnal intelligence. Milbre reported that she was “doubting [her] mind but finding [her] body [had] more information than [her] mind [did].”<sup>138</sup> She also communicated a difficulty in finding the stops in the Walks. I was, of course, glad she was facing difficulty, perhaps more so because the disclosure of this particular trouble was an extremely significant admission. As my own teacher often said: “If there are no stops, then it ain’t Suzuki!” The impossible and specific articulation demanded in the execution of each and every step is no easy task, I assure you, yet it is an absolutely vital ingredient. Suzuki training is a method for awakening and accessing boundless stores of heightened energy, yes, but it is also a hard-earned lesson in restraint, endowing the actress with energy *and* the means to

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<sup>138</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all comments on this third day of training were made in personal conversations with the author, October 20, 2008.

control it. Milbre's confessed aggravation was an early indication that she was truly *working* – and so was the training.

Katie experienced a strengthening of her muscle memory, dormant since the days of her childhood spent in dance classes and lessons in martial arts: “Using that muscle memory is so pleasurable, to trust my body to know what it’s doing and to remember the steps, its such a rewarding a thing that I don’t really get to do with my body anymore, so this is a reawakening of that. Its ingraining itself more and more.” I appreciated Katie’s mention of childhood, and reminded everyone of Pablo Picasso’s oft-cited adage: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” This wise pair of sentences captures the sentiment of our own attempts to get in touch with our more primal – or *child-like*– selves, a washing away of societal conventions that box us into a so-called propriety, disconnect us from our innate energies, and condition us to operate outside of our bodies.

On this night I endeavored to teach Statues, a free-form Suzuki exercise that involves the swift striking and releasing of instantaneously formed and abstractly shaped poses derived from an intense focus on image. Because of the more fluid nature of this exercise, Milbre began asking a series of questions that were serving only to micromanage the experience. She was mid-sentence when I savagely beat my stick against the floor – a frequent yet consistently jarring occurrence in the training space – and shouted: “Get ready for Statues!” I am not in the habit of treating people, especially my students, in such a brash manner, but the work demanded it. Afterwards, Milbre didn’t speak of the incident directly, but did report that although she was suffering from a “guiding mind that won’t shut up ... My body and my gut wanted to bypass my brain: ‘Go here,’ as opposed to ‘Tell me where to go!’” This was a wonderful admission, a profound breakthrough for a woman who often

wouldn't comment in training when prompted because she wanted time to process things cognitively before making any statements.

After Statues, we learned the final Suzuki form we would use in our process: Slow Ten, also referred to as Slow Ten Tekka Ten, “ten tekka ten” being the written transcription of the drumming sound of the accompanying music, music we did not use in my original training nor in our work here. Rather, to any sort of music – so long as it does not contain English lyrics – Slow Ten involves moving a fixed statue in slow time across the width of the space while maintaining an intense focus on image. This is a meditative and surprisingly taxing practice of focus and restraint, and, actually, can function as a natural segue into Viewpoints training. And so at the close of the Slow Ten exercise, I laid down my Suzuki stick and I transformed myself from drill sergeant into kindly – yet still demanding – mentor. I asked them to move along the grid in a rather ordinary fashion, telling them: “From now on, follow my instructions. Don't ask questions, and don't stop.” What hubris! What trust I expected! Yet, what trust I was given: consistent commitment with little context, a sort of blind faith from which every action was born.

I began by introducing each Viewpoint in individual succession, encouraging the actresses to open themselves up to the unplanned. We played at the ever-shifting rhythms of Tempo; the span of variant Durations; at seeing with our ears and hearing with our eyes in Kinesthetic Response, the building block of Viewpoints training; at the effects of Repetition; the distance inherent in Spatial Relationships; the trajectory of Topography, or floor pattern; the Shape of the body in space and the expressive and behavioral Gestures that body can make; and at the relationship of the body to Architecture, the landscape of the physical environment. I coached the actresses to play with extremes, to persevere with no predetermination, no cleverness, no agenda, encouraging a kind of pure movement that

facilitates a talking and listening in the body. I reminded them that there is more to their bodies than arms and legs. “What parts of your body are you continually relying on?” I asked, “What parts do you ignore? You have ears,” I reminded them, “and fingers, toes, lips, hips, belly buttons, teeth, elbows, butts, hair.” It was wonderful to watch their work grow in the literal sense: out from timidity crept a brave and infinite palette of the physical expression of each actresses’ bodymind. Late in the exercise, with the others’ work taking them to the edges of the playing area, Ashley was left alone in the center of the space. At some point she had picked up a piece of chalk off the floor, and was working at negotiating her relationship to it through her new movement vocabulary. Gaily bounding through the air, it appeared as if she was writing with the chalk. But this was an abstract, expressive writing that would not have yielded legible or coherent prose. Entranced and freed of the burdens of daily life, it was as if she were writing (righting?) herself into a new reality, one that matched the promise of her own vision.

After working for nearly an hour – which in my experience is an extremely long time – I brought the actresses to stillness. Before I released them, I said: “Close your eyes. Be aware of your energy. Be aware of all that has been sensed through the exercise. How much more information is there to take in if you don’t just rely on your eyes and your ears?” Finally, I released them, and they appeared stunned. Katie reported that she found the training “a little tedious. But that’s probably because I really lived in here [she motioned to her head]. I was really challenged to connect with myself and with the others in my work, if that’s what it was.” I replied that Viewpoints is “training your muscles, your heart, your sensitivities. It’s tuning the body to a whole different key, a different frequency.”

“I agree,” she responded distantly, “and I’m scared of what we’re going to do with the training, that it’s just a great unknown ... It’s terrifying.”

“I know,” I said after a brief silence, “it’s terrifying for me too.”

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*After leaving you in the crouched position for an endless and painful few seconds, the Teacher thunders: “On a count of twenty. SHI!” You rise, slow and steady, like a phoenix out of the ashes of your burnt-away former self. You rise with power and with a significantly renewed sense of your self. You can see and hear and smell with an extended clarity. Your body is charged and your mind is ready to explode from increased activity. When you reach the culmination of your ascent, you stand taller than ever before, and when the Teacher calls “Release,” you sense a part of yourself that would rather not do so.*

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I kept in contact with Mallory while she was away, and met with her separately upon her return to discuss the research packet and fill her in on all the work we’d been doing. This brief meeting was hardly sufficient, but she and I both agreed that the best way to integrate her into the ensemble was throw her to the wolves, as it were. I felt assured about this decision, for Mallory’s entrée into the world of Suzuki/Viewpoints more closely corresponded to my own initiation. It was not until years after my initial training that I read *any* of the literature providing the historical and philosophical context of the forms. Rather, the only information I had going into my first Suzuki class was whatever it was I unwittingly gleaned from having seen my new Post colleagues train in the forms just once during what we called Company Class. This was an hour of training – a half-hour of vocal warm-ups followed by a half-hour of Suzuki training – that we engaged in at the beginning of each rehearsal week and before every dress rehearsal and performance, a practice I carried over into the *Agnes* process as a kind of communal and carnal prayer of preparation. On this night, Mallory would observe – and the other actresses would perform – for the first time a full Suzuki session. That is: they were to go through each of the Suzuki forms in succession,

as they would eventually do at each of *our* Company Classes, slated to begin once we commenced our performance-making activities proper.

This night was the culmination of the training/workshop phase of our process, and the actresses' precision and extension seemed to have grown in intensity from the previous nights, but I was honestly more concerned with guiding Mallory through her witnessing than I was with focusing thoroughly on the others. Afterwards, Milbre reported that she "couldn't diagram the sentence," that there was "so much happening on so many levels its hard to sift out what's what."<sup>139</sup> Exactly: there are *always* millions of thoughts, associations and images swirling around our bodies, but we are not usually attuned to recognize and receive them. Milbre's constant need to apply logic and definition to her intuition remained her cross to bear throughout the process.

I led another extended Viewpoints session, with Mallory participating. Supported by a strong background in dance and a deep desire to experience these kinds of trainings, her work was intrepid from the start. Not so surprisingly, her literal and metaphysical presence made the ensemble whole as much as it inspired an increased sense of courage in her fellow players. Afterwards, Katie said: "Last night, Viewpoints didn't happen for me in the way that I thought it should. I didn't feel active, I didn't feel creative. But Mallory's presence changed the energy of the group, and her participation in Viewpoints lit a fire under me. Tonight I discovered an awareness of the space around me and the space within me." Mallory herself found the Viewpoints a "sensory conversation, a very different way of being," and reported "feeling a certain comfortability in the daringness of doing things that wouldn't be acceptable in society movement-wise and in human-to-human connections." It was wonderful to listen to the actresses process this particular Viewpoints session, because it

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<sup>139</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all comments on this fourth day of training were made in personal conversations with the author, October 21, 2008.

appeared as if they were *absorbing* their new vocabulary and it was allowing them to explore with wonder the beauty of their instruments.

Just before calling it a night, Mallory – half sharing with the group, half thinking out loud – said rather quietly: “This is where the theatre is going.” Although this comment was more a realization of our collective desire than the identification of a perceptible trend, it was certainly where *our* theatre was going. Anne Bogart believes “you create the future by describing it,” and across the landscape of bodies perpetually jockeying through and within heightened states of mental and physical awareness – bodies charged with energy and radiating hot, fleshy creativity – we were doing just that.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*.

“Because Agnes is different.”

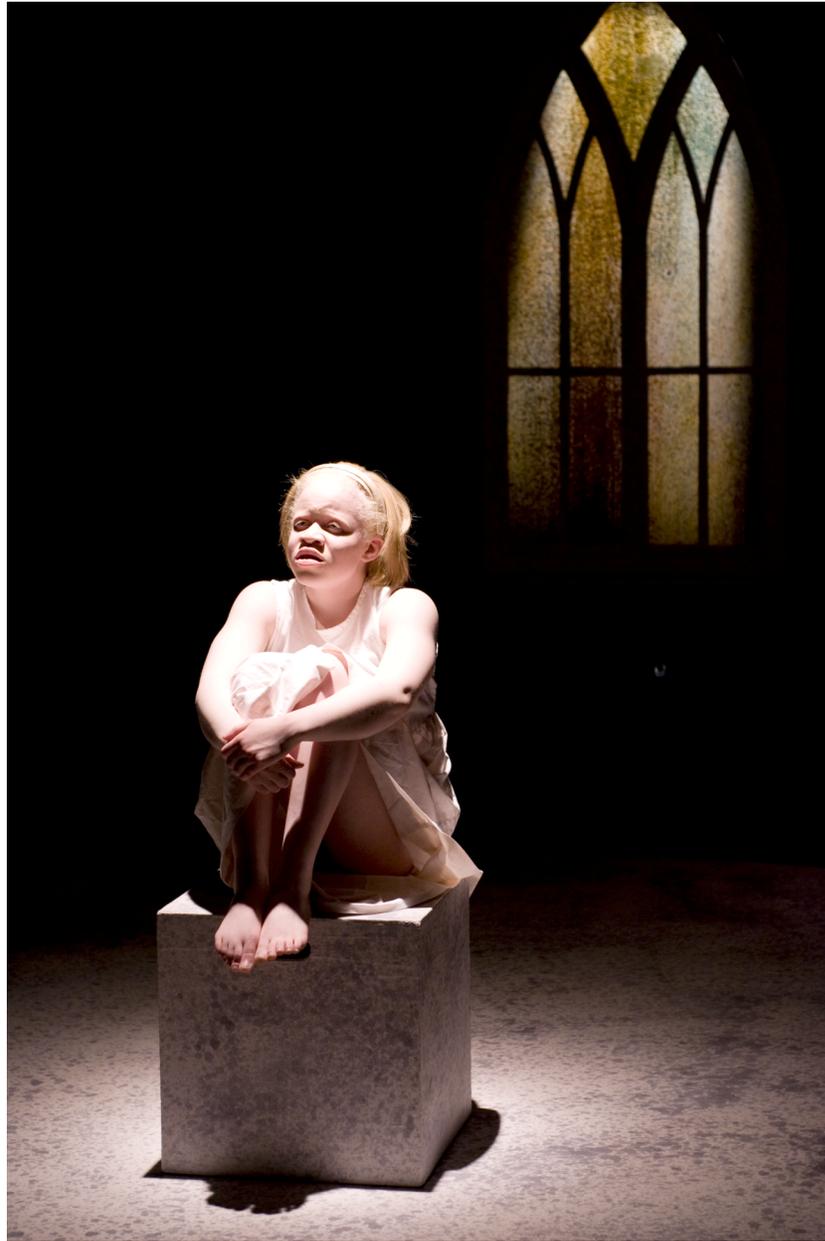
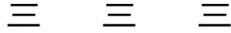


Figure 5. Ashley J. Hicks as Agnes. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

Interlude  
*spatial relationship:*  
*exploring the possibilities of distance*



The play's the thing, we used to say, as if we knew what the play was.  
- Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought*

One thing is sure: the play is not the thing.  
- Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre"

Creating theatre is a process, not of staging the dramatist's text, but of using the motivation and opportunity for expression to be found in a text to establish a space where certain directors and certain seductive [actresses] can exist and, at a certain moment in time, lure on an audience that has come, not to see a certain drama, but to experience what it is like to be in that particular space with these particular people.

- Ian Carruthers, *The Theatre of Suzuki Tadashi*

Words in the theatre are only a design on the canvas of motion.  
- Vsevolod Meyerhold, quoted in Harold Clurman, *On Directing*

[Theatre is] attractive because ... it goes beyond ... the familiar to the greatest euphoria anyone can experience ... [It's] always about energy and rhythm seen as rapture ... , rhythm as the mainstay of performance and the way to tell a story.

- Jorge Lavelli, quoted in Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, *In Contact With the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre*

Inside every great play lives a question ... When I reach for a play on the shelf, I know that inside the book is a spore: a sleeping question waiting for my attention. Reading the play, I touch the question with my own sensibilities. I know that it has touched me when the question responds and provokes thought and personal associations – when it haunts me.

- Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares*

The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.

- James Baldwin, attributed

One of the reasons for the asphyxiating atmosphere in which we live ... is our respect for ... what has been given form, as if all expression were not at last exhausted, were not at a point where things must break apart if they are to start anew and begin afresh.

- Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

Theatre is a pragmatic art form. How could it not be? ... [A text] must be mediated by a gang of people ... In short, it benefits from the journey which broke the trail.

- Tom Stoppard, introduction to *The Coast of Utopia*

In the plays that I write, I always try to bring an audience to the edge of the cliff and have them look into the abyss.

- John Pielmeier, quoted in Gregory Bossler, "Writers and Their Work"

Movement 4:  
Gladysing, or The Gift of Rhythm  
*center of gravity exercise number two:*  
*challenging center*

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*You find yourself once again in-line with your fellow neophytes horizontally across the rear of the workspace. Again, your center of gravity is low: your knees are bent and your arms are at your sides, only this time your feet are parallel and pressed together. The anticipation of this new adventure overwhelms you, and your interior restlessness nearly compromises your outer stillness. But you sense this is not a constructive sort of fire burning inside you, and you attempt to refocus yourself on the activities at hand. The Teacher stands immobile several feet in front of you; again, his eyes dart across the workspace like carnivorous searchlights hunting for their prey. He can penetrate deep into the heart of you, you feel, and you work mightily to prevent your internal distractions from betraying your application of the form. The Teacher thunders "ICHI!" and your right leg suddenly comes out from under you, sweeping into a waist-high position parallel to the floor with the foot flexed so that you bare its sole to meet the Teacher's nefarious glare. Then your leg whips inward, bending at the knee so that your foot now hovers parallel to the floor. This sequence occurs in one dizzying, continuous motion, tempting you with the loss of physical control. "Initiate from center! You must not wrench the torso!" the Teacher bellows, "You must control your energy!" Standing on one leg like a bewildered stork, you fight the urge to rise out of the bend in your left leg, you fight to keep from trembling, from tottering about on your one-legged perch, you fight ... and fight ... and fight ...*

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I have, since the summer of 1998, been an Eagle Scout. This honor was my first real achievement. Before I ever held a job, before I was licensed to drive a car, before I accrued any of the several hard-earned award and degree certificates hanging on the wall above my desk, I endeavored to complete a course of study that called upon equal parts forethought and instinct: an intense commingling of practical skill, deep intellectual engagement, and

spiritual reflection that taught me discipline, the importance of community service, and inspired within me a tremendous sense of compassion and understanding. Most artistically-minded children my age were acting in school plays and taking scores of dancing and singing lessons; my commitment to Scouting prevented me from engaging in these activities. I have, from time to time, looked upon my formative years with regret, longing for the early training I apparently missed. Yet, despite this fact – or, perhaps, because of it – I am immensely proud of my highly-regarded distinction: I include it as a line on my vita and, twelve years later, still carry in my wallet the card, signed by then-president Bill Clinton, that certifies me as an Eagle Scout. I will never forget the promises made before each and every Scouting event: the Scout Oath and the Scout Law, words of honor committed to memory and recited as a kind of prayer affirming our obligations to ourselves and to the world around us, words that guide my personal, professional, and artistic life to this very day. Thus, when the Scout Oath admonishes me to “do my best” to live “morally straight,” and the Scout Law reminds me that “A Scout is Trustworthy,” I know what I must do; I cannot tell a lie:

*Agnes of God* was not my first choice.

Indeed, the entire conceptualization of the process as a theatreing of the sacred via Suzuki/Viewpoints training and the Composition method of performance-making was, simply stated, an afterthought: not an arbitrary decision but certainly an unexpected and, at least initially, an unplanned approach that developed as a completely wondrous falling-into-place of the many elements that brought our galvanizing production to its startling realization. Experience has taught me that my life will endlessly unfold as a series of what I call *happy accidents*: those seemingly miraculous moments when what happens is not at all what you wanted or anticipated but is in fact a richer, more fulfilling experience than you might have ever imagined. The *Agnes of God* experience was, of course, no exception. This

seems only appropriate, for what drives this work is the sense that the sacred in theatre “has the ability always to come up with something unexpected, and that it is important to explore precisely the forms and scope of that unexpectedness,” with the crucial recognition that the unexpected by definition, cannot – and *should* not – be traced to a definitive, definable source nor rendered with the logician’s sense of prescriptive linearity.<sup>1</sup> My challenge, then, is to discuss the fleeting, ephemeral, and, yes, miraculous moments that coalesced as springboard informing the entire *Agnes of God* process “without fixing and classifying” those moments “so thoroughly that they become conclusions rather than possibilities.”<sup>2</sup> These words come in ethnographer Stacy Holman Jones’s masterful performance writing on torch singing, a work that focuses on the subversive, hidden – “though not silent” – stories evinced in reading between the lines of visible and invisible meanings, in “waiting for the accident to happen.”<sup>3</sup> And so here, as I trace the accidents that shaped and defined the process that *was*, I will continue to wait for accidents to shape and define the process that *will be*, unable to escape my longing for a play and process I never knew I wanted.

When, late in the Fall 2007 semester, the University of Missouri-Columbia Department of Theatre sent out the call for directing proposals to myself and my fellow graduate students, I immediately jumped at the opportunity. I have always viewed directing as an extension of teaching, and, indeed, one of the high points of the doctoral program at MU is that graduate students are encouraged to practice their art, be it acting, directing, playwriting, or design. It is my understanding that doctoral programs exist in which Ph.D.

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, ed. Ralph Yarrow (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, *Torch Singing: Performing Resistance and Desire from Billie Holiday to Edith Piaf* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 82.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

students are all but forbidden to engage in such practice, perhaps due to the fear that the embodied work of the rehearsal environment will somehow impede scholarly writing and book learning. To me, the very idea of a non-practicing theatre scholar seems an oxymoronic and priggishly serious-minded attempt to maintain the notion of a mind/body hierarchy my work seeks outright to overthrow. A professor of theatre must be an artist *and* a scholar, for it seems impossible to excel in the academe without a synthesis of craftsmanship and scholarship. I take to heart Victor Turner's assertion that "there must be a dialectic between performing and learning. One learns through performing, then performs the understanding so gained."<sup>4</sup> As a kind of incubator bridging educational and professional practice, a production process can be a galvanizing way to contextualize and reinforce concepts learned in the classroom, disseminate advances in research, and instigate social repercussions. While it could never completely replace classroom learning, the practical experience of the rehearsal environment is integral to the student-artist's development. This approach enmeshes the artist/scholar in a more holistic learning environment where analysis *and* embodiment of particular texts and modes of performance making mutually reinforce one another. And so one of the difficulties of educational theatre is choosing a play that not only serves the director's interests, supports the department's mission, and is consonant with the season as a whole, but also one that provides an educative and aesthetically vitalizing process that advances the craft of the student actresses and designers involved. I proposed two plays to the department: Michel Tremblay's *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* as my primary interest, and, of course, John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* as a sort of back-up plan, my desire to direct overriding my principles regarding script choice.

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 94.

Michel Tremblay – known for his complex blending of psychological realism, fantasy, structural experimentation, and political expression – is acknowledged as one of Canada’s foremost living playwrights and has aroused greater critical controversy than any other dramatist in or out of his native Quebec.<sup>5</sup> *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra* is a galvanizing, challenging piece of theatre that explores explicitly the relationship between religion and sex: the play unravels as its two characters engage in separate but parallel monologues on religion and sex. Manon, the spinster, seeks religious ecstasy through mystical union; Sandra, the transvestite, seeks sexual ecstasy through physical union. Yet, in retrospect, the very inclusion of *Agnes of God* in my proposal at all speaks to the fact that, deep down, I never believed *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra* had a chance. It is too controversial and too obscure – and so too risky – a play for a theatre department forced to produce theatre for what in my experience is a rather traditional, conservative Midwestern audience. It is my impression that the disinclination to produce *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra* was fueled by the fear of alienating audiences and loosing valuable revenue – and isn’t it sad that economic factors should ever place limitations on artistic expression? A discussion of economic issues related to the theatre could fill a book all on its own; for now, it is enough to say that the refusal to dance into unknown territory fuels an endlessly repetitive cycle: audiences will never acquire an appetite for the unfamiliar if they are always fed what they expect. Theatre should be a continuously acquired taste: just when you’ve settled into a certain degree of comprehensive ease, something existing outside known categories should appear on the horizon, tempting the palate to open itself up to the experiment.

With the charge of directing *Agnes of God* set before me, all I can do is think of Antonin Artaud, that wonderfully wild advocate for the theatre who wrote in his infamous

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<sup>5</sup> Renate Usmiani, *Michel Tremblay* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982), 2.

essay “No More Masterpieces”: “a form, once it has served, cannot be used again and asks only to be replaced by another, and that the theater is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice.”<sup>6</sup> I was presented with what was, on paper, the safer of my two propositions, and I am proud to say I turned everyone on their heads by conjuring a theatrical event that was anything but safe and ordinary.

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*Finally, the Teacher calls “NI!” and you Stomp your right leg down with all your might, causing a reverberation that sends a rush of adrenaline up your spine. Instantaneously, the Teacher bellows “SAN!” and you slide your right foot forward along the floor, transferring all your weight to the right foot. “Torsos straight!” the Teacher thunders after noticing that your upper body and the upper bodies of several of your fellow neophytes have listed forward. “From center!” He exclaims, “You must always be over center!” As you make the appropriate adjustments, the Teacher moves into the space and approaches one of your comrades, pressing against his lower abdomen to test his stability. When the Teacher arrives at the space in front of you, you fight the urge to break your focus on image to look Him directly in the eyes. He pushes against you with all His might and succeeds in forcing you back several paces. Distracted by the electricity of His touch, you allowed your back leg to slacken and your heel to rise off the floor. “Again!” the Teacher commands you, and you hurriedly reset yourself. He pushes again, but this time you have a more thoroughly energized form and so can summon a tremendous store of resistance to combat the Teacher’s challenge. As He releases His hold on you, the compulsion to smile nearly materializes across your face. But you know better, and instead set yourself to absorb the benefits of the heightened sensations engulfing your mind, body, and spirit.*

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“*Agnes of God*,” observes Paul Rosefeldt in the play’s only significant scholastic treatment, “has never gained acceptance into the critical canon and thus has attracted very

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<sup>6</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 75.

little critical attention.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there exists little more than a handful of tepid reviews and several MFA in Directing theses that fail to provide any new insights and amount to nothing more than confessional diaries.<sup>8</sup> When I read a “Notes Given to Cast” section and see such empty, torpid, unspecific, and superficial directives as “Find balance between hysterics and quietness,” “Be more accusing or suspicious,” or “Be more demented,” I can only envision trite, overwrought productions of the play that might have made excellent After-School Specials or Lifetime Movies.<sup>9</sup> Although it ran for nearly six hundred performances, the Tony award-winning play that brought John Pielmeier to public attention received mixed reviews when it premiered on Broadway in early 1982. In the *New York Times*, theatre critic Frank Rich wrote: “[Pielmeier’s] play falls apart ... because he hasn’t figured out how to meld its melodramatic and spiritual concerns. While *Agnes of God* aspires to be a chilling thriller and a stirring reaffirmation of the power of faith, it fails on both accounts.”<sup>10</sup> In a subsequent issue of the *Times*, Walter Kerr wrote: “Having posed a daring and virtually unsolvable question ... he has dodged the answer and simply returned to the question.”<sup>11</sup> I find these assessments ironic, for to me they display a complete misunderstanding of the thematic fire that sets the text ablaze. It seems both Rich and Kerr are uncomfortable with the play because it cannot

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Rosefeldt, *Absent Father in Modern Drama* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995), 83.

<sup>8</sup> For examples, see Charles Patrick Gendusa, “*Agnes of God*: Directing the Miracle” (master’s thesis, Texas Tech University, 1998) or Mark Curtis Reeves, “*Agnus Dei*: An Exploration and Presentation of John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God*” (master’s thesis, University of Mississippi, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Gendusa, “*Agnes of God*: Directing the Miracle,” 69-74.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Rich, “Whodunit in Convent,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Kerr, “Creatures of Habit,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1982.

be neatly categorized *and* for preferring questions to answers – but that is, of course, exactly Pielmeier’s point:

I had been struggling for several years personally with religious questions, spiritual questions. I’d been raised a Catholic, and I was thinking through all of that. A lot of these questions were about spirituality in the twentieth century ... I wanted to find a way of asking these questions, a play or story on which I could hang them ... Nothing had come along, and one day I was down in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street subway station and saw a headline in the [*New York Post*] that said, “Nun kills baby.”<sup>12</sup> I thought, Oh, that’s interesting, but I didn’t really think that much about it until, literally nine months later, when I work up in the middle of the night and said, Aha! That’s it. Again I was interested in it only as a clothesline on which I could hang the questions I wanted to ask. Ultimately, in writing it, I decided that it was the asking that was important; it was not a matter of finding answers in this play, or maybe at any time. So the play became a play about question asking.<sup>13</sup>

I love to read and reread these particular comments because they describe explicitly the potential I see to render *Agnes* in aesthetically and politically potent terms. I love these comments because they are full of moments of struggle and wonder that invite only *more* struggle and wonder, and by excavating the depth of the questions that hang on Pielmeier’s metaphorical clothesline, my collaborators and I were able to accost this text in a manner that allowed its inquisitive spirit to texture our theatreing of the sacred in significant, vitalizing ways.

Court-appointed psychiatrist Dr. Martha Livingstone is sent to determine the sanity of Agnes, a young nun with an angelic singing voice accused of murdering her own child.

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<sup>12</sup> Pielmeier is referring to the real-life case of Sister Maureen Murphy in Brighton, New York in 1976. At the age of thirty-five, Sister Maureen secretly bore a child in Our Lady of Lourdes Convent. Sister Maureen was found unconscious on the floor of her room, suffering from a immense loss of blood. She was whisked away to the local hospital, after which the other nuns discovered her newborn baby boy in a wastepaper basket, asphyxiated by the blue nightgown wrapped around his neck. Sister Maureen was charged with manslaughter, waived her right to a jury trial, and was eventually acquitted of all criminal charges.

<sup>13</sup> John Pielmeier, quoted in Barbara Carlisle Bigelow and Jean W. Ross, “John Pielmeier,” in *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1981) 132: 329.

Agnes is in the care of Miriam Ruth, the Mother Superior of the convent and, as we discover late in the play, Agnes's maternal aunt. Agnes is an innocent: one who, in Mother's words, "hasn't been touched, except by God," and, as such, appears completely ignorant to matters of sexual intercourse and the human reproductive process; what's more, she has no apparent recollection of the child's conception or birth, nor its subsequent death.<sup>14</sup> Doctor is a scientist who believes with the pretense objectivity and the logician's sense of linearity that "everything that Agnes has done is explainable by modern psychiatry. She's an hysteric. She was molested as a child. She had no father, an alcoholic mother. She was locked in a house until she was seventeen and in a convent until she was twenty-one. One-two-three, right down the line."<sup>15</sup> Mother, determined to protect Agnes from Doctor at all costs, laments society's lack of "primitive wonder" and is "willing to question *without* finding all the answers."<sup>16</sup> Agnes, the "wonder one," gets caught in the crossfire of Mother and Doctor's opposition. Both Mother and Doctor are wonderfully complex characters, each deficient in her clarity of conviction: Mother holds onto her faith by threads, and has to work to convince herself of Agnes's divine innocence as mightily as Doctor has to work to convince herself that the mystery can be resolved with absolute certainty. On the surface the central enigma of the text might be "Who fathered the child?" and/or "Who murdered the child," but these are merely metaphors for Pielmeier's substantive thematic element: the struggle of logic and faith.

The play's heart reveals itself a little more than half-way through the text when Mother says:

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<sup>14</sup> John Pielmeier, *Agnes of God* (New York: Samuel French, 1982), 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, 61.

One is born a saint. Only no one is born a saint today. We've evolved too far. We're too complicated ... We're born, we live, we die. Occasionally one might appear among us, still attached to God. But we cut that cord very quickly. No freaks here. We're all solid, sensible men and women, feet on the ground, money in the bank, innocence trampled underfoot. Our minds dissected, our bodies cut open, "No soul here; must have been a delusion." We look at the sky, "No God up there, no heaven, no hell." ... No *room* for miracles. But oh my dear, how I miss the miracles.<sup>17</sup>

My eyes water and a chill travels up my spine as I intermingle Pielmeier's words in amongst my own, for I can still hear the soft voice of Mallory, our Mother Superior, incanting those final sentences, full of loss and – what is perhaps even more painful – full of the recognition of that loss. I hear Pielmeier's voice – and *my* voice – loudest always in Mother's dialogue, and this is not so surprising, I should think, especially when considering his Catholic upbringing and that he is, like me, "a very spiritually minded person ... fascinated by religion."<sup>18</sup> In *Agnes of God*, Pielmeier exposes his *own* Catholic imagination, an imagination that manifests – again, much like my own – in a complex interweave with a kind of mysticism: "I think [*Agnes of God*] is about spirituality – it's not about catholicism [*sic*]; that's just the idiom I've used ... I wanted to write a play that simply asked questions," he admits, "because I don't think the answers are as important. There is an Eastern influence in *Agnes* in the idea of questions being primal."<sup>19</sup>

In this way, the struggle of logic and faith was not only the vehicle through which Pielmeier troubled his spiritual questions, but it became *our* exploratory vehicle as well, a sort of meta-commentary for our tempting of a more elemental, subjective, sensuous and *spiritual* experience in the theatre. Pielmeier conceives of his characters as metaphors; they function

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 50-1.

<sup>18</sup> John Pielmeier, quoted in Trevor Thomas, "The Headline that Became a Play," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1984.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

as instruments of the author used to fantasize his questions regarding spirituality, current conceptions of science and religion, and whether a belief in miracles is possible in today's digital climate. In our analysis, the characters become archetypal symbols operating at an extra-ordinary intensity that defies their categorization as historically-situated, psychologically-driven human beings.<sup>20</sup> And so the conflict that drives the play – and thus our theatreing of the sacred – plays out across the landscape of these symbolic embodiments: How do we negotiate a desire to embrace the unknown in a world that has conditioned us to define, compartmentalize and label in order to render our world less threatening?

Of course, it is important to remember that in our conception “the sacred is not in the what, but the how of drama,” and so “religious drama is not necessarily sacred, and the sacred is not necessarily religious.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, fundamental to our work was the assumption that we could have employed Suzuki/Viewpoints training and the Composition method of performance-making in the staging of *any* play and have engendered a similar experience; the theatreing of the sacred needn't be engaged via a play about nuns, or rabbis or imams or what have you. But *this* play, no doubt, advanced our cause, and in doing so further complicated our secular – and not-so-secular – conception of the sacred. Our work was about the play and *not* about the play: we focused ourselves squarely on the work of the

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<sup>20</sup> Costuming supported this conception of character: rather than employing the mundanities of nun's habits and business suits, we preferred to dress the characters archetypally/symbolically as well. Doctor wore not much more than a barely-buttoned black men's dress shirt and a slick red wig, and was painted garishly with copious amounts of street make-up. In direct opposition to Doctor's nakedness, Mother was covered in black from head to toe, donning pants, a suit jacket, leather gloves and headscarf, and wore a large cross around her neck. Agnes wore a simple, sleeveless white dress that made her look every inch the guileless, sweet child she is.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Malekin, “The Sacred, Drama, Ritual and the Ancient Mystery Religions,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 46.

body, yet there was obviously still some level of – albeit unspoken – intercourse with the *inspiration* of that body-ment. As Peter Civetta has noted:

As theatre seeks to retain its relevance within an entertainment culture, religious approaches to drama offer increasingly appropriate ways of reaching an audience . . . explor[ing] not only *what* people experience in the world, but also *how* they experience it . . . Whether through traditional ideologies or inventive individual expressions, religious paths can provide meaning and hope. What more necessary gift can theatre give?<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, it is only now, with the benefit of the time and space for reflection, that I am able to put some of the pieces together and take note of the startling and exhilarating ways *Agnes of God* the play helped us work at healing a fragmented and digitized culture via *Agnes of God* the experience.

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*When the Teacher beckons you to lift your straightened leg to test your centeredness, you anticipate His command and mistakenly execute the succeeding form in the sequence. “NO!” He screams, “Leg!” Like a scolded child, you reset and raise your back leg. Your right leg muscles have becomes especially fatigued, and, trembling with weariness, you struggle to maintain stillness. But, after a surprisingly quick scan of the room, the Teacher signals you and your fellow neophytes to replace your legs with a fervid bit of His stick. Everyone’s weight must have been properly placed, you think, for the Teacher to have moved on so quickly and so mercifully. Even though your momentary lapse in focus has left you feeling mortified, the Teacher’s actions please you, and you cannot help but marvel at the inexplicable ways in which your body is now operating.*

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Of her own process of preparing for a particular rehearsal process, Anne Bogart has said: “I spend a great deal of time first just in the pressure cooker of my own imagination,” embracing “digressions: sleeping sometimes, or napping while I’m researching something will lead in directions, and if I haven’t done that work I haven’t earned the right to walk in

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Civetta, “Expressing and Exploring Faith,” in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, ed. David Krasner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 207.

the room. I can't just walk into a room and say 'Let's collaborate!' ... If I haven't spent that time of sort of deep study and research than I have not done my job and I don't have the right to actually start [that collaboration]."<sup>23</sup> I have always used the word 'marinate' to describe the pressure cooker of *my* imagination: the longer I allow myself to stew in the various juices besieging a particular piece of dramatic meat, the more pungent it will taste when served up for communal consumption. I love opening a new script, because within its pages are paths to exotic and perhaps even dangerous uncharted territories that exist somewhere beyond those pages. With the gusto characteristic of my Italian heritage I embark on the long but welcomed journey. Like a ravenous bloodhound, I plow through all manner of materials, my quest for understanding absolutely insatiable: one thing leading me to another, and another and another until my walls are peppered with post-it notes and my desk nearly buckles under piles of books, papers, and images; until my brain overflows with details both intimate and fragmented and my heart throbs with emotions disorienting but welcomed, welcomed because I understand that in order to be truly touched, I "have to be willing not to know what the touch is going to feel like."<sup>24</sup>

Like Bogart, "I am a scavenger ... That is what I do. Like a bird that goes and pulls different things and makes a nest ... I read a lot and I take little bits of what I read and I put them together into thoughts and ideas ... I like the satisfaction of putting things together like that. That is my talent, if I have any talent, to be able to hold up a number of things in

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in ATW Working in the Theatre, "Directors on Directing," American Theatre Wing Web site, podcast, 58:45, [http://americantheatrewing.org/wit/detail/directors\\_02\\_08](http://americantheatrewing.org/wit/detail/directors_02_08) (accessed November 13, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 70.

the air at the same time.”<sup>25</sup> My best ideas come when I am doing anything but thinking about the work at hand: my work space is continuously littered with piles of recklessly-organized and hopelessly mismatched scraps of paper, each bearing a supposedly brilliant idea, each appropriately warped from my having scribbled on it after running out of the shower in mid-shampoo in the hopes of capturing a spark of that ever-elusive *something*. Relaxation and sleep eluding me, I am in my prime when coaxing and cajoling the thoughts in my head into workable, tangible form for and in the rehearsal space. Molding, forming, making, forging: that is what *I* do. The seduction of pulse of my intuition into concrete, corporeal form is central to the theatreing of the sacred: as an *entrée* into “a dimension of experience of intelligence and feeling beyond the limitations of normal activity,” the act of embodying “becomes the window out of which we fly.”<sup>26</sup> Bogart calls this necessary period of active research and reflection Source Work, or “a series of activities done at the beginning of the rehearsal process to get in touch ... with the source from which you are working. It’s the time taken ... to enter with your entire being into the world, the issues, the heart of your material ... It’s not about setting the final product. It’s about making time at the beginning of the process ... to wake up the *question* inside the piece in a true, personal way for everyone involved.”<sup>27</sup> In the case of *Agnes of God*, there was one crucial activity that laid the groundwork for all that was to follow, the window out of which I flew; the domino, if you will, that set off the long, circuitous and not wholly visible series events culminating in the

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<sup>25</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>26</sup> Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 17, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 163-4.

explosion that occurred in MU's Corner Playhouse that cold December night well over a year ago.

Late one night, months and months before rehearsals were to begin, I was poking around on YouTube.com.<sup>28</sup> Without much forethought, I typed "Agnes of God" into the rectangular search field at the top left-hand corner of the main page. Most of the videos yielded by the search were clips from the Academy Award-nominated film starring Jane Fonda, along with a few live recordings of unintentionally amusing amateur high school productions of the play. However, about half-way down the page was – and still is, at this writing – a curious inclusion. It is a brief recording of Mexican actress Teresa Ruiz rehearsing the title role in a 2004 production produced by the Promenade Playhouse and Conservatory in Santa Monica, California.<sup>29</sup> The particular scene captured on the almost six-minute video is Agnes's first hypnosis session, a powerful and charged scene played between Doctor and Agnes only. In the video, the camera focuses squarely on Ms. Ruiz, with the disembodied voice of the unnamed actress playing Doctor relegated to somewhere off-camera. Ruiz is not wearing a habit, as one might expect, but a white, flowing peasant dress held up by thin straps gently caressing the curvature of her shoulders. Her long black hair hangs casually about, sticking to her face in places by the very real tears she is crying. She sits on the floor, her legs angled to the side, her dress pooled around her exposed flesh. Blanketed in white, she appears to glow in the black rehearsal space. Mirroring the depth of Doctor's interrogation, the camera, at first set in wide shot, closes in on Ruiz by degrees

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<sup>28</sup> The irony of inspiration found in a video viewed second-hand does not escape me. As much as I may fight temptation, I am nevertheless a product of my time and cannot completely resist the investigative ease websites such as YouTube have the potential to provide.

<sup>29</sup> Promenadeplayhouse, "*Agnes of God*," YouTube.com, YouTube video, 5:44, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtbV7x59h\\_E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtbV7x59h_E) (accessed April 16, 2008).

until only her face is in view. She adopts a detached, trance-like delivery in her responses to Doctor's relentless questioning. Ruiz is, in effect, naked in the video: raw emotion and bare skin reveal a vulnerability that chilled me to the bone; in communicating the incommunicable, Ruiz exposed for me the spiritual essence driving the play. Her bare performance renders not an eating, sleeping, living, breathing Agnes but rather operates as a jump through that psychologically-based being, engendering a visioning of Agnes's deep, poetic significance.

In the weeks following my late-night viewing, Ruiz's performance haunted me like a ghost. Sociologist Avery F. Gordon says a ghost is "one form by which something ... barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us," and, she says, we must recognize that the "way of the ghost is haunting ... Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition."<sup>30</sup> In this moment of reflection, I now recognize that Ruiz's virtuosity planted a seed, provoking my first glimpse of text's unvarnished profundity. As the initiating act of the entire process, viewing Ruiz's mesmerizing performance completely formed my thinking, showing me that a conventional handling of the text would not be acceptable. Ruiz's performance showed me that there was – that there *must* be – another way in, a way that defied expectation, that didn't need to shroud itself in nun's habits and be burdened with quotidian movement and sentimental delivery to be effective. Ruiz's performance led me to the conception of a whole process of sacred theatre-making that, by

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<sup>30</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

“entering a dramatic text exceeds the text, adding, as we shall we, the presence of a new life that the text does not exhaust.”<sup>31</sup>

The specter of Ruiz’s performance worked at my psyche until waking up the question inside *Agnes of God* by literally waking *me* up with a revelation, not unlike the “Aha!” Pielmeier himself experienced as inspiration for writing the play in the first place. But not without help, and not until much, much later – just a few weeks before rehearsals were to begin. It was not until I was thoroughly enmeshed in my aforementioned Directed Reading with Dr. Richard “Chip” Callahan and read Yarrow’s *Sacred Theatre*, Orsi’s *Between Heaven and Earth*, Allain’s *The Art of Stillness*, Suzuki’s *The Way of Acting*, Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Artaud’s *The Theatre and Its Double*, and Brook’s *The Empty Space* that my ruminations began to take tangible shape. Chip is a wonderful mentor operating always with exceptional benevolence and an inquisitive mind of his own, and his genuine interest in this work was inspiring. I think it is safe to say our meetings evolved as charged, enlightening, and scholastically and personally fulfilling conversations for both of us. What began with a general focus on the interrelationship of theatre and religion formed into a sort of weekly think-tank, an impassioned discussion of theory that specified and reified an impassioned process of practice.

And so – in the midst of all this reading, with Ruiz’s performance carved into my head and into my heart, and having longed for years to return to the training methods electrifying the beat of my artistic pulse – in the middle of one warm early-October night, I shot up in bed like a firecracker. Through tired, murky eyes I groped for the bottle of water I always keep next to my bed. I took several fervent gulps and the cold water stung my insides as it rushed down my gullet, confirming my wakefulness and letting me know that this was

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<sup>31</sup> William S. Haney II, “Between the Opposites: Gender Games,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 95.

no dream. My partner Ryan began to stir, fighting off drowsiness to ask me if anything was wrong. Quite the contrary, things never seemed more right, and I had never felt more alive. David Mamet says artists are “driven to lessen the burden of the unbearable disparity between their conscious and unconscious minds ... to achieve peace.”<sup>32</sup> My invisible longings were straining to be called into startling visibility, and if you can understand the peace engendered by such visioning not as tranquility or restfulness but as the blissful recognition of the unanticipated and unpredictable coming together of the many, many passionate desires, yearnings, and outright cravings intrinsic to one’s artistic and scholastic constitution, then you will know of what I speak. I turned to Ryan and he sat up, his concern growing with every second of my silence. Finally, I smiled – I can’t help but smile when delivering major news, be it happy, sad, or otherwise – and said: *What if I trained the actresses in Suzuki/Vienpoints, and Composed the show as a kind of sacred performance, and approached the entire process ethnographically?* Peter Brook says: “When I begin to work on a play, I start with a deep, formless hunch, which is a smell, a color, a shadow ... It’s my conviction that this play must be done today, and without conviction I can’t do it.”<sup>33</sup> My nocturnal premonition became *my* conviction, my shadowy and somewhat clairvoyant realization of the coalescence of all of deep my artistic and scholastic enthusiasms and curiosities, as well as the illuminative potential of such an approach for theatre directors, professors, and students, for audiences and university theatre departments, for ethnographers and scholars of religion, and as the stuff of scholarship and dissertations. Gordon remarks that the ghost “registers *and* it incites, and that is why we have to talk to it graciously, why we have to learn how it speaks, why we have to grasp the fullness of its life world, its desires and its standpoint,” because when “a

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<sup>32</sup> David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 50.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 3.

ghost appears, it is making contact with you; all its forceful if perplexing enunciations are for you.”<sup>34</sup> And she is correct when she says “the ghostly matter will not go away”: I became extra-ordinarily driven to render tangibly the effervescence haunting *Agnes’s* pages because that effervescence was now haunting *me*, shadowing me, often outwitting all my cleverness – all my “smart moves” of imposition – until, by way of “merging the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent,” I acquiesced to a process of theatreing the sacred in all its sensuous, embodied glory.<sup>35</sup>

Tyron Guthrie has said: “Directing at its best is psychic evocation and is performed almost entirely unconsciously.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, everything fell into place in somewhat unexplainable ways, and it is not easy to translate the process engendered into written format, the very reason I have resisted a linear, systematic rendering of events here. Although I adopt, as Anne Bogart does, a “what if” technique” that treats “drama as an artifact, a found object, perhaps even a talisman, which must be examined without presumption and researched in detail in order to release its powerful secrets,” I don’t want to give the impression that I did a huge amount of narrowly-focused research for years and then carefully chose a play and worked at it for months with a definitive “to do” list firmly in my grasp.<sup>37</sup> In the actual process of theatreing the sacred, I didn’t labor over theories or intellectualize the actresses’ physically intuitive choices. We were working with theories of practice *in* practice; I did not need to preach from the gospel of Ralph Yarrow, or even Tadashi Suzuki or Anne Bogart because that would have been irrelevant and, actually, a

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<sup>34</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 207-8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 190, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Tyrone Guthrie, quoted in Arthur Bartow, *The Director’s Voice: Twenty-One Interviews* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), n.p.

<sup>37</sup> Cummings, *Remaking American Theatre*, 40.

hindrance. Never once did I say: “So-and-so said *this* and so we have to do it this way.” Rather, I think it all ended up working because I *didn't* do that. The intellectual and physical source work we did do was there in our muscle memory, enabling us quite literally to act on instinct because we trusted those instincts were informed by something real. If something felt ‘right’ – and our bodies knew this – we went with it. It is a challenge to be educative without being pedantic, but I think this is the way to do it. And this sensibility can carry over into performance. We don't want to prepare for spectators a dramatized lecture, but rather offer for communal consumption a experience to be devoured and digested, and so nourish ourselves and all those who bear witness to our sacrifice.

A colleague of mine once remarked that I have the rare ability to just make things happen, that I always seem to be able to make and go and do and have things come out sparkling. With humble gratitude, I take this as a supreme compliment, and feel privileged to harbor such multidimensional supernatural powers, such as they are, that seem operate of their own accord. Looking back, it is indeed eerie how neatly all the elements fit into place. But after all, the creative process is about doing your homework and knowing when to stop doing your homework, because “rehearsal is not about proving that what you have worked out before is the right solution for the play,” says Bogart, “The research eventually gets in your way. If you don't get beyond the homework, the outcome will ... simply validates the research. It [will] not challenge it.”<sup>38</sup> Validation was not an element of the *Agnes of God* process; neither was justification. Strong in our convictions, we recognized – if, at times, only instinctually and always without pretension – the value of what we were doing, a process of exploring and encouraging the “turbulent Disorder [*sic*] that rocks [our] familiar

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<sup>38</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 133.

ways of living the space and time around [us] and, through bewilderment, compels [us] to discover another part of [ourselves].”<sup>39</sup>

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*The Teacher thunders “SHI!” and the harsh rap of His stick resounds in your ears like a jackhammer. You shoot up onto your tiptoes like a piston, distributing your weight equally over both feet, fighting to maintain your connection to the earth. You accelerated with fervor, but you did not manage to control your energy properly, you realize, and so you totter about, rendering yourself vulnerable to the Teacher’s reproach. Anxiety courses through your veins as the Teacher calls “GOH!” – Japanese for ‘five’ – and you descend into flat-footed form once again. This time, you are careful not to expel any excess energy, and you complete the motion in a succinct, still fashion. Rapidly, the Teacher bellows “ICHI!” and once again you find yourself extending your leg up and out – your left leg, this time – and wrapping it back in one contiguous motion. Again, you tempt centeredness on your one-legged perch, the discomfiting burn in your feet and legs fueling the vitalizing fire raging in your soul.*

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My father has always taught me to *be aware*, a maxim that has become the loving hinge on which our whole relationship has developed. And so I have never been interested in paying much attention to surface matter, forever seeking to penetrate the bone to suck at the marrow of a thing. In plain terms, I’m nosy. For example, when I go to the theatre, I prefer to sit on the outside edges of the auditorium so I can see into the wings, praying to catch a glimpse of the players unguarded or perhaps sneak a peek at the inner-workings of the mechanics of the scenic elements. In short, I am always more interested in knowing everything about a particular production rather than knowing what the production is actually about. My penchant for snooping through the background of a thing has led to my being called Gladys Kravitz by many of my colleagues in the theatre. Gladys Kravitz is, of course,

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<sup>39</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, trans. Richard Fowler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 61.

Samantha Stephens's dubiously curious across-the-street neighbor on *Bewitched*. Ms. Kravitz – perpetually peering through her blinds and into the Stephens's living room – was often the sole mortal witness to Samantha's magical feats, yet could never convince her apathetic husband Abner of the presence of witchcraft because in the time it took to persuade him to look through the window himself, conditions would have returned to 'normal' in the Stephens's home. Nevertheless, Gladys Kravitz remained strong in her convictions and relentless in her pursuits, often privy to secret stores of knowledge that – had they been handled by someone with a more balanced temperament – harbored the potential to empower her rather than relegate her to the status of a humorous busybody. Indeed, I have always found it a great advantage to be in possession of the read-between-the-lines information such a heightened sense of perception can yield. My own tried and true skills of penetrating observation – forever dubbed in active verb form as "Gladysing" by my warm-hearted colleagues – have led to my becoming, if you'll allow me a mixed popular culture reference, a kind of Lieutenant Columbo of the theatre. The probing Lieutenant Columbo – one of my all-time favorite television characters – endlessly explores, as I do, all manner of details, always wanting to uncover "just one more thing," forever reaching through the overlay to get at the heart of the matter. And so for me, as a theatre director, this quest for significance translates into an approach to text that is focused on not what a play *says*, but rather what it is *saying*, an aesthetic within which a performer "does not merely speak the lines furnished by the dramatist," but rather "uncovers the roots from which the lines have sprung."<sup>40</sup> This is a process of evoking what a text *wants* to say, giving presence to the absence of desire.

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<sup>40</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, quoted in Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 203.

In her memoir tracing her sensuous relationship with the French language, American professor and scholar Alice Kaplan speaks of metaphor as “‘jumping over’ the basic meaning of a word to get to the poetic meaning.”<sup>41</sup> Always interested in penetrating the literal and to access the essential, I actually like to think of metaphor as a jumping *through*. For me this jump signifies the recognition that, according to director Declan Donnellan, “what’s essential is not the word. The word is only the surface of something. What’s really important is what makes the word happen ... The text is a generalization ... a catalyst for something else.”<sup>42</sup> Tyrone Guthrie recognized that “the author doesn’t know everything about his script, and ... the script itself is merely the raw material upon which a group of collaborators have got to work; it is not the finished article.”<sup>43</sup> Richard Schechner has gone so far as to posit that, once rehearsal begins, “it is no more reasonable to expect that the text will remain unchanged than that a performer will not develop his role.”<sup>44</sup> I agree: if a text is viewed as immutable, how can you collaborate with it? Schechner continues, describing his 1967 of Eugene Ionesco’s *Victims of Duty*: “We did not ‘do’ Ionesco’s play; we ‘did with it.’ We confronted it, searched among its words and themes, built around and through it. And we came out with our own thing.”<sup>45</sup> Schechner’s characterization of his work as *confrontation* comes from his admitted influence in the work of Jerzy Grotowski, who has described his own process of not “doing” a particular play, but “meeting” it: “We eliminate those parts of

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<sup>41</sup> Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 149-50.

<sup>42</sup> Declan Donnellan, quoted in Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, eds., *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>43</sup> Tyrone Guthrie, “Directing a Play,” in *The Director in a Changing Theatre*, ed. J. Robert Wills (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1976), 94.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Schechner, “6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre,” *TDR* 12 (1968): 64.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

the text which have no importance for us, those parts with which we can neither agree nor disagree ... We did not want to write a new play, we wished to confront ourselves.”<sup>46</sup> The process Grotowski and Schechner describe is a fitting depiction of my approach to *Agnes of God*: if confrontation can be conceived of as a “psychic penetration” enacted to conjure “an extraordinarily intimate layer,” then a confrontation with text – indeed, with *all* the elements that comprise the totality of the theatrical experience – was absolutely essential to our theatreing of the sacred.<sup>47</sup>

I am not a playwright: I am a director, and, thus, an *interlocutor*. I work kinesthetically with bodies – *materials* – in space. In my aesthetic, the text itself must become “one material among other materials – like the body of the [actress], sounds, objects, et cetera – each of which the performance manipulates or adapts, thereby constituting itself as art.”<sup>48</sup> This work, mind you, is not about gimmicks. Rather, what is constructed – born afresh – out of a confrontation with a text is not arbitrary, random, or egocentric but is actually *inevitable*, born of a deep, somatic relationship with – and this is important – what those involved in a particular process of performance-making determine to be the underlying substance of a particular work. Peter Brook has observed that theatre “is always written on the wind ... every form once born is mortal; every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear the marks of all the influences that surround it.”<sup>49</sup> If nothing else, I hope our

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<sup>46</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, quoted in *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 37, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, “The Avant-Garde and the Semiotics of the Antitextual Gesture,” trans. James Harding, in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 80-1.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 16.

process can show the necessity of Brook's charge as well as the forcefulness of its consequences.

I fancy my revisionist aesthetic as that of an *auteur* director. *Auteur* – French for “author” – is perhaps the most appropriate description for a director who positions himself as the scribe of a production's entire *mise-en-scène*, its complete visual and aural composition. Significantly, Argentinian-born spectacle director Jorge Lavelli asserts that a “*mise en scène* means not just a reciting a text, but presenting a view of what is written: it is another writing.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, this approach is “associated more with the symbolic than the naturalistic” and situates the director as an *originator* rather than the “interpreter of (generally) another's text,” as one who crafts a performance as “a diorama of synthesized images, sounds and non-linear temporalities.”<sup>51</sup> It is the recognition that, according to Tyron Guthrie, “every contact with the play ... is that person's comment on it. If you read a play ... you may not be aware of it but what you're seeing is only part of the author's intention, and you're also seeing things that the author never meant to put in.”<sup>52</sup> My work is not about doing something *to* a play, but doing something *with* it: not telling a play what it is but allowing *it* to reveal itself to *me* – filtered, of course, through my own imaginative and intellectual make-up. This is not egomania so much as it is a privileging of multiple and complex layers of intentionality whilst tempting an “independence,” says scholar David Richard Jones, “from dead traditions and bad habits, from rotten clichés, stale thoughts, and poor assumptions about what theatrical art can or cannot be. That is why,” he continues, “we all – no matter

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<sup>50</sup> Jorge Lavelli, quoted in Delgado and Heritage, 114.

<sup>51</sup> Gabrielle Cody, “Introduction to Part II: Auteur Theatre,” in *Re: Direction: A Theoretical and Practice Guide*, ed. Rebecca Schneider and Gabrielle Cody (London: Routledge, 2002), 125, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Guthrie, “Directing a Play,” 88.

how we are disposed on other matters – yearn for productions ... that enliven contemporary works, peel the old wallpaper off the classics, and show action, word, and character in all their presentness.”<sup>53</sup>

Amy S. Green traces the disavowal of the authority of the text, not surprisingly, to the counterculture revolution of the 1960s in which visionary directors such as Andrei Serban, Peter Sellars, JoAnne Akalaitis, and Schechner and Grotowski themselves sought to reinvent “cherished plays” in “maverick stagings” that stripped away “all realistic trappings in favor of an abstract metaphorical milieu ... in the hopes of unleashing the play’s primal emotional powers” as a way to “confront the issues and aesthetics” of a “turbulent, fragmented, and cynical” America.<sup>54</sup> Green continues: “By abandoning the modernist quest for historical authenticity and the definitive production,” these directors “knocked playscripts off their ... pedestals into an egalitarian stew of theatrical signs and gestures that may alter, clarify, contradict, criticize, demystify, dislocate, update, or otherwise reimagine the subject text on stage.”<sup>55</sup> My work with *Agnes of God* is certainly indebted to the turn to the conceptual instigated by this bright group of radicals, an aesthetic that rejects the common complaint that reinvention “is often an egotistical intrusion by a director who feels compelled to have a ‘concept’ or else is an implicit confession of an inability to handle the play” as is.<sup>56</sup> I suggest it is egotistical for directors to see it as their only job to serve the author’s intentions and simply ‘stage the play’ as if there were some sort of canonical,

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<sup>53</sup> David Richard Jones, *Great Directors at Work: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Kazan, Brook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 13-14.

<sup>54</sup> Amy S. Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Invent the Classics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1, 2-3, 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley Kauffman, *Persons of the Drama* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 131.

‘original’ version and that an author’s ‘true’ intentions could ever be known. I like to think of my work in terms of Robert Brustein’s notion of “poetic metaphor,” or the interest in “generating provocative theatrical images ... that are suggestive of the play rather than specific, reverberant rather than concrete.”<sup>57</sup> Rather than presenting a linearly constructed, readily interpretable product neatly packaged for effortless consumption, we must offer a *challenge* that creates a fevered atmosphere in the theatre and can light a fire in performers and spectators alike.

An examination of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s more recent article on the “Antitextual Gesture” makes, perhaps, a more significant contribution to the overall discussion by situating the initiation of the turn away from textual dominance not in “the development of performance culture and performance art in the sixties” but rather in the “programmatically expressive avant-garde theater” of the early twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> In observing “the long-enduring conception of the ‘World as Text’ ... increasingly and radically giving way to a conception of the ‘World as Performance,’” and, interestingly, giving credit to Dwight Conquergood as one such scholar who has noted this shift, Fischer-Lichte credits Russian actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold as being among the first to react “sharply” to the “overwhelming majority” of nineteenth-century artists who believed “the artistic character of performance was primarily affirmed ... through the dramatic literary text that was supposed to steer and control performance.”<sup>59</sup> Dissatisfied with the notion of theatre as a “maid to

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Brustein, “Reworking the Classics: Homage or Ego Trip?,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1988.

<sup>58</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Avant-Garde and the Semiotics of the Antitextual Gesture,” 79, 80.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

literature,” Meyerhold and his contemporaries<sup>60</sup> “generated community-building power not through an appeal to a specific text but through the performance, which in the use of bodies, voices, music, sounds, lights, et cetera, attempted to directly affect the sense of the audience and which occurred at a very specific place.”<sup>61</sup> This shift in dominance from the textual to the eventful – in which “process, the fleeting, the ephemeral, and the changeable receive absolute priority over the fixed, stable, enduring, and unchangeable” – recognizes that a *performance* can only be comprehended through the character of occurrence.

I only became aware of Meyerhold’s “infectious optimism toward the possibilities of creating ... a new theatre” well after the production closed.<sup>62</sup> Another accident – or is it? Is it an accident that Meyerhold believed to stylize a phenomenon meant “to employ every possible means of expression in order to reveal [its] inner synthesis ... to bring out those hidden features which are deeply rooted in the style of any work of art”?<sup>63</sup> That his antipsychologicistic aesthetic defined performance in purely plastic terms, seeking to engender “the psychophysical unity of the performer as moving being” and emphasizing “physical virtuosity in place of detailed characterization”?<sup>64</sup> That he insisted on the proper education

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<sup>60</sup> Most notable, perhaps, is Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), one of the earliest theatre theorists to consider the director as having total responsibility for a unity of performance. Although Meyerhold was not initially aware of the work of his English complement, the two visionaries theorized similar ideas regarding the role of the actor in stylized performance. Of Craig, Alexander Hevesi has said: “I think Mr. Craig is the truest revolutionist I have ever known, because he demands a return to the most ancient traditions of which we can dream.” Alexander Hevesi, quoted in Willis, *Director in a Changing Theatre*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Avant-Garde and the Semiotics of the Antitextual Gesture,” 86-7.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 104.

<sup>63</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 43n.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of Playing*, 282, 104.

of creative artists? That his theory of Biomechanics – the first attempt at a modern system of movement-based acting training – was derived in part from Asian theatre techniques and aimed “not to teach a style of performance, but to train the [actress] to be responsive and flexible enough to provoke in the spectator the widest possible range of feelings”?<sup>65</sup> That he worked to “‘make strange’ the subject matter” of a production by deforming “reality in order to force us to see that reality afresh”?<sup>66</sup> That he “demanded that the spectator play an active role in constructing the meaning of the performance”?<sup>67</sup> That, for Meyerhold, the interplay of performer and spectator set the course for the performance event and that movement “is the most powerful means of theatrical expression ... The spectator can understand the [performer’s] thoughts and impulses from [her] moves, gestures and facial expressions”?<sup>68</sup> That in his critical examination of modern systems of acting entitled *The Purpose of Playing*, Robert Gordon concludes his discussion of Meyerhold with one of Anne Bogart, crediting her as one such artist who was “surely” inspired by the Russian revolutionary, evident in her development of training and performance-making methods that locate the actress as a scenographic instrument at the center of the performance enterprise?<sup>69</sup> Bogart, remembering Freud’s speculation that there is no such thing as an accident, believes we should celebrate the unexpected because it contains an energy that allows us to look at the elements we are

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 91.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of Playing*, 115.

<sup>68</sup> Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 147.

<sup>69</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of Playing*, 115.

working with in an entirely new way.<sup>70</sup> Thinking about my work in relation to Meyerhold now not only confirms the precision of my theatrical sixth sense and, thus, the appropriateness of our approach, but also recognizes and understands the historical context out of which that intuitive aesthetic was born. As Meyerhold's fellow Russian visionary Yevgeny Vakhtangov wrote in his diary: "Meyerhold provided the roots for the theatre of the future. So shall the future honour him."<sup>71</sup>

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*"NI! – SAN! – SHI!," the Teacher thunders in rapid sequence, leaving you on your tip-toes in a state of hot exhilaration. The Teacher paces across the horizontal lane at the front of space like an assassin stalking His next victim. You stand strong and proud and still, and feel as if you can withstand whatever challenges the Teacher might lay before you. Using His staff like a walking stick, an ominous, rhythmic thudding sound accompanies Him as He traverses the space; its beat is persistent, and it seduces you into a kind of hypnotic trance. You are overtaken by this strange sensation; you have lost all sense of time and space and can imagine with your mind's eye only wild and exotic surroundings. But somehow you have not lost connection to your physical self. You can feel your energies coursing through your veins, the rhythmic thud of the Teacher's staff driving them harder and faster.*

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Peter Brook has written: "If you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you must conjure its sound from it."<sup>72</sup> In the case of *Agnes of God*, this involved a rhythmically-driven restructuring of text inspired by the play's intrinsic musicality. One of the text's most remarkable features is Agnes's glorious singing: brief, luminous moments of relief from the tumultuousness of the condition –

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<sup>70</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares* 48, 131-2.

<sup>71</sup> Yevgeny Vakhtangov, quoted in Nick Worrall, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage: Tairon, Vakhtangov, Okhlopkov* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 76.

<sup>72</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 38.

sometime-gift, sometime-affliction – of one who has been touched by God. With “the voice of an angel” Agnes sings – in addition to a traditional Christmas song (“Virgin Mary Had One Son”), a sixteenth-century old-French folksong (“Baissez moy, ma duce amye”), and an anonymous lullaby (“Charlie’s Neat, Charlie’s Sweet”) – the various Latin chants that comprise the Ordinary of the Catholic Mass: the Kyrie, a ternary invocation of *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy), *Christe eleison* (Christ have mercy), and *Kyrie eleison* representing the hopes of the faithful and symbolizing the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the Gloria, a voicing of praise for God that implores His mercy; the Alleluia,<sup>73</sup> a responsorial psalm from the Hebrew *Hallelujah* meaning “praise ye the Lord”; the Credo, a testament of faith that outlines church doctrine and narrates Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection; the Sanctus, or “Holy, holy, holy,” a chorus of praise from the vision of the prophet Isaiah; the Ave Maria,<sup>74</sup> or “Hail Mary,” a musical rendering of the popular prayer “Hail Mary” that worships Mary, the mother of God; and the Agnus Dei, or “Lamb of God,” a litany that asks for the Lord’s forgiveness.<sup>75</sup> Music has a long history in the church: the singing of hymns is the earliest recorded musical activity of Jesus and his followers. By the fourth century, Christians were gathering publicly to engage in the communal singing of psalms and hymns and the chanting of prayers and Scripture, and formal Christian observances began to adopt a standardized format of which music was a regular feature. Church fathers St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom,

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<sup>73</sup> Although in its proper placement within the structure the Mass, the Alleluia is not included in Pielmeier’s text. Our production inserted this chant for reasons that will reveal themselves in a subsequent Movement of this writing.

<sup>74</sup> The Ave Maria is actually *not* part of the Ordinary of the Mass. Pielmeier interpolates this veneration of the Blessed Mother in place of the Pater Noster (Lord’s Prayer). Pielmeier’s subtle modification was, assuredly, no accident, and its immense significance will also, I assure you, come into focus in good time.

<sup>75</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 12; J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of World Music*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 52-53.

St. Jerome, and St. Augustine believed “the value of music lay in its power to influence the ethos of listeners,” and rejected “the idea of cultivating music simply for enjoyment.”<sup>76</sup> By the early seventeenth century “Catholic composers adopted the theatrical idiom for church music, setting religious texts in *sacred concertos*” – or compositions on a sacred text for one or more singers and instrumental accompaniment – “using a dramatic, powerful art medium to convey the church’s message in the most persuasive and rhetorically effective way.”<sup>77</sup>

Nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner, one of the most influential musicians of all time, envisioned an “absolute oneness of drama and music” as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* – or a “master art work” – of which the author-composer supervised every aspect, operating under the belief that artistic unity was the ultimate goal of performance.<sup>78</sup> Influential Swiss theatre designer and theorist Adolphe Appia was “deeply impressed” with Wagner’s emphasis on “music as the servant of drama,” and thus believed “the art of staging can be an art only if it derives from music.”<sup>79</sup> Nearly equally influenced by Swiss musician Emile-Jacques Dalcroze’s method of eurhythmics – a “system under which students were led to experience music kinesthetically by responding physically to the rhythms of music compositions” – Appia believed that an excavation of the rhythm at the root of a text provided “the key to every gesture and movement” comprising a performance’s physical score, involving “the *rhythmic* life of the human body in its whole scope ... an imaginative,

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<sup>76</sup> Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca, *World Music*, 28.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 690-691.

<sup>79</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of Playing*, 91.

nonrational form.”<sup>80</sup> Meyerhold – who studied the work of Wagner, Appia and Dalcroze – believed “the gift of rhythm” to be “one of the most important a director can have.”<sup>81</sup>

Meyerhold felt the Moscow Art Theatre’s 1904 production of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* failed to recognize the play’s complexity, and wrote as much wrote to Chekhov: “Your play is abstract, like a Tchaikovsky symphony. Above all else, the director must get the *sound* of it,” envisioning a production in which “music and movement would be used not simply as components of a lifelike scene, but as the means of pointing theatrically [at] what is truly significant in the action, the subtext, the unspoken dialogue of emotions.”<sup>82</sup>

I find myself wanting to write similar words to John Pielmeier every time I come across an overwrought and pedestrian production of *his* abstract play. *Agnes of God* is not meant, in my analysis, to resemble a “lifelike scene”; rather, it deserves to have the significance of its action, its subtext, its unspoken eloquence coaxed out of the darkness by means of a rhythmic exposition of its base musicality that allows that text to sing individual, openly-interpretable melodies and appear “as a moving, ever-changing creation that is constantly in flux.”<sup>83</sup> And so we transformed *Agnes of God* into a kind of rhythmic musical score: text became staff and actresses became notes, or rather, the corporeal evocation of the space *between* the notes. In this conception, rhythm is “not merely an organizing agent but

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<sup>80</sup> Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 413, 382; Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of Theatre*, ed. Barnard Hewitt, trans. Robert W. Corrigan and Mary Douglas Dirks (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1962), 37-8.

<sup>81</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, quoted in Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 112.

<sup>82</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 22; Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 24.

<sup>83</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Avant-Garde and the Semiotics of the Antitextual Gesture,” 93.

has a direct impact upon the meaning as well,” a meaning “we can know ... only in the most profound depths of our being.”<sup>84</sup>

To assist in translating *Agnes* into spatial and plastic terms, we refashioned its more static act and scene divisions into thirty-three intermission-less *Movements*, each a rhythmic beat made-up of an endless series of even smaller beats, each but one pulse in the total rhythm of the performance.<sup>85</sup> The play unravels, for the most part, as a series of duets: between Doctor and Mother, Doctor and Agnes, and Mother and Agnes. We took full advantage of this fortunate sense of structure and, having determined the actresses were never to leave the stage, phrased *Movements* corresponding to which two characters carried the melody line – the tonal sequence in the foreground of a complete musical idea – of a particular section of text. Shifts in phrasing occurred by what is referred to in musical terms as disjunct motion, or melodic movement occurring by leaps of large intervals rather than the stepwise progression of regular intervals. This reframing of text was absolutely necessary to facilitate the actresses’ conjuration of a rhythmic score of their own, one in which they would function both as instruments *and* as instrumentalists. An incredible specificity blossomed in the play of the their individual physical scores, a gestural life that evoked the underlying rhythms of the musically-restructured text upon which it played. What developed was a *polyphony* of stylized movement, a rhythmic texturing in which the various parts moved in contrasting directions, independent progressions sounding at the same time, holding their own, but weaving together and so growing in their complexity. The actresses’ polyrhythmic rendering of text embraced multiple steams of action, allowing fresh and dynamic moments

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<sup>84</sup> Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 112; Appia, *Music and the Art of Theatre*, 16.

<sup>85</sup> In our conception, ‘movement’ has several connotations. For clarity sake, I have chosen to capitalize the ‘m’ when by ‘movement’ I am indicating a particular section of the play or of this writing. Otherwise, ‘movement’ (connoted with a lower-case ‘m’) indicates the gesticulations of the actresses.

constantly to emerge. These moments evolved in the real-time, moment-to-moment “dangerous electricity” of a pulsating, “living event” via a physically-embodied symbolic life itself born of the rhythmic principles of its raw material; that is to say: the play itself.<sup>86</sup>

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*The sudden harsh rap of the Teacher’s staff fractures His steady beat. It assaults you violently, knocking you out of your hypnotic daze and nearly sending you hurtling down in a crash. Quickly, you register with your centeredness and reassert the connection of your foot to the floor. Firm you stand, hazarding absolute collapse and daring the Teacher to send another challenge your way. Finally, he thunders “GOH!,” and you replace your raised leg, mercifully reapportioning your weight over both feet. After a tense moment of silent stillness, He commands you to release the form. You do so, exhilarated but also fearful of what will come next.*

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It seems *no* accident that the technique for developing our rhythmic revelation of *Agnes of God* is termed Composition, a method for creating performance by “revealing to ourselves our hidden thoughts and feelings about the material.”<sup>87</sup> Tina Landau describes Composition as “an alternative method of writing. Rather than being alone in a room with a computer, Composition is writing with a group of people on their feet.”<sup>88</sup> The word ‘composition’ has equal significance, of course, in the world of music as it does in the world of writing. At the outset of this Movement, I spoke of accidents, quoting Stacy Holman Jones from her ethnographic study of torch singing, a book, she says, “that performs like the music I listen to – a narrative that moves and changes with each repetition of a note, a line, a song ... a text that asks you to imagine your own interpretations and make your own

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<sup>86</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 99.

<sup>87</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Viewpoints Book*, 12.

<sup>88</sup> Tina Landau, “Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Composition: What Are They?,” in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1995), 27.

improvisations, variations on the theme.”<sup>89</sup> Here, I have tempted the writing of a book that performs like the music *I* listen to: the beatified, miraculous singing of poor, young Agnes of God, who has left “marks of sound and rhythm on my language,” and I hope, dear reader, will leave such imprints on your own impressions of my writerly rendering of this work.<sup>90</sup> Patricia Hampl says that during the time of Catholic bishop Aurelius Augustinus – whose *Confessions* is widely regarded as the West’s first memoir – “to own a book meant to memorize it,” and, with the popularity of public recitation, “‘to read’ meant to listen.”<sup>91</sup> This “culture of memorization,” continues Hampl, affected composition in that a “treasury of memorized texts packed in the writer’s mind made ‘writing,’ like ‘reading,’ more densely communal ... A text was a buzz and murmur of voices, literary chamber music ... a rich, polyphonic texture.”<sup>92</sup> Chamber music – as a method of composition that explores intimately the harmonic relationship of but a few voices and/or instruments in intimate association with each other and their audience – encourages conversation and, importantly, communion between and across players and listeners. Our production of *Agnes of God*, itself a kind of chamber piece for three bodies, tempted such communion “primarily on a physiological, rhythmical and energetic basis.”<sup>93</sup> Now, with you as my listener-readers, I tempt the continuation of that transfer of energy through the rhythmic expression of *this* written body. Ethnomusicologist and Harvard professor Kay Kaufman Shelemay reminds us

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<sup>89</sup> Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 3.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>91</sup> Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W. Norton & Company, 1999), 172.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-3.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theater Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 40.

that music “has been said to have a special capacity to evoke and symbolize emotional and bodily response,” that “we perceive music not just in the ear but also throughout the body.”<sup>94</sup> If, as Appia asserts, the poet alone can “consecrate the divine union of music with the human body,” then let my writing – longing for the group, crafted in a lonely monophony in the dead of night with only my computer and the glare of the television to keep me company – let it envelope you, overcome you, enter your body, and so let the rhythmic cadence of our sacred, fleeting performative moment continue to sing, now *with* you and *through* you, in the rejuvenating polyphony of fellowship.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 167, 250.

<sup>95</sup> Appia, *Music and the Art of Theatre*, 4.

“Oh my God, O sweet Lady, don’t leave me. Please, please don’t leave me.”



Figure 6. Milbre Burch as the Virgin/Mother. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

## Interlude

*gesture:  
harnessing vision*



I don't see it.

- Milbre Burch, circa October 2008

What is represented on an image is actually present, or present in it.

- David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*

It's the study of what makes a performance come to life and breathe ... It's an exercise in subtlety, clarity, and the economy of movement. It's the practice of empathy, honesty, imagination, observation, and believing.

- Tony Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here*

But a miracle is an event *without* explanation ... I believe that it is also the nature of science to wonder, and we can only wonder if we are willing to question *without* finding all the answers ... The wonder of science is not in the answers it provides but in the questions it uncovers. For every miracle it finally explains, ten thousand more miracles come into being.

- Mother, in John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*

It is impossible to tell a simple story about the Virgin Mary. She cannot be held in place by a single attribute – sorrow or delight, purity or compassion – or held accountable for a single social consequence – liberation or oppression, solidarity or fracture ... She is always refracted through the prism of the needs and fears of the people who approach her, and so she is a protean and unstable figure.

- Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*

There are singular people who appear like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, author and hero of a dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whatever we may be.

- Diane Arbus, quoted in Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames*

What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and invisible?

- Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains, / This fall star my milk sustains, / This love that makes my heart's blood stop, / Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones / And bids my hair stand up?

- W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*

For in woman's capacity to act as generous host, to contain a body in her body, there is an act of tremendous hospitality: the act is so generous that it often threatens to destroy the mother herself.

- Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*

I see it.

- Milbre Burch, circa December 2008

Movement 5:  
Earning the Lady's Gestures  
*center of gravity exercise number three:*  
*awakening the heart*

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*Your legs weary and your feet throbbing, you find yourself in line with your fellow neophytes for yet a third time. You are standing in a form similar to ballet's fifth position: your feet are turned away from your body in a forty-five degree angle, your left foot is in front of your right, left heel firmly positioned in the recess of your right instep. You maintain, as always, the bend in your knees that effects a lower center of gravity. This position, you think, is the most awkward yet, and you foresee a great cruelty in the sequence that will follow. Suddenly, the Teacher calls "WRAP!" His grating voice as abhorrent as nails scratching their way across a chalkboard. Your right leg sweeps up and out from beneath you before pulling the foot back to center. Your foot flexed and your leg turned up and left trembling in the air, it is as if you have wrapped it perpendicularly around a vertical pole positioned directly in front of you. This motion has been the greatest challenge to your center yet, and you stagger violently about, attempting in vain to maintain a cool exterior. The Teacher watches you intensely, and you notice a sinister smile stretching across His face.*

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I am an only child and an only *grandchild*. My maternal grandparents were essential to my coming-of-age, effecting in a fundamental way the entirety of my emotional and intellectual make-up. As a young child and adolescent – in the years before moving away to college and even then during the inevitable returns home – I spent as much time with my grandparents as I did with my parents, often living with them for extended periods of time. This began out of necessity and eventually blossomed into a deep desire to surround myself within their tenderhearted companionship. The weekends I spent with them as a child while my mother and father worked turned into week- and even month-long respites as adult. It wasn't that living with my parents was in any way unpleasant – and, indeed, a little more than

ten minutes separated the two houses – but the time spent with my grandparents was unique and untroubled. Without the distractions of rules or chores or homework or the weighty expectation of achievement, these periods spent at their home on an acre of land at the outskirts of town were wonderfully comfortable furloughs from the strain of daily existence. To say that Nanny and Pop – that is what I called them from the first moment I could speak and will continue to call them until my dying day – spoiled me is not quite right, for that seems to paint them as unsophisticated dupes and me as some sort of Little Lord Fauntleroy gone wrong. Rather, as first generation Italian-Americans and the children of immigrant parents, they saw in me the inherent potential to write the legacy of the family into the future – a legacy of struggle and determination, compassion and humanity – and lavished upon me the gifts necessary to ensure my success.

My grandparents were almost seventy when I was born, and didn't think they'd live to see me become a teenager. I am now nearly thirty, and my grandfather passed away during the course of this writing at age ninety-seven. I had hoped he would live to see this project through to its completion, and it is his spirit that now drives and inspires my work. My grandmother died almost seven years ago, shortly after I earned my Bachelor's degree.

I was alone with her when she died.

She was ninety years old and had been living in a nursing home for over a year, suffering from diabetes, muscular dystrophy and a severe bacterial infection in her intestines. My grandfather and I went to visit her one hot summer day only to be met in hall with the news that she had taken the proverbial “turn for the worse.” We walked into her room to find her in a coma and breathing with the assistance of an oxygen tank. Looking back on the scene, I can't remember what was worse: watching her, or watching my grandfather – her husband of seventy-one years – watching her. She was in the beginning stages of congestive

heart failure, the cause of the labored, mucus-filled breathing of her death-rattle. If you've ever heard its eerie gurgle – and I've heard more times than anyone my age, or any age, ever should – then you understand me when I say it will haunt me forever.

My grandmother's descent into death dragged on for several days. The extended family gathered and were taking turns crowding her room. Each of us stood by her bedside, wiping the phlegm from her mouth as her nurses gave her Roxanol – a strong antitussive oral solution – through an eye-dropper to try to ease her pain. On one late evening everyone was hungry and left for the diner just a mile down the road. I had a migraine headache and was indeed ravenous, but somehow I sensed that I should remain with my grandmother. I paced back and forth, my heart racing with anticipation. Oddly nervous, I finally mustered the courage to stand beside her and to stroke her face: "We love you, Nanny," I told her, "It's alright to let go." Eventually I placed a chair at the foot of her bed to watch over her. Suddenly, my grandmother's breathing stopped. I froze for a moment, and then calmly stood up to check her pulse at her neck. She made one last jerking motion which frightened me and caused me to withdraw hurriedly from her side. I stood watching her for another while before checking again. Nothing. I checked her feet. They were blue and cold, as the nurses said they would be when... I took her hand one last time, told her I loved her, and walked out of the room and up to the nurses' station. The nurse, Anne Brown, was startled by my presence. We locked eyes in a silent moment of recognition, and then she was off, darting down the hall and into my grandmother's room. She prayed over my grandmother and pronounced her dead at 6:45 p.m. on Tuesday, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

My grandmother's name was Mary.

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*Again the Teacher calls "WRAP!" accompanying it with a terrifying bit of His stick. You Stomp down into the earth, and, in your effort to deposit your right heel in the hollow of your left instep, you instead Stomp*

*directly onto your left foot. You wince from the pain, and hurriedly fumble your way to right yourself, all the while attempting to wrap your left leg around the imaginary vertical pole to complete the motion. Your heart is beating so violently and so loudly that you wonder if the others in the room are as besieged by its resounding throbs as you are.*

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In last years of my grandmother's life, I had a recurring and rather unsettling dream that found me alone with her when she died, charged with the difficult task – as I was on that late July evening – of informing the family of her passing. The fact that my dream came to fruition was no surprise, and, in fact, I had hoped its events *would* actually materialize: call me selfish, but I wanted to be the one to comfort my dear grandmother in her final moments. I don't consider myself to harbor any sort of psychic abilities. Rather, I think my premonition has everything to do with how thoroughly my grandmother's essence was woven into the fabric of my own spirit. I have come to embrace the ways in which I am often stricken with a perception of the yet-to-be, recognizing that I have only been furnished with the *vision*, and that it is my *responsibility* to conjure the specter of desire into being *through my actions*. This is a metaphor for how I inhabit my artistic life: I allow myself to be consumed by a thing, to allow an almost sensual union to emerge so as to come out on the other side of that relationship altered entirely and in the possession of valuable material for the theatre and, thus, for life. Such is my relationship with my blessed grandmother Mary, a patrician figure, in my esteem, who has penetrated every inch of my being with her tangible presence, a microcosmic exemplification of the power and profusion of the Blessed Mother Mary, "a polyvalent figure ... that for [over] two thousand years has coursed through our culture, as spirited and often as imperceptible as an underground stream."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), xxiv-xxv.

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*“WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP!” the Teacher thunders in rapid succession, leaving you teetering on one strained leg. The velocity engendered by the progression of alternating wrapping legs has made it difficult to control your energy, and the Teacher admonishes you for as much. “You must not bounce about!” He bellows, “The stop is not a release! Energy is continuous – but you must command it!” You recognize the immense contradiction – the continuation and control of energy within a flicker of stillness – and become overwhelmed and discouraged by this utter impossibility.*

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Historian Miri Rubin asserts that it is actually “impossible to ... understand world cultures without the meaning of Mary. The sheer variety of shape and colour, of form and gesture that she ultimately came to embody are reflections of human yearning, ingenuity and creativity.”<sup>2</sup> Robert Orsi asserts that the Virgin Mary is a cultural figure “as present everywhere as she is anywhere ... She enters the intricacies of a culture,” he continues, “[and] becomes part of its webs and meanings, limitations, structures, and possibilities. She contributes to making and sustaining culture, and reinventing it, at the same time that she herself is made and sustained by culture, in dynamic exchanges with her devout.”<sup>3</sup> Mary’s currency extends deep into the text of *Agnes of God*: She is not a character *per se* but still a prominent, omnipresent figure spoken of often and referred to as “the Lady” who, says Agnes, “I saw when I was ten. I was lying on the grass looking at the sun and the sun became a cloud and the cloud became the Lady, and ... she tells me things .... And she uses me to sing.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in a play so thoroughly entrenched in the complexities of motherhood

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<sup>2</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 59, 61.

<sup>4</sup> John Pielmeier, *Agnes of God* (New York: Samuel French, 1982), 19-20.

it seems no accident that, in Agnes's singing of the various Latin chants that comprise the Ordinary of the Catholic Mass, Pielmeier replaced the Pater Noster with the Ave Maria, the most frequently prayed of all Marian devotions. And so through the casting and staging of the unscripted character of the Virgin/Mother, our process sought not to transform Her eminence into a cheap gimmick but to excavate and expand Her galvanizing presence, to render the relational dynamics She engenders visible, to give Her *body* in quite the literal sense.

Orsi asserts that "encounters with the Virgin are encounters with presence ... whatever artists, patrons, and curators intend – and they intend many things, including devotion – Mary is *there* in representations of her."<sup>5</sup> Here, he is referring the various "media of presence," as he calls them, the "images, statues, beads, ritual objects, smells, visions, colors, foods and tastes, vestments, oils, and waters" that bear representations of the Holy Mother.<sup>6</sup> "These objects are believed to hold the power of the holy figure," he says, "and to make it present ... Media of presence are efficacious and they serve as points of encounter between humans ... and between humans and sacred figures."<sup>7</sup> Yet, regardless of Mary's inherent "thereness," we knew it was not enough for us to install any arbitrary effigy of the Virgin Mother in the performance space and consider our work done, because "presence is a human experience," Orsi reminds us, and "how sacred presences become real in particular times and places is a question."<sup>8</sup> Orsi describes this process in active and *practical* terms, and so what is for us a theatring of the sacred is, for Orsi, a "corporealization of the sacred":

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<sup>5</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

the “practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body ... so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence for oneself and for others,” a process in which “materiality or presence ... is not things but practice.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, our practice of rendering Mary in concrete, visible terms necessarily called upon our recognition that Her thereness “is not a benign reality” because “presence, however it is understood,” says Orsi, “is not easily or finally located on one side, the positive side, of a set of discrete moral categories – helpful/hurtful, reassuring/frightening, good/bad, and so on.”<sup>10</sup> The Virgin Mother is a complex model of contradiction in Her very name, not only represented in the oxymoronic appellation ‘Virgin Mother’ but also in the recognition that Miryam, the original Hebrew form of Mary, can mean either ‘rebellion’ or ‘salt tears.’ Indeed, Orsi reports She is often “so beloved, and so feared” by those who “love and honor her but are also weary of her power.”<sup>11</sup> This more chilling, reproachful aspect of Mary’s nature manifests itself mightily in *Agnes of God*, a play, says Paul Rosefeldt, “haunted by the force of a sinister maternity,” and so accounts for our conception of the character as the Virgin *slash* Mother.<sup>12</sup> *Agnes* is indeed saturated with “the dominance of the Terrible Mother”: Doctor hints at having had an abortion,<sup>13</sup> and Mother – a dubious title, to be sure – confesses that her calling to monastic life came only *after* she had been “a failure as a wife and mother”; her two daughters won’t see her anymore, and tell their friends and family

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 74, 75-76.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Rosefeldt, *Absent Father in Modern Drama* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Abortion is not necessarily an immoral act, depending on one’s personal belief system, but it is certainly conceived of as a mortal sin via the Catholic theology that permeates the text and is treated as such in the world of the play.

she's "passed on."<sup>14</sup> What's more, Mother knew about Agnes's pregnancy yet did nothing to help her, and in fact left Agnes – who knows nothing of the reproductive process – alone to birth the child and to care for her after she was born. Agnes herself ultimately confesses her filicide, even though she has no concept of the consequences of her actions: "I looked at it [the baby] and thought, this is a mistake. But it's my mistake, not Mommy's. God's mistake. I thought, I can save her. I can give her back to God ... I tied the cord around her neck, wrapped her in the bloody sheets, and stuffed her in the trash can," an act that transforms the umbilical cord, "the sign of maternal nurturing ... into a noose, a dead instrument of strangulation."<sup>15</sup>

Agnes's actions after the birth of her child are evidence of how her abuse-ridden existence has so terribly skewed her perceptions. She thinks of herself as 'Mommy's mistake' because she was often told as much. She admits to Doctor with hesitation that "[Mommy] ... makes me ... take off my clothes and then ... she makes ... fun of me," telling Agnes that she's ugly and stupid, that her "whole body ... is a mistake."<sup>16</sup> The ghost of Agnes's mother – a demented alcoholic who burns Agnes's genitals with her cigarettes – haunts her subconscious so thoroughly that in her initial description of the Lady, Agnes cannot seem to separate the Lady's beneficence from Mommy's savagery. Agnes's memories of the two motherly figures in her life are inevitably wedded, and remain interwoven throughout the course of the play. "I think [Mommy] went to hell," says Agnes, "because every time I see her she looks like she just stepped out of a hot shower. And I'm never sure if it's her or the

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<sup>14</sup> Rosefeldt, *Absent Father*, 83; Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 72-73; Rosefeldt, *Absent Father*, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 41-42.

Lady who tells me things. They fight over me all the time.”<sup>17</sup> Agnes is clear that it is the Lady who inspires her singing, yet even then she cannot rid herself of her mother’s depravity: “It’s as if [the Lady is] throwing a big hook through the air and it catches me under my ribs and tries to pull me up but I can’t move because Mommy is hold my feet, and all I can do is sing in [the Lady’s] voice.”<sup>18</sup>

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*After allowing you to falter for an inordinately prolonged period of time, the Teacher finally calls “WRAP!” and you achingly but gratefully wrap with the alternate leg, resituating your weight over your right foot. Barely able to collect yourself, the Teacher commands you to “Add arms!” As in the other Center of Gravity challenges, you arms have been held at your side for the entire exercise, and you cannot imagine – or perhaps would prefer not to imagine – what ‘adding arms’ might entail. A nearly inaudible murmur begins to erupt amongst your fellow neophytes, and, sensing this, the Teacher shocks you with a “WRAP!” and a whack of His stick that nearly sends you careening downward. “ARMS!” He thunders with another hit of His stick, and off you go, readying yourself to face the Teacher’s latest provocation whilst actually doing the act of facing it.*

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In practice, our corporealization of the presence of the Virgin/Mother was perhaps the beacon of our rhythmic revisioning of text. Internationally renowned director David Leveaux asserts that “you must see [theatre] as a piece of music” because “ultimately theatre is not about psychology; it’s about rhythm. There is not a single thing that will move you in the theatre unless the rhythm is right. It’s brutal like that. *Rhythm is the connection to the invisible*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 20.

*world in theatre.*<sup>19</sup> The emphasis is, as you might imagine, mine, for Her visible rendering did indeed result in some rather imaginative and exhilarating performative happenings. We gave Her “material substance, fabric, and texture” unequivocally: the audience entered the performance space to find the Virgin/Mother clothed in long, white flowing robes and standing as a statue upon a one-and-a-half foot tall cube in Her most recognizable pose: palms open at Her side, head bowed and to the right in a display of modesty.<sup>20</sup> The Virgin/Mother was centered in a simple scene scape of my own design: a wide, moon-like white circle speckled gray and surrounded on three sides by large stained-glass windows. And here She stood – our corporeal Mary, our *bodied* Virgin/Mother – assuming a humble-yet-seductive stature that in these early moments sought to penetrate spectators in intimate and unsettling ways, tempting them to get in touch with what Suzuki calls the “unarticulated ... element ... hidden deep in the human heart.”<sup>21</sup>

The Virgin/Mother remained in Her opening stance until Agnes’s first appearance, which was made quite literally *through* the statue. To facilitate Agnes’s arrival, we incorporated into the performance text a standard piece of liturgical music that is *not* included in the script: the Alleluia, a joyful praising of God that functions as the musical high point of the Mass, a moment “when the words for once seem secondary to the expansive melody filling” the space.<sup>22</sup> At the tail end of an extended monologue about her own sister’s

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<sup>19</sup> David Leveaux, quoted in Anne Nicholson Weber, ed., *Upstaged: Making Theatre in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 66-7.

<sup>20</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, xxii; Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 87.

<sup>22</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of World Music*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 62.

death at a convent, Doctor was stopped dead in her tracks with the echoing tones of the Alleluia as all light was subtracted from the space less a small pool of amber light directed squarely at the Virgin/Mother. At this point, the Virgin/Mother raised Her arms and Her head for the first time, and whilst looking directly at the audience, She opened Her long, billowed skirt to reveal dear innocent Agnes. This was a crucial moment, for the emergence of Agnes from the womb of the Virgin/Mother was much more than a mere metaphor for Her birthing of the Christ child. Rather, this act set into motion a series of events that would lead to Agnes – bearing the full weight and significance of her name – becoming the *present* sacrifice; not a *representation* of Christ’s ultimate suffering, but actually serving as the *present* offering to our own God or god(s), absolving us of our sins. Moreover, this act of parturition significantly transferred the focus of the performance to Agnes. As written, *Agnes of God* is really Doctor’s play: it evolves as her memory, and we also experience her in a manner unique among the characters via her intimate, audience-directed monologues. This renders Agnes a secondary character, a hazy figure who appears in the past through remembered fragments. Our rendering of Agnes in startlingly present terms *through* the Virgin/Mother made Agnes the cynosure of our production and thus made the experience of that production all-the-more vitalizing.

After Her delivery of Agnes, the Virgin/Mother retreated upstage behind the central stained-glass window and into a serviceable niche that is part of the space’s permanent architecture. Here, illuminated in white light and viewed only in silhouette, She formed herself into a new statue at the start of each successive Movement. Each statue was founded on familiar Christian imagery and sustained throughout the duration of each particular Movement. Transitions between statues were executed with the exactitude of the speaking characters in a nanosecond’s shift of light and body posture that transitioned us from one

Movement to the next. These études in stillness functioned as sculptural renderings of the essential thematic matter of a particular Movement, and thus “rendered the interior process of imagination corporal and moved Mary into the body.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it was behind the window that She made Her several transitions into the specter of Agnes’s mother. In each of Agnes’s scenes – when she spoke of her mother and/or was terrorized by her spirit – this involved a brief period – often not more than half a page of text – in which the Virgin/Mother morphed into a more severe, angular posture at the same time She was consumed by a richly saturated red wash of light. Afterwards, She returned to Her previously established – and more tenderly-fashioned – pose illuminated in white. Limitations of space meant that two separate lighting instruments were used to create this bifurcated luminosity, a matter of logistics that produced a dazzling effect and allowed us to take full advantage of Pielmeier’s decree that *Agnes of God* “is a play of light and shadows.”<sup>24</sup> Because it is physically impossible to hang two instruments in the same exact position, each shaft of light was necessarily directed at the Virgin/Mother from a different angle. This meant that during the transitions between ‘Virgin’ and ‘Mother’ a shadow was cast that made it appear as if there were *two* figures evoking the several elemental states of *one* body. These wonderful – and extremely brief – moments of separation allowed both the Virgin Mary and Agnes’s awful mother to materialize as simultaneous corporeal figures, each making Herself visibly present and extending the “enfleshment” of the invisible out to its farthest extremes.<sup>25</sup>

The Virgin/Mother emerged from behind the window twice during the course of the performance. Echoing the function of a *koken* – the Kabuki stage assistant who sits upstage

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<sup>23</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, *Torch Singing: Performing Resistance and Desire from Billie Holiday to Edith Piaf* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 40.

in the shadows during the performance and whose job it is to assist a leading actor in, among other things, fetching hand properties – both of Her sojourns to the circular playing area were to provide Agnes the blood of the stigmata.<sup>26</sup> This seemed only appropriate, as it was the Lady herself who suffered the stigmata in Her initial revelation to Agnes: “Her feet began to bleed,” she says, “and I saw there were holes in her hands and in her side and I tried to catch the blood as it fell from the sky.”<sup>27</sup> In our production, the Holy Mother’s bloody bestowal was yet another act of sacred visibility, in that She was seen literally to burden Agnes with her blessed affliction.

The Virgin/Mother’s initial reappearance was brief and came early in the play, during Agnes’s first duet with Mother. Although the published script calls for Agnes to keep one of her hands “inconspicuously hidden in the folds of her habit” so that she might later reveal “a hand wrapped in a bloody handkerchief,” our revisioning neither allowed for the habits to hide things in nor the time or place for Agnes to don and doff a prop cloth, both mundane logistical matters in any event.<sup>28</sup> Our process dilated this moment, transforming it into something infinitely more creative and thrilling – and *visible* – than banal stage trickery. Rather, the Virgin/Mother initiated a trajectory that began with Her retreat from Her perch behind the window to a blood-filled silver bowl that gleamed in a perpetual shaft of white light throughout the performance. Here, She collected two clots of blood – one on each of Her thumbs – before descending the few steps of Her alcove to land once again in the playing space proper. Holding Her hands in front of Her and walking as if She were floating, She made Her way about the perimeter of the circle until She reached a frustrated Mother

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<sup>26</sup> James R. Brandon, William P. Malm, and Donald H. Shively, *Studies in Kabuki: Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978), 110.

<sup>27</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 25.

grilling a tormented Agnes. After she is denied a conciliatory embrace, Mother entreats Agnes: “Now what’s wrong?”<sup>29</sup> It was at that point that the Virgin/Mother left the outer edge of the circle and began Her direct progression towards Agnes. Looking the Virgin/Mother squarely in the eyes, Agnes replies: “I’m being punished . . . I don’t know [why].”<sup>30</sup> And at that, Agnes laid her hands violently on her lap, allowing the Virgin/Mother to strike each of her palms with a small amount of blood so as to endow her with the visible symbol of her suffering. Afterwards the Virgin/Mother retired once again to Her nook behind the window where She remained for the better part of the performance.

Her subsequent journey, which came late in the play, resulted in Her permanent return to the main playing area. During Agnes’s second hypnosis session, Doctor returns Agnes to her room in the convent on the night her child was born. As the Virgin/Mother transitioned into the wicked mother cloaked in red light, Agnes suddenly notices that someone is in her room with her. Doctor encourages her to confront the apparition: “What do you do?,” she prods, “Agnes?”<sup>31</sup> This propels Agnes to resuscitate the moment of contact: “Who is it? (*silence*) Who’s there? (*silence*) Is it you? (*silence*) But I *am* afraid. (*silence*) Yes. (*silence*) Yes I do. (*silence*) Why me? (*silence*) Wait. I want to see you!”<sup>32</sup> Our production took full advantage of Pielmeier’s generous silences: during each pause in Agnes’s speech, the Virgin/Mother responded to Agnes through a series of manual gestures that tempered Agnes’s responses. Eventually, the Virgin/Mother appeared to melt into the black abyss beyond the windowsill, and all light was subtracted from the alcove less the spotlight on the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

silver bowl. This prompted Agnes to gasp and open her eyes. Doctor asks “What do you see?” and as Agnes responded we glimpsed the Virgin/Mother once again approaching the blood-filled bowl. Agnes – sitting alone in a small pool of light in the center of the foremost quadrant of the circle – describes in beautiful and disturbing detail what she perceives: “A flower. Waxy and white. A drop of blood, sinking into the petal, flowing through the veins. A tiny halo. Millions of halos, dividing and dividing, feathers are stars, falling, falling into the iris of God’s eye.”<sup>33</sup> By this point, the Virgin/Mother had arrived at Agnes’s side, only this time She had shepherded the entire bloody vessel to the playing space, placing it between Agnes’s legs before She returned to Her opening position perched upon the central cube. In the time before the bowl’s arrival, Agnes’s hands had been gently stroking her body; once the bowl was in place, they found their way *into* the bowl as if it were yet another member of her corporeal landscape. Agnes continues: “Oh my God, he sees me. Oh, it’s so lovely, so blue, yellow, green leaves brown blood, no, red, His Blood, my God, my God, I’m bleeding, I’M BLEEDING!”<sup>34</sup> At this point, Agnes was covered in blood, having suffered the full impact of the scourge of the stigmata.

In the closing moments of the play – after Agnes has admitted her filicide – she speaks one final time to the Lady and to her mother. Still on Her cubed pedestal behind Her bloody babe, the Virgin/Mother – whose back faced us during Agnes’s confession – turned forward once again, molding Her hands in manner similar to that of the popular image of Jesus in which He exposes His Sacred Heart. Her left hand pulled at Her robes across Her breastbone as if to reveal the compassion emanating from the core of Her humanity; Her right hand had its thumb, index and middle finger extended upward, and its ring and little

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

finger turned into the palm. Yet, the right-handed element of Her statue was not arranged – as Christ is usually shown to do – as an extension of Her arm held up and out at Her side at a right angle. Rather, in our conception, the Virgin/Mother laid Her right hand across Her left cheek, as if She were weeping. “Why are you crying?” Agnes asks, and after a momentary silence, responds: “But *I* believe. I *do*. (*silence*) Please, don’t you leave me too. Oh no. Oh my God, O sweet Lady, don’t leave me. Please, please don’t leave me. I’ll be good. I won’t be your bad baby anymore.”<sup>35</sup> Suddenly, Agnes “sees someone else,” and a red wash of light engulfed the space.<sup>36</sup> The Virgin/Mother arched Her back and extended Her right arm downward, directing it at poor, tormented Agnes, Her right hand hovering over Agnes like a claw and Her left hand gripping Her right forearm, driving and fortifying Her nefarious intentions. “No, Mommy,” Agnes pleads, “I don’t want to go with you. Stop pulling me. Your hands are hot. Don’t touch me like that! Oh my God, Mommy, don’t burn me! DON’T BURN ME!”<sup>37</sup> At that, the all-encompassing red light transitioned into nothing but a small spot of white that pooled in extreme downstage center, beckoning Agnes forward. After crawling into the bright light gladly as the Virgin/Mother returned to Her weeping pose, Agnes – her hands traveling the geography of her body as always – finally gave *her* account of her daughter’s conception:

I stood in the window of my room every night for a week. And one night I heard the most beautiful voice imaginable. It came from the middle of the wheat field beyond my room, and when I looked I saw the moon shining down on Him. For six nights He sang to me. Songs I’d never heard. And on the seventh night He came to my room and opened His wings and lay on top

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

of me. And all the while He sang.<sup>38</sup>

And Agnes sang:

Charlie's neat and Charlie's sweet,  
And Charlie he's a dandy.  
Every time he goes to town,  
He gets his girl some candy.  
Over the river and through the trees,  
Over the river to Charlie's,  
Over the river and through the trees,  
To bake a cake for Charlie.  
Charlie's neat and Charlie's sweet,  
And Charlie he's a dandy,  
Every time he goes to town,  
He get his girl some candy.  
Oh, he gets his girl some candy.<sup>39</sup>

Defying the script's instruction to have Mother begin to "take Agnes off" at the start of the third verse, as she sang Agnes gently stood, placed her palms out at her sides, and turned and approached the Virgin/Mother.<sup>40</sup> Sensing Agnes's return, the Virgin/Mother released from weeping into a heartbreakingly sorrowful yet graciously benevolent gesture, Her arms outstretched, welcoming Agnes back into the Sacred Heart. Agnes and the Virgin/Mother – their eyes locked, each with Her arms outstretched – were left to remain in that position while Doctor delivered the play's final speech. She wonders about, as we do, "the truth behind that song. Yes, perhaps it was a song of seduction, and the father was ... a field hand. Or perhaps the song was simply a remembered lullaby sung many years before. And the father was ... hope, and love, and desire, and a belief in miracles."<sup>41</sup> After a brief pause and with great sadness, Doctor informs us of Agnes's fate: "Agnes ... was sent to a

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 74-5.

hospital ... where she stopped singing ... and eating ... and where she died.”<sup>42</sup> During Doctor’s lament, the Virgin/Mother relinquished Her elevated position upon the cube, and She and Doctor and Mother all sunk to the floor as Agnes ascended her Throne, sculpting herself into the image of Christ on the Cross.

Orsi asserts that all “corporal realizations of the sacred are mimeses of the presence of the divine in the body of Christ and of Christ’s body present in the host during the sacrifice of the Mass.”<sup>43</sup> What Orsi is referring to is transubstantiation, the process in which the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine are transformed – or consecrated – into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the same body and blood offered up for the salvation of humanity by Christ at his crucifixion. It is important to recognize that the quarter-sized wafers and church wine blessed and consumed at Mass are not taken as *representations* of Christ but are rather conceived of as Christ incarnate. In much the same way, Agnes’s stigmata does not make her suffering *comparable* to Christ’s suffering; more precisely, her suffering *is* Christ’s suffering. This is no more evident than in the play’s clever title: *Agnes of God*, in Latin *Agnus Dei*, or “Lamb of God.” As the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* tells us, the “symbolism of the paschal lamb, the sacrifice of Christ, is not presented in the manner of substitution where the victim bears the sins of others and expiates them by undergoing their punishment ... it is not said the Lamb bears, but that He takes away sin” through the ultimate sacrifice of His crucifixion.<sup>44</sup> Taken as such, this is no great revelation: Virgin/Mother or no Virgin/Mother, the theological underpinning of the play is there, intricately woven into Pielmeier’s interrogation of faith. Yet, our corporealization of Her

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>43</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 76.

<sup>44</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Lamb of God.”

sacred presence called these thematic elements to the forefront, making them more functional and infinitely more profound, elevating Agnes's "human suffering into the visible suffering of Christ through the stigmata. Agnes is truly united with Christ, for she physically suffers his crucifixion. She transforms the senseless suffering of a battered and deserted child into the redemptive suffering of the Son of God."<sup>45</sup> And thus Agnes, as the "victim of a false society," becomes *our* Redemptrix – the Redemptrix of all those who bear witness – and engenders a direct experience with ordinarily intangible supernatural powers, a wakefulness that has the potential to lead us into new ways of being.<sup>46</sup>

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*On your overworked left leg you stand, your right hand flexed at the side of your head near the ear, your left arm extended forward in soft tension. The Teacher commands you to "WRAP!" once more, and as you do so your arms move outward and upward before descending sharply into their new position. Now, with your left leg wrapped around the imaginary vertical pole, you find your left hand hovering near the opposite side of your head and your right arm extended outward. Your messy execution of these additional machinations causes your torso to flail about and your foot to maintain an uneasy, insufficient connection to the floor, the rapid arm movement savagely challenging your sense of stillness and centeredness.*

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Of course, the sacred is a perilous, destabilizing eventing, and so Rosefeldt's summation that "reaching for the Divine ... in a world that no longer believes in miracles is a dangerous quest" seems a wholly accurate one.<sup>47</sup> In the prefatory pages of the script, Pielmeier labels *Agnes of God* "a play of ... miracles," and includes as an epigraph a lengthy dialogue from popular Canadian author Robertson Davies's 1970 novel entitled *Fifth Business*:

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<sup>45</sup> Rosefeldt, *Absent Father*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

“... why do you worry? What good would it do you if I told you she is indeed a saint? I cannot make saints, nor can the Pope. We can only recognize saints when the plainest evidence shows them to be saintly. If you think her a saint, she is a saint to you. What more do you ask? That is what we call the reality of the soul; you are foolish to demand the agreement of the world as well ...” ...

“But is the miracles that concern me. What you say takes no account of the miracles.”

“Oh, miracles! They happen everywhere. They are conditional ... Miracles are things that people cannot explain ... Miracles depend much on time, and place, and what we know and do not know ... Life is too great a miracle for us to make so much fuss about petty little reversals of what we pompously assume to be the natural order ... Who is she? That is what you must discover ... and you must find your answer in psychological truth, not in objective truth ... And while you are searching, get on with your life and accept the possibility that it may be purchased at the price of hers and that this may be God’s plan for you and her.”<sup>48</sup>

I found that this quotation described so thoroughly my own thoughts regarding Agnes’s remarkableness, the influence of extra-ordinary and mysterious forces on so-called ‘natural’ order, the sham of objectivity, and the core of faith that was to form the basis of our work that I made reading *The Fifth Business* the first order of business in my preliminary research process. The novel’s privileging of the spirit world over the mundane and its giving credence to divine agency via a fundamental belief in the miraculous settled profoundly into my already-receptive subconscious, inspiring my approach in largely imperceptible ways.

Religious studies scholar Robert Bruce Mullin asserts that miracles “must first be understood as an intervention by God into the world of humanity or nature.”<sup>49</sup> If a miracle is an interruption in the regular course of natural events through the revelation of supernatural forces, then it can be conceived of not as a thing but as a *happening*, and – through the very act of divine intervention – an *act of presence*: the transformation of the invisible into visible

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<sup>48</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 4; Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 199-203, quoted in Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Bruce Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 6.

terms, a defining characteristic of the theatreing of the sacred. In this way, the intrusion of the corporeal presence of the Virgin/Mother into our play world rendered the supernatural – that which is “outside the course of nature” – in terms “material and palpable.”<sup>50</sup> I am comfortable saying – as a scholar and a believer – that Agnes’s birth *and* her stigmata were miracles. I say this in full – and dauntless – recognition that “to allege that miracles are real is to assert that outside of the phenomenal world there is a personal reality that intervenes within the phenomenal world,” despite – or perhaps because of – the inability of the Catholic church – or anyone – to settle conclusively the tenability of either the Virgin Birth or the affliction of the stigmata as miraculous events or, in fact, whether miracles exist at all.<sup>51</sup> After all, the etymology of ‘miracle’ is *to wonder*, and “the evidence for the miraculous [will be] forever inadequate to compel belief ... No amount of empirical evidence,” says Mullin in his assessment of nineteenth-century Catholic writer John Henry Newman, “[will] ever produce faith. Faith [is] not built upon evidence.”<sup>52</sup> Why fight to make logical sense of something that in its very nature defies analysis? Hasn’t it been for centuries the work of religion and of the theatre to make sense of life in full recognition that we never *will* completely collate the chaos? Why must everything have a label, fall into a neat category? Why theorize ourselves into a wholly known and drab reality in which we are left with nothing to theorize about? What will there be left for us to *do*?

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“WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP!,” *the Teacher bellows at varying intervals. Frustrated beyond comprehension, you breath deeply to halt a potential flood of excess energy.*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 42, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 7. For issues regarding the Virgin Birth, see Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination*, 151-65. For issues regarding the stigmata, see *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Stigmatization.”

<sup>52</sup> Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination*, 127.

*Suddenly, you realize you have not been breathing deeply, and you think that might account for your increased unsteadiness. After a successive sequence of wraps, the Teacher has left you perched on your right leg for an extended moment, perhaps sensing your need to reconnect with your innermost self. Taking advantage of this moment, you imagine a great well forming deep in your core. You take a long, revitalizing breath and attempt to fill this well, only to push the air back out once again in a cleansing act of renewal. You enjoy this rare moment of meditation, of tapping into the most fundamental parts of yourself called forth via the rigors of the exercises.*

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It is important for you to know, dear reader, that the casting and staging of the Virgin/Mother was a largely intuitive process. I can still picture vividly the shower during which I was stricken with the revelation of Her birthing Agnes: lest I lose it, I thrashed through the curtain and careened out across the slick bathroom floor and back into my bedroom where pen and paper awaited me, leaving puddles of soap and water in my wake as I dashed to my desk to sketch out my thoughts. Indeed, most of the scholarship I have cited above – including Orsi – was not known to me until *after* She was cast and Her function had been mostly solidified. Of course, the supernatural sensibility of *Fifth Business* was at the forefront of my mind; I also read Paul Rosefeldt’s essay during the project’s infancy, and no doubt his focus on the themes of maternity that run rampant in the play weighed heavily on my thinking. I struggled with my sense of this character-to-be in the months preceding the rehearsal process, often fighting against the irrepressible instinct that seemed quite literally to pop into my head one crisp fall day while walking to class. Experience had taught me to trust my intuition, but I am also a neurotic New Yorker and thus kept taunting myself with reservations: “Okay. Say I cast this character. What ever will She *do*? We’ll have to invent everything ourselves!” Yet, the charge of devising such an original and imaginative creation was less frightening than it was exhilarating. Even so, at the outset of casting I was still

wavering: “There exists the potential for the casting of a fourth actress to play an integral, yet probably non-speaking role,” the wimpy audition form read, “Please indicate on the line below whether or not you are interested in being considered.” Something Anne Bogart once wrote is called to mind now, as sure as it was then. In this writing, outside of – and, of course, within – my discussion of the Viewpoints, I have intentionally quoted Bogart frequently and sometimes at length because she has influenced my aesthetic so deeply. I can repeat many of these quotations nearly verbatim and on a moment’s notice, and this, compiled from her essay on “Violence,” is one of them:

[There is a] necessity for violence in the creative act. ... Art is violent. To be decisive is violent ... To place a chair at a particular angle on the stage destroys every other possible choice, every other option. ... Risk is a key ingredient in the act of violence and articulation. ... When in doubt, I look for the courage, in that moment, to take a leap: articulate a thing, even if I’m not sure it is right or even appropriate. ... I make decisions before I’m ready. ... To achieve the violence of decisiveness, one has to ... [act] fully and intuitively without pausing for reflection about whether it is the right decision ... Violence begins with decision, with commitment to something. ... Decisions give birth to limitations which in turn ask for a creative use of the imagination. ... Ideas come and go but what is important is the commitment to a choice and to its clarity and communicativeness.<sup>53</sup>

It was not until I was in the heat of the casting process and working with bodies in space – those moments when I am at my best – that I was finally able to summon the courage to risk the unknown, to take the plunge and give body to the Lady, *my* Lady who had worked so mightily – and so successfully – at busting out of the deep recesses of my subconscious. In a way, I had birthed *Her*. Yet, as Bogart cautions, to tempt the “necessary cruelty of decision ... is ultimately an act of generosity in the collaborative process.”<sup>54</sup> And this is why no discussion of our Virgin/Mother is complete without a significant consideration of the

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<sup>53</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 43-60.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 60.

contributions of the wonderful woman who brought Her to life: Grammy-nominated spoken-word recording artist and storyteller Milbre Burch, our Virgin *slash* Mother *slash* Assistant Director.

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*You are rocked out of your breathy ruminations by another command to “WRAP!” You realize that you were focusing so thoroughly on breathing that you were beginning to relax and so were negating the work of the exercises. Breath is as much an activation of energy as the wrap of your leg or the Stomp of your foot, you think, and so must occur simultaneously and inherently in your execution of the various forms. More impossibilities, always more impossibilities ...*

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In the months preceding auditions, I heard through the proverbial grapevine that Milbre was interested in becoming a part of the *Agnes* process, a prospect which excited me. At the time, I only knew Milbre casually. We were colleagues, but by her own admission her status as a “nontraditional” graduate student with a family – including two active teenage daughters – a production company and a thriving professional career as a solo performer kept her life within the academy “pretty contained.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, I did know via our various informal conversations and my attendance at several of her storytelling performances that she had at one time trained as a mime and had more years of experience than I in training in and performing physical theatre – although she had no specific experience with Suzuki/Viewpoints or Composition.

Milbre came to storytelling through various movement traditions and actually considers herself a movement-based storyteller; that is, a storyteller who *intentionally* crafts a

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<sup>55</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, September 13, 2008. Milbre’s production company is called Kind Crone Productions, an apt title, perhaps, in respect to her participation in this process. Visit <http://www.kindcrone.com> for more information.

gestural life to accompany her telling of a particular story.<sup>56</sup> Milbre is indeed an accomplished performer, and the physical life she brings to her storytelling has always, to me, seemed precise, economical, specific and viscerally communicative. As I would eventually learn, her movement training began in childhood ballet classes and continued with her study of modern dance in college. But it is her background in mime that has most thoroughly influenced her approach to performance; indeed, catch her in a particularly jovial mood and she will refer to herself as a *recovering mime*. “I have always felt that gesture is a second language for me,” she says, “the way that another spoken language is for many other people.”<sup>57</sup> Watching world-renowned French mime Marcel Marceau perform in a particularly large space via her television set was a thrilling experience for a young Milbre, but it wasn’t until she encountered mime in the intimacy of a coffeehouse that she was inspired to begin study. Her first mime teacher was the “very gestural” Meli Davis Kaye, who was a protégé of dancer and choreographer Doris Humphrey; Humphrey herself studied with Ruth St. Denis, a pioneer – along with Isadora Duncan and Ted Shawn – of the modern dance movement in America.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Milbre practices Storytelling in its revival form, which “is widely celebrated as having been initiated in October, 1973, with the first National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee.” Storytelling, as “a medium of connectivity and of community,” incorporates a multitude of modes of performance – including mime, oral interpretation, chamber theatre, stand-up comedy, confessional monologue, etc. – and “evokes historic lineages, from bardic courts and griot assemblies, to the front porches of rural Americana, to the Chautauqua tents of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century elocutionists.” Yet, “as a popular performing art,” Storytelling “is widely consigned to [the] nostalgia-padded margins of the dominant culture” and has only recently been recognized in the academy. Joseph Sobol, John Gentile, and Sunwolf, “An Introduction to the Inaugural Issue,” *Storytelling, Self, Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Storytelling Studies* 1 (2004): 1-7.

<sup>57</sup> Milbre Burch, interview with author, June 10, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Milbre's second – and greatest – mime teacher was Tony Montanaro, who came to mime by way of the legitimate theatre and, more specifically, the study of acting. Montanaro was highly influenced by the work of French elocutionist François Delsarte, who developed, according to Montanaro in his classic *Mime Spoken Here*, “a science of gesture” called Applied Aesthetics (*Cours d'Esthétique*).<sup>59</sup> Delsarte was “fascinated with the process of *doing*,” reports Montanaro, and “discovered that what a person *does* is a direct manifestation of who that person *is*; ‘doing’ is a function of ‘being’.”<sup>60</sup> In Delsarte's attempt to systematize and thus understand the vast range of physical expression by way of an implied symbiosis in the *cause* and *effect* of any particular action, Montanaro discovered “the *origin* of everything I had learned about mime.”<sup>61</sup> Milbre experienced Delsarte's system of expression filtered through Montanaro's teaching, which involved “specifically looking at the movement characterizations [Delsarte] gave – the housing of emotion of physicality and mentality in the body,” that promoted, she says, “a connection between the body and the mental, between the emotional and physical aspects of the personality.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Milbre's years of experience with the – I daresay – *psychophysical* discipline of mime – “the eloquent and efficient delivery of a mood or a message in which the body is the primary instrument” – primed her to be immediately receptive to Suzuki/Viewpoints and Composition.<sup>63</sup> Having Milbre's emotional and physical sagacity present to the process could yield monumental results, I thought, and, selfishly, I coveted her.

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<sup>59</sup> Tony Montanaro with Karen Hull Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here: The Performer's Portable Workshop* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 1995), 125.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>62</sup> Milbre Burch, interview with author, June 10, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here*, 14.

But *Milbre* came to *me*. “After thirty years as a solo performer,” she told me, “when I saw the e-mail notice about auditions something stirred in me: the long-buried urge to audition ... I like the play and being in [it] could give me another layer of experience in being part of the culture of the Theatre Department.”<sup>64</sup> Yet, the thought of adding yet another responsibility to her already-full schedule caused Milbre to feel ambivalent about taking on this new challenge. She vacillated over the several weeks of the semester leading up to auditions in early October, querying her academic advisor, office manager, husband, and children about what she should do. She engaged me in an extended e-mail exchange regarding scheduling, expectations, etc. in which my responses were blatantly beguiling. I saw Milbre at a Department function and all but cornered her in an effort to ‘sell’ to her this very different – and hopefully extremely valuable – process. It was her then-twelve-year-old daughter Elizabeth, who, says Milbre, “was the most eloquent respondent on the topic, saying: ‘Mom, it sounds like you really want to do this, and you aren’t getting any younger, so I say go for it. There may not be many parts for women your age in the future.’”<sup>65</sup> Young Elizabeth’s frank apprehension of the issue worked and, in the last available audition slot – at nearly ten o’clock in the evening – in walked Milbre.

As I’ve mentioned, I went into auditions uncertain about whether or not I’d be coming *out* of auditions with a *Virgin/Mother* on my cast list. At the time, I was actually considering Milbre for the role of *Mother*; as written, *Mother* is at least thirty years older than any of the undergraduates that would have been available to me, and part of the reason

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<sup>64</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, September 13, 2008. Milbre actually began her undergraduate studies in Theatre at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, but then moved on to a year contemplating a Journalism major at Georgia State University before eventually graduating from Duke with a degree in Political Science. The last play she performed in was a children’s production with in the Circus Wagon Theatre that toured Rhode Island in the mid-1980s.

<sup>65</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with the author, Columbia, MO, October 13, 2008.

Milbre was interested in auditioning in the first place was because “the small cast included two parts that could be played by a woman my age.”<sup>66</sup> After initial auditions, I had whittled down the callback list to Katie, Mallory, Ashley, Milbre, and one or two other actresses who were then quickly dismissed. I spent some time trying to force Milbre into the role of Mother, with Katie and Ashley reading alternately for Agnes and Katie and Mallory reading alternately for Doctor. For whatever reason, Milbre’s reading was not strong and the character was obviously an ill fit for her particular sensibilities. Regardless, I contrived the actresses into several casting scenarios, always leaving Milbre in the role of Mother, a rare instance when I allowed forethought to obstruct my intuitive sense of a combination of players whose look and energy was craved by my vision of the piece. Of course, in my revisioning Mother’s age was a non-issue. As I have discussed elsewhere, the characters were conceived of as allegorical figures and not psychological beings governed by such mundane details as age. Why was I so concerned with casting Mother with an ‘age-appropriate’ actress? Mea culpa. Even I am not immune from clinging to – however involuntarily – the familiarity and comfortability of logic and tradition.

It was only after I asked Katie and Ashley to sing – and realized that Katie’s singing voice was too weak to adequately capture Agnes “at her most glorious” – did the air in the room begin to shift.<sup>67</sup> Encouraged by her arresting vocals and her sensitive and intensely focused rendering of the play’s emotionally and physically damaged title character, I quickly became resolved in my decision to cast Ashley as Agnes. I also realized that Katie’s more coarse physicality and caustic delivery worked well for Doctor’s logic-driven aggressiveness, as much as Mallory’s regal, refined appearance as a woman well beyond her then-nineteen

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<sup>66</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, September 13, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 4.

years was well matched to the formality masking Mother's moral distress. Finally, I moved Milbre out of the scene and allowed Katie, Mallory, and Ashley to read together for quite sometime, and, dear reader, sparks did fly. Yet, Milbre was still, literally, in the picture: when I handed her role over to Mallory, she did not leave the stage but rather stood a few feet off to the left. She remained the periphery, haunting the scene with her benevolent spirit, giving her full attention to her fellow artists as if she were a life force, fortifying and inspiring the work of her compatriots. Moving from impulse, I asked Milbre to stand on a chair that happened to be sitting closely behind the other players. After staring at their image for what probably felt like forever, I said: "Okay. That's it. Ashley, I'd like to cast you as Agnes, Mallory as the Mother Superior, Katie as Doctor Livingstone." After sharing in a brief moment of relief and exaltation with the young actresses, I turned to Milbre: "I'd like to cast you as the Virgin/Mother, and also have you serve as Assistant Director." "I'd be thrilled," she responded as she dismounted the chair.<sup>68</sup> I can say with a good degree of certainty that had Milbre *not* auditioned, there would not have been a Virgin/Mother – an absence I can't even begin to fathom. Yet, I don't think it's appropriate to say that our mutual commitment to the unknown – made in the heat of the moment – *transformed* the process because to say that something has been transformed implies that that something already exists. The performance-making experience is at its most fundamental a collective task, and thus the machinations unraveling within my own self – however inspiring they may have been – do not ultimately define the *Agnes of God* process as such. Rather, Milbre's assimilation into the work through our joint resolution of faith – in her unique position as both witness and participant – *delivered* the process to us, in a way, by filling it and rendering it complete with her enlightened physical and emotional perceptiveness.

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<sup>68</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with the author, Columbia, MO, October 13, 2008.

I give Milbre an enormous amount of credit: her commitment to such a difficult process, one that was outside of what had become her usual mode of performance and with fellow players who were a generation younger than her, and, on top of that, to agree to be cast as an unscripted character that, at the time, existed only as a figment of the director's imagination and had no definitive function displays, in my estimation, a fearlessness to be admired. "I had to laugh," she would later recount, "I'd never been cast as an hallucination before."<sup>69</sup> She said she was "relieved at this turn of events ... It's the best of all possible solutions – I have no lines to learn but a group process to be part of, and a chance to be trained in a movement-based system of acting preparation."<sup>70</sup> Yet, she couldn't help but wonder: "I get to waft about in a sheet when needed. But when I will I be needed? And will I have the sense to know when my expertise (such as it is) would be welcome? I'm not sure what my role or duties will entail. Am I an assistant director or a resource teacher?"<sup>71</sup> The next day, Milbre left in my department mailbox one of her many audio recordings accompanied by a coy little note: "Thank you for the opportunity to work with you on *Agnes of God*. I look forward to being your assistant director as well as playing the Virgin Mary. It's not the first time I've 'played' her, as you will see by [this] CD ... Please enjoy it with my compliments."<sup>72</sup> It was a copy of *The Mary Stories*, four original narratives based on the life of Mary, using the Gospels and the Apocrypha as source material. I immediately played the CD on my drive home that evening, and was struck by the ending moments of the first story – entitled "Waiting for the Wonder" – during which Milbre/Mary recounts Her initial

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<sup>69</sup> Milbre Burch, interview with author, Columbia, MO, June 10, 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, October 13, 2008.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Milbre Burch, personal communication with author, Columbia, MO, October 14, 2008.

acceptance of Her role as the virginal mother of the Messiah. “‘Every choice has its consequences’,” the Holy Spirit says to Her, and to which she responds: “‘Something in His look made me feel a great urgency. Without beginning to know all that was encompassed in my ‘Yes,’ I whispered: ‘May it be to me as you have said.’ I felt a breath against my ear and a sweet burning sensation . . . The waiting is over. The wonder has just begun.’”<sup>73</sup> I thought about this as a metaphor for our collaboration: uncertain about the road ahead but compelled by the intensity and faith of my convictions, Milbre ultimately gave herself over to the work, placing in me a tremendous amount of trust. Both of us alive with the “sweet burning sensation” of creativity, it was time to *act*; the waiting was over and, indeed, the wonder was just beginning.

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*“WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP! – WRAP!” the Teacher thunders at a velocity so savage that it threatens to break you completely. Sweat stings your eyes and you can barely see. Positioned precariously on your right foot, your arm and leg muscles burn fiercely and you struggle mightily to maintain composure. You bit the inside of your lower lip to ease the tension, and, having broken the skin, the metallic taste of blood begins to flood your mouth. You want to stop, you want to give in and give out, but owing to fear and determination, you hold the form with your heretofore untapped stores of courage and tenacity.*

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It was always central to my vision of the Virgin/Mother that She would somehow appear in relation to the central window. Yet, my initial conception of the character also had Her moving with some frequency amongst the three speaking actresses, alternating between the playing space proper and the niche behind the central stained glass window. I thought She might even speak, and instructed Milbre to think of movement founded on Agnes’s dialogue. Might they speak in league with one another, or might Agnes mouth her text and

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<sup>73</sup> Milbre Burch, “Waiting for the Wonder,” performed by the author, in Milbre Burch, *The Mary Stories*, Kind Crone Productions, CD, 2005.

the Virgin/Mother actually speak it? Or might the Virgin/Mother underscore Agnes's English dialogue with Her own words spoken in Latin? I even went so far as to supply Milbre with some additional Latin texts to consider, such as the *Magnificat*, or the "Song of Mary," a canticle frequently sung by Catholics during Vespers with a text taken directly from Mary's own testament of faith in the Gospel of Luke. Yet, from the outset Milbre was unconvinced that the Virgin/Mother should speak or, indeed, even appear in the playing space at all. She felt the Virgin – and even Agnes's mother – was "pretty laconic and quiet. Whispy, the way the wind is in a grove of statues: 'What was that I heard?'"<sup>74</sup> Much of the process was spent with my own doubtfulness raging, all the while reminding myself of the unpredictable precision of my intuition and feigning absolute certainty to assuage Milbre's skepticism. I was afraid of people asking, "Why did Matt paint Milbre Burch white and put her behind *Agnes of God*?" as much as Milbre was afraid that she was "going to be in the way," that she was "going to ruin this beautiful work [and be] this redundant, whispering, flapping, ghost-y thing."<sup>75</sup> Milbre's instinctual disinclination to embody a speaking, frolicking Virgin/Mother was, of course, completely on target, yet we made this discovery rather organically. Milbre was absent from our early staging rehearsals, out-of-town at a previously scheduled storytelling performance. When she returned to us, we had already developed the first several scenes, and she felt her presence would be intrusive to this work and to the ensemble in general. The trappings of scheduling proved advantageous in this instance, for what emerged from Milbre's absence was yet another happy accident. If Milbre had been in attendance at our very first working sessions, it is likely that we *would* have forced her into speaking and/or playing in the space with the other actresses, and a completely different

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<sup>74</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, October 28, 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

production of *Agnes of God* would have emerged; what did develop, in our estimation, was a much stronger and, in Milbre's words, a less cluttered piece.

However, the decision to keep the Virgin/Mother behind the window after Agnes's birth – lest her bloody deliveries – was a gradual and unspoken one. At one point, still somewhat wedded to my original ideas, I remarked that the Virgin/Mother wasn't developing like I thought it would, and Milbre wondered if it was her "fault" because "I have been so loathe to mess up the beautiful stark work the others are doing."<sup>76</sup> Of course, I would quickly come to champion Milbre's loathsomeness: her presence *in the playing space* was simply not what the piece wanted; it was much more powerful to allow Her specter to haunt the space from afar than to muddle the relational dynamic of the speaking characters and unnecessarily confound the physical score of the piece. It was my imposition that the Virgin/Mother would form silhouetted statues, but it was Milbre herself who designed them and developed them into profoundly evocative elements within our visual landscape. Indeed, Milbre found on her own a tenderness in the Virgin's statues to juxtapose against the haggard angularity of Agnes's mother, as well as determining when and where to transition between the two. Regardless, even three weeks into rehearsals, she said: "I'm still not sold on the usefulness of my part – pulling faces and waving arms in statues behind three talented actresses who would have every right to be annoyed by my presence."<sup>77</sup>

It wasn't until a few days before technical rehearsals were scheduled to begin that we were actually able to rehearse Milbre behind the window and with her lighting effects. I remember stopping rehearsal in the middle of a scene, shouting from the rooftops: "It works, Milbre! It works!" Until this point, I had only the lighting designer's assurance that

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<sup>76</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, November 10, 2008.

<sup>77</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, November 16, 2008.

Her silhouette would read large enough and clear enough to be effective. I am too neurotic to have bought into the designer's assurances completely, but I wanted to *believe* it would work, spent weeks convincing Milbre that it would work, and – low and behold – *it worked!* “My role depended entirely on my dance with the lights,” Milbre would later say, and she couldn't have been more correct.<sup>78</sup> One night, she and I worked together at shaping her statues until nearly midnight, she behind the window contorting herself into each successive pose and I in front assuring her each statue looked as she imagined it did and that it would work for its designated Movement. I photographed each silhouetted image so that she could practice them and commit them to muscle memory. “Having [those] pose pictures makes all the difference,” she said, “I feel like I finally have a script for my character in the play. It's gone through a lot of changes: from sketches in my composition notebook to hand-drawn storyboards of ‘positive image’ poses to photographs of the ‘negative image’ shadow silhouettes.”<sup>79</sup> This was a challenging process indeed, in which her scripted lines were not written out in alphanumeric type but were literally drawn across the terrain of her own body: “What a journey through a changing visual landscape, and a visual, expressive gesture body language!”<sup>80</sup>

Milbre developed her poses based on her observations of the work of the other three actresses, an activity that necessitated her spending much of her time standing outside the process and watching their work from the front. This was a fortuitous occurrence, as her expertise on the other side of the footlights was absolutely invaluable. Indeed, when I came to rehearsal with an idea for the statue of the Virgin/Mother to birth Agnes – but *without* an

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<sup>78</sup> Milbre Burch, interview with author, Columbia, MO, June 10, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with author, Columbia, MO, November 30, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

idea of how to actually do it – it was Milbre who inspired the eventual staging of what was perhaps the production’s most significant single moment. When I queried the ensemble about their thoughts on the matter, Milbre explained the *kabuki* tradition of what she called “the tearing of the threads,” something she learned some thirty years ago during a series of *kabuki* workshops with American teacher David Reinke. “I never forgot the tale he told of the origins of *kabuki*,” she said, “His workshops made a lasting impression on me.”<sup>81</sup> Now those long-ago lessons would make an impression on us and our audiences, as Milbre called to the forefront aspects of her prior training in a tradition so integral to the heritage of our own practice. *Kabuki*, as an overtly theatrical mode of performance, features two types of onstage costume changes, dramatic techniques that attempt to stun the audience with their suddenness. *Hikinuki*, or “pulling out,” involves the *koken* removing all the basting threads holding a performer’s kimono together and, in one final swift pull, whisks away the entire garment to reveal, in the blink of an eye, a completely different kimono underneath. In *bukkaeri*, or “sudden change,” the *koken* peels back the top half of the kimono at the shoulders allowing the torso section of the garment to fall down over the actor’s lower body and to reveal a new design, giving the appearance of a completely different costume. Our appropriation of the *kabuki* costume change in the great reveal of Agnes involved conflating the function of the two: while *bukkaeri* symbolizes *henge*, or a “transformation” whereby a character reveals his true identity and/or indicates that his fundamental characteristics have changed, *hikinuki* “is purely a theatrical technique designed for visual effect.”<sup>82</sup> In our conception, the tearing of the threads became a cutting of the umbilical cord, as the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Brandon, Malm, and Shively, *Studies in Kabuki*, 109-110. See also Ronald Cavaye, Paul Griffith, and Akihiko Senda, *A Guide to the Japanese Stage: From Tradition to Cutting Edge* (New York: Kodansha International, 2004), 81.

Virgin/Mother pulled open and eventually doffed her swelling skirt to reveal the corporeal image of Her divine child.

Milbre also spent a significant amount of time coaching Ashley through the birthing contractions Agnes re-experiences during her initial hypnotism. Milbre was steadfast in her commitment to ensure that each of us – especially Ashley and Mallory – understood exactly what would have happened in Agnes’s room on that fateful night. “I am moved by what Agnes has to go through, and deeply disturbed that Agnes was left alone by Mother – who was her blood relative and who had children and who knew that Agnes’s mother was crazy on some level!”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Milbre was all-but-furious with the recognition of her “growing sense of Mother’s villainy in leaving a girl who was completely unschooled in the ways of nature to labor on her own when she most needed others with her,” a galvanizing thought that was particularly intense for Mallory to hear.<sup>84</sup> What’s more, Milbre was vocal in her displeasure over the fact that “America considers natural childbirth to be an *alternative* form of delivery” and that young women from all walks of life are not properly educated regarding the actual birthing process.<sup>85</sup> “Birth education and sex education are very dear to my heart,” she said, and as the only member of the ensemble who had actually given birth and as someone thoroughly educated in the physiology of natural childbirth, I allowed Milbre to take over completely the direction of these moments.<sup>86</sup>

Before Milbre worked with Ashley physically, we all gathered around a television set to view two documentary films she wished us all to see “in the name of establishing,” she

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<sup>83</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with the author, Columbia, MO, November 14, 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

said, “a wider physical/psychic vocabulary as source material for Composition in the scene” at hand.<sup>87</sup> The first was *Birth Day*, in which a Mexican midwife is shown laboring with her husband’s help in and out of her bathtub with her family gathered around her.<sup>88</sup> “It is the best positive image of the birth experience that I have seen so far,” Milbre said, “She has no fear at all because she knows birth inside and out.”<sup>89</sup> Milbre also took this opportunity to speak about the vulnerability and interiority of the birthing experience, informing us that “a laboring woman is in an altered state of consciousness, an elemental state of consciousness that is very interior: your body is focused on what it’s doing and your mind has no choice but to go along for the ride,” and that “contractions aren’t always notable to someone who hasn’t seen one. It happens inside, not outside.”<sup>90</sup> The second film, *Orgasmic Birth*, is founded on the premise that if women were taught to anticipate natural birth as the sensual experience it is – instead of being taught to fear birth – they’d come to it primed for a very different physical experience taught to them today.<sup>91</sup> This film was especially reverberant because it featured the story of a sexual abuse survivor who stated that she experienced her history of abuse in flashbacks during the birthing process, once again suffering the pain of surrendering her body to forces beyond her control but ultimately feeling liberated from such pain once her child was born. Of course, Agnes’s experience with childbirth was the absolute negative of what saw in these scenes: she was certainly in an altered state, yes, but

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> *Birth Day: A Short Video Documentary Celebrating Life and Family*, DVD, directed by Georges Vinaver (Veracruz, Mexico: Sage Femme, Inc., 2003).

<sup>89</sup> Milbre Burch, personal conversation with author, November 14, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> *Orgasmic Birth: The Best-Kept Secret*, DVD, directed by Debra Pascali-Bonaro (Sunken Treasure, LLC, 2008).

watching the physical and emotional extremity of what these *informed* – and contented – women are going through, it is heartbreaking to imagine poor, *uninformed* Agnes – covered in blood and weak from laboring and fighting with the evil specter of her mother – all by her lonesome.

In the play, Pielmeier uses a water metaphor in the first hypnotism scene –“like a water birth,” Milbre said.<sup>92</sup> “Now imagine that you are listening to a chorus of angels,” coaches Doctor,

Their music is so beautiful and so real that you can touch it. It surrounds you like a very warm and comfortable pool of water. The water is so warm you hardly know that it’s there. All of the muscles in your body are melting into the pool. The water is just under your chin. But you must remember that this water is music, and if you are submersed in it you can still breathe freely and deeply. Now the water covers your chin. Your mouth, your nose, and your eyes.<sup>93</sup>

Ashley began her Composition next to the cube at center stage. Milbre’s suggestion that she cuddle the cube for comfort as she goes into her hypnotic trance and then stroke it as if it were her belly once she begins to relive the birth was a note well-taken. This was yet another unanticipated-yet-providential discovery made in the heat of the moment: the cube was not originally intended to function as an extension of Agnes’s pregnant body and, actually, if it had not caused an awkwardness in Her movement, the Virgin/Mother would have carried it off during her initial retreat behind the stained glass window. Ashley gripped the cube tightly each time Agnes felt a contraction, observing Pielmeier’s notations in the script as to the exact placement of each of Agnes’s labor pains. When I remarked that the contractions weren’t sufficiently expansive, it was the birth educator in Milbre who responded: “Birth contractions aren’t Martha Graham style big dramatic contractions but something that

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<sup>92</sup> Milbre Burch, personal conversation with author, November 14, 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 52-3.

happens deep inside.”<sup>94</sup> I reminded her that while that was no doubt true, we weren’t after such realism here and, indeed, the entire process was about – dare I say – *dilating* such internal activities, and so the contractions needed to materialize with much greater magnitude. Working from impulse, Ashley made her movements bigger not by relinquishing her commanding sense of restraint but by adding sound, slapping the cube each time a contraction gripped her. Once set, Ashley’s diligence and unguarded commitment worked the scene into something extra-ordinary to behold. Such intense, focused work from the team of Milbre and Ashley transformed what could have been a melodramatic rendering of a tired dramatic cliché – hypnotism – into a rather beautiful, violent, and riveting experience. Indeed, Ashley’s work was so electric that it appeared as if Agnes was not merely *reliving* her child’s birth, but that we had actually been *transported* to the evening in question. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that it was not we who were transported but rather that the birth was *made present* to us.

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*You are on the brink of utter collapse when the Teacher once again commands you to recite “TEXT!” Once more you intone Menelaus’s speech from The Trojan Women, but this time you and your fellow neophytes exhibit a profoundly intricate sensitivity to one another, and your communal and commanding delivery of text astounds you. You finish the phrase triumphant, almost begging the Teacher to escalate the challenge. Yet, He seems, for the moment, pleased with His young pupils, allowing you to release the form with an uncharacteristically tepid bit of His stick. Is it satisfaction you sense in the Teacher, or disappointment? Is He giving up, or is this merely the calm before the storm?*

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I was incredibly grateful to have Milbre’s input in the development of the work: her sharp eye for precise and honest physicality crucially shaped the gestural life of the actresses

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<sup>94</sup> Milbre Burch, personal conversation with author, November 14, 2008.

portraying the scripted characters. “Body language speaks to me very deeply,” she later told me, “and being involved in body language speaks to me very deeply, so whether I’m moving myself or I’m watching the visual literacy of the physical text, I am sensitive to that.”<sup>95</sup> Out of respect for the value of everyone’s time, I would often dismiss the ensemble early – including Milbre and our stage manager – to give Katie and myself some time to flesh out Doctor’s monologues. On one such occasion, Katie, of her own accord, asked Milbre to stay and give feedback. Milbre reported being “really touched” by Katie’s desire for her presence.<sup>96</sup> Of course, that was exactly the sentiment felt by all of us regarding *Milbre*: that our work in this process and our overall development as artists was profoundly *touched* by her warmth and generosity, and that the lessons she taught us about the power of bodily expression had left a permanent imprint on our individual and collective artistries. At some point during the process, her husband told their daughters she played a nun in the show. When Milbre corrected him, he said: “No, I mean you play *the none*,” making a clever play on words.<sup>97</sup> Silent character or not, she was truly anything but a *none*.

What I most remember, though, is a wonderful little turn of phrase she taught us, something she had ‘stolen’ from Tony Montanaro and transformed into her own thing: whenever Katie, Mallory or Ashley executed a gesture that was too behavioral or descriptive, or that appeared preconceived and/or uncommitted, Milbre would call that an *unearned gesture*. In *Mime Spoken Here*, Montanaro explains what an *earned* gesture is:

the difference between an imitation and the real thing ... The real thing is earned – you’ve made it your own ... You must motivate [your gestures] – find the feelings that *produce* those effects, naturally. You develop a personal *relationship* with your gestures until they feel natural and instinctive ... They

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<sup>95</sup> Milbre Burch, interview with author, June 10, 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

accommodate your body type and reflect your temperament, your personality, and disposition. These gestures appear to come *from* you instead of *at* you.<sup>98</sup>

I have always believed that performance-making is a privilege, and not one to be taken lightly. It is an act of hubris that we dare ask people to watch us for two or three some-odd hours – and require them to pay for it no less! Suzuki once said “acting should be judged by the degree of how profound a reason the [actress] has to stand of the stage”; Anne Bogart asserts that “the stage is a place where stakes are raised intentionally. A body is put in crisis. For an [actress], it should cost something to walk across the stage.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, we are not entitled to a place in the sun, we must *earn* the honor of attention. We can do this through a deep introspection that leads to the sacrifice of the self for the betterment of the community. In its nobility, this can become an overblown and self-aggrandizing act. But by constantly reminding us that we must *earn* our way through the arduous terrain of conjuring sacred experience, Milbre kept our feet to the floor, as it were, and never allowed the benevolence of our convictions to devolve into arrogance or elitism or exclusiveness. This is a wonderful metaphor for life: shunning a sense of entitlement opens us up to becoming more compassionate, humble beings operating with a sense of the brighter future just beyond our grasp.

All that, and it wasn’t until Milbre viewed the production photographs several days after the production closed – and could see the performance in full effect for the first time –

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<sup>98</sup> Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here*, 119-21.

<sup>99</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, quoted in Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theater Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 123; Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 35.

that she could finally say: “A few weeks ago, I said ‘You see your vision for this play and this use of the Virgin/Mother, but I don’t.’ Now, at last, I do.”<sup>100</sup>

Hail Milbre, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Hail Virgin/Mother, blessed art Thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb, Agnes. Hail Mary, grandmother of mine, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

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<sup>100</sup> Milbre Burch, conversation with the author, December 15, 2008.

“But there was so much blood ...”



Figure 7. *From left to right:* Katherine Hamlett as Doctor, Ashley J. Hicks as Agnes, Milbre Burch as the Virgin/Mother, and Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom as Mother. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

Interlude  
*repetition:*  
*coaxing transformation*



What are we doing in rehearsal? What are we striving for? What is the point of all the discipline, hard work and training? The preparation and sweating and memorizing and studying is not the point, rather it is the indispensable discipline and sweat that endows upon us the permission to take up space and make wild, surprising and untamed choices.

- Anne Bogart, "Fuck You Anne," Anne's Blog, October 4, 2009

The 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 odour 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 work to move from conception to production. Our bodies are both art elements and tools that communicate intuitively.

- Goat Island Performance Group, "Letter to a Young Practitioner"

[Actresses] are required to be incredibly alive and sensitive to the slight variations in the environment and to the vicissitudes, moods, signals and minute alterations of those around them. To be in the room with humans functioning at this highest level of wakefulness, awareness and courageousness is both sexy and thrilling. I experience a contact high from these extraordinary beings. To be in the presence of someone who is actually noticing, not faking or feigning, but truly noticing, is a remarkable occasion.

- Anne Bogart, "Nude with Skeleton," Anne's Blog, April 2, 2010

Collaborators aren't born, they're made. Or, to be more precise, built, a day at a time, through practice, through attention, through discipline, through passion and commitment – and, most of all, through habit.

- Twyla Tharp, *The Collaborative Habit*

All great art is created from a state of imbalance ... Rehearsals need to be a place where imbalance is encouraged, and the striving for harmony from a state of imbalance is what makes the heroic act of creation.

- Anne Bogart, *Voices of the American Theatre*

As an artist you have to face the impossible and try to accomplish it every day, otherwise you don't call yourself an artist.

- Kameron Steel, quoted in Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness*

There is a mind in the flesh, a mind as quick as lightning,

- Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*

The director only punctuates, the [actress] writes in blood.

- Vsevolod Meyerhold, quoted in Robert Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*

Movement 6:  
This Is What We're Doing?

*walks:*  
*practicing endurance*

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*You and your fellow neophytes stand in several lines three and four deep length-wise across the far left wall of the space. Still reeling from the previous exercise, you sigh heavily as you take your place reluctantly at the front of your lane. Sensing your irresolution, the Teacher whacks His staff violently across the floor, sending a chill up your spine, calling you to attention. He fixes His gaze on you for a long, uncomfortable moment. His penetrating glare burns into your flesh, scorching the surface, exposing your most intimate parts. You work at fortifying yourself in the face of exposure, renewing your focus on image and setting yourself firmly in the ready position: feet in solid relationship to the floor, knees bent to maintain an energized lower body, arms engaged at your sides, torso still, head aligned perfectly atop your spine. Without releasing His stare, He once again induces the opening strains of the same clamorous, rhythmic music that engulfed the space during earlier exercises. You set off Stomping across the room horizontally, attempting to maintain an unwavering trajectory and a consistently even spacing between yourself and your comrades. After traversing an interminable distance, you reach the far right wall and so halt your progression mid-Stomp, your right leg raised, your full weight deposited precariously over your left foot. You bow internally before the gods in a hot moment of stillness before releasing the form. You turn to your left and walk across the rear of the space to reset yourself for the next form in the sequence. As you cross the room, you are careful not to do so casually, not to devolve in ordinariness, not to expend unnecessarily any of the energy you have worked so mightily to summon. In your periphery, you catch a glimpse of the Teacher and realize His gaze still has not left you.*

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Over the course of the endless-yet-exhilarating hours I have spent toiling at the craft of theatre – hours upon hours spent sweating in fevered frustration within the sanctity of the stage space conspiring with my fellow performative architects to forge lush and fecund

experiencings – I have come to embrace the implications of the French word for rehearsal: *répétition*. Finding, as I do, a study of different languages’ words for rehearsal “endlessly fascinating,” Anne Bogart, after marking the French word for rehearsal “significant,” puts forward the German *Probe*, indicating an investigation, and the Japanese *keiko*, which translates as “to practice.”<sup>1</sup> I myself might add the Spanish *ensayo*, which can mean “test” or, revealingly, “experiment,” or even the Italian *prova*, which can also translate as “test,” but also as “attempt” or “try.” Regardless, again and again – perhaps evidence of my increased Francophilia due to my partner’s French fluency, my love of French absurdist theatre, and my several voyages to *l’hexagone*, one of which included seeing *the* original productions of Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon* that have been playing at the tiny *Théâtre de la Huchette* in Paris’s *Quartier Latin* for nearly sixty years – again and again, I am drawn to the French: *répétition, répétition, répétition*.

In his discussion of *répétition*, Peter Brook illuminates the associations imbedded in the French-language rendering of rehearsal:

Week after week, day after day, hour after hour, practice makes perfect ... As every athlete knows, repetition eventually brings about change: harnessed to an aim, driven by a will, repetition is creative ... Repetition is the only way certain actions become possible, and anyone who refuses the challenge of repetition knows that certain regions of expression are automatically barred to [her].<sup>2</sup>

Brook’s correlation of the work of an athlete to the work of an actress is significant, especially in relation to the extreme physical rigor required by our process. In making such a comparison Brook uses some familiar terminology, terminology encountered in our earlier conversation on training: namely, that *practice* – when exploited towards achieving an aim, a

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 45-6.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 138.

goal, a *vision* – can, as you’ll remember Anne Bogart similarly proclaiming, affect change in the artist. And the hot, messy work of rehearsal – or, if you will, the *practice of repetition* – is creative, as Brook notably asserts, precisely because it forces the body to confront itself, to cultivate its expressive intelligence, to meet all of its constituent parts as if for the first time and to learn how to use those parts in extra-ordinary ways. This awakening of dormant, primal energies causes fresh and imaginative patterns to emerge, a revelatory palate of corporeal articulation heretofore unrecognized by the artist. Yet, as Brook so accurately surmises, this can only occur if such expressivity is actively and consistently worked at.

What’s more, Brook’s conception of repetition as a creative act is helpful in distinguishing *training* from *performance-making*. Of course, Repetition is one of the Viewpoints, and it is fundamental to Suzuki training, for, as Phillip Zarrilli has noted, “Asian disciplines of practice, including acting, are implicitly understood to be a psychophysiological means to effecting a fundamental transformation of the individual through the repetitious practices of exercises and/or forms.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, just as a football player lifting weights or even throwing a series of forward passes at training camp is not the same as playing in the Super Bowl, so an actress Stomping across the floor or playing in open Viewpoints is not creating theatre. Rather, training – engaged in, as you’ll remember, with performance *energy* – instills in her body certain rules – elucidated in an earlier Movement of this writing – that provide her technical precision and temper her creative abilities. Training is indeed integral to the potency of the inevitable performance, because “if performers are consistently and precisely trained,” observes Paul Allain, artists “can spend more time inventing in rehearsal,

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<sup>3</sup> Phillip Zarrilli, “Introduction to Part II,” in Phillip Zarrilli, ed., *Acting (Re)Considered* (London: Routledge, 1995), 81.

encouraging the experimentation” our own work tempted.<sup>4</sup> We engaged in such experimentation through our idiosyncratic use of Anne Bogart’s method of Composition, a bridge from training into performance that arranges “formal theatrical elements into a cohesive whole, integrating action, gesture, architecture, character, repetition and text.”<sup>5</sup>

Just as Bogart admits to “stealing” the Viewpoints from Mary Overlie, she is equally as vocal about her assimilation of the Composition method from her time spent as an undergraduate student of choreographer, dancer and director Aileen Passloff at Bard College.<sup>6</sup> During Bogart’s time at Bard in the early 1970s, Passloff – a core member of the early 1960s postmodern dance troupe Judson Dance Theatre – taught a course entitled “Composition,” which she defines in broad terms as “putting things together, putting one thing after another, listening to what the content is so you can find out what form it needs to take.”<sup>7</sup> As an experimentalist revolting against what she saw as the limitations of modern

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theater Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in Eelka Lampe, “From the Battle to the Gift: The Directing of Anne Bogart,” *TDR* 36 (Spring 1992): 21.

<sup>6</sup> In this spirit, I must make a confession of my own. I have been clear about my own complex reception and teaching of Suzuki/Viewpoints training, and the same must now be said for Composition, also taught to me by Maria Porter. Maria’s personal method of Composition is influenced heavily by the work of Grotowski pupil Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark, a company preoccupied with psychophysical actor training methods and deeply influenced by traditional Eastern forms of dance and drama. There Maria met Argentinian director Cristina Castrillo, and has worked with her extensively over the last ten years at Teatro delle Radici in Lugano, Switzerland, a company dedicated to research in actor training that places the actor at the center of the creative process. Maria has said that the Composition method I was taught comes from a process used extensively at the Odin and by Castrillo, and, in the end, is the manifestation of a marriage of disciplines (Bogart, Odin, Castrillo) within Maria’s personal aesthetic. Thus, *my* teaching of Composition is yet another permutation of the form, owing to my experiences with Maria and my individual study of Bogart’s methods.

<sup>7</sup> Aileen Passloff, quoted in Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 126.

dance, Passloff herself borrowed the term “Composition” from composer Louis Horst, a frequent collaborator of Martha Graham “who advocated musical forms as a structure for modern dance.”<sup>8</sup> For Passloff and her Judson contemporaries, “the idea of composition became less mannerist and more experimental, ... less a matter of finding an established musical form to flesh out with choreography than finding some rubric or conceit or strategy for ‘putting things together’ to make a dance.”<sup>9</sup>

What is indicated by “rubric or conceit or strategy” is the necessity of *form*. Peter Brook recognizes that for an actress “to communicate [her] invisible meanings ... [she] need[s] form. It [is] not enough to feel passionately – a creative leap [is] required to mint a new form which would be a container and a reflector for [her] impulses. That is what is truly called an ‘action’.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, if – as it has been established – Suzuki is the body’s grammar, and Viewpoints its vocabulary, then these praxes are the embodied syntax that make it possible for the formal, sculptural *language* of Composition work to speak. This is a tangible evocation and eventual articulation of the heart-rending discoveries made during the rehearsal process, what Suzuki himself meant when he called for a “complete physicalization of acting.”<sup>11</sup> As SITI Company member Ellen Lauren observes: “In the best rehearsals, the body’s priority over the text allows a truer emotional response to surface. One is simply too busy to ‘act’ ... No feeling, memory or desire exists independent from the body on the stage. The form is

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<sup>8</sup> Cummings, *Remaking American Theater*, 304n16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. For more information about Passloff and Judson Dance Theatre, see Sally Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> James R. Brandon, “Contemporary Japanese Theatre: Interculturalism and Intraculturalism,” in *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own, and Foreign*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Josephine Riley, and Michael Gissenwehrer (Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), 92.

the spirit ... Anne is trying to [reestablish] a world where the body is as eloquent and articulate as the text.”<sup>12</sup>

Composition encourages expressive (or abstract) movement, rather than descriptive (or behavioral) movement and asks that we “become authentic collaborators” working with a tremendous “spirit of generosity” in our experimentations “with themes, characters, and situations, images, structures, pieces of text, and physical materials.”<sup>13</sup> The collaborative manner in which we are inspired to work with the various performance materials serves as a model for how we must work with each other. The Composition process is an evocate one, and, as our own work will show, there is no telling to what degree the actress might expose her deepest self. As director and facilitator, I had to be sensitive to such intimate revelations at the same time I was setting up the circumstances to encourage them. Peter Brook eloquently captures the perhaps dubious but certainly seductive role of the director: “A director is there to help a group evolve towards” fully articulating “the invisible substance of the play ... The director is there to attack and yield, provoke and withdraw until the indefinable stuff begins to flow ... At best a director enables an [actress] to reveal [her] own performance, that [she] might otherwise have clouded for [herself].”<sup>14</sup>

Yet, Composition seems perfectly suited to tackle this tricky terrain, for it encourages Dwight Conquergood’s notion of *co-performance*, the demand that the researcher’s body “be coterporally present and active in a dialogical meeting” with his ethnographic

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<sup>12</sup> Ellen Lauren, “Seven Points of View,” in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1995), 64, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 139; Cummings, *Remaking American Theatre*, 126-7.

<sup>14</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 109.

collaborators.<sup>15</sup> Conquergood believed that the “the power dynamic of the research situation changes when the ethnographer moves from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of ‘coactivity’ or co-performance with historically situated, named, ‘unique individuals.’”<sup>16</sup> As “a structure for working from our impulses and intuition,” Composition disallows the director to treat his actresses as so many pawns on a chess board, compelling a process in which each member of the ensemble has equal input in and responsibility to the process and its inevitable outcome.<sup>17</sup> Actually, if it could be said that any member or members of the ensemble had the so-called upper-hand it would be the actresses themselves, for Composition is an approach that privileges the intelligence of the body, and, after all, it was the *actresses’* bodies that were crafting the performance. We began rehearsals as we began training: sitting around a table engaging in the necessary Source Work, or the “way of lighting the fire so that everyone can share in it ... The director has caught a disease,” says Bogart, “and somehow in these critical early moments of the process, s/he has to make the disease contagious ... *Source Work is an invitation to obsession.*”<sup>18</sup> And so with the actresses ‘in’ on the obsession, they pushed “me to be better, to be more in the moment, to be more awake, to be more responsible for the choices I’m making. Those are collaborators ... Collaborators are people who disagree, who can

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<sup>15</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 349.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>17</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Vienpoints Book*, 12

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

allow me to see from an angle I've never looked at before, or to experience life from an angle I've never look at before."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, I have always believed there comes a time in any given rehearsal process when the actresses have apprehended more about the work than I, as director, might ever hope to, for the actresses are the ones who are actually *living* it. This integral aspect of my directorial approach is very much indebted to Meyerhold's theory of the Theatre of the Straight Line, in which

the director, having absorbed the author's conception, conveys his own creation (now a blend of the author and the director) to the [actress]. The [actress], having assimilated the author's conception via the director, stands face to face with the spectator (with director and author behind him), and *freely* reveals [her] soul ... , thus intensifying the fundamental theatrical relationship of performer and spectator ... The director must remain the sole arbiter of the mood and style of the production, but nevertheless, the [actress's] art remains free in the Theatre of the Straight Line. The director describes his plan during discussion of the play. The entire production is colored by his view of it. He inspires the [actresses] with his devotion to the work, and imbues them with the spirit of the author and with his own interpretation ... In establishing the harmony vital to the production, he does not insist on the exact representation of his own conception, which was intended only to ensure unanimity and to prevent the work created collectively from disintegrating. Instead he retires behind the scene at the earliest possible moment and leaves the stage to the [actresses]. Then ... they reveal their souls through almost improvisatory additions, not to the text but to the mere suggestions of the director.<sup>20</sup>

In my roles as *auteur* director and university instructor, I always come to the first rehearsal with a strong, thoroughly-crafted vision for the production. Yet my vision is not an immutable one, because, as Anne Bogart says, the "director's job is not to supply answers but rather to provide interest ... If you already have the answers, then what is the point of

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<sup>19</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre: Preserving the Legacy Volume Three*, DVD, Theatre Communications Group Oral History Project, produced by The Ford Foundation, The Allen Foundation for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 51-3.

being in rehearsal? But you certainly need to know what you are looking for.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it seems to me that the ‘knowing what you are looking for’ is the critical ingredient in any successful collaboration and, thus, any successful piece of theatre. But that doesn’t mean one’s aim can’t shift or transform into something altogether different to what he or she first imagined. Anne Bogart provides a model for the work of this elevated sense of moment-to-moment attention, a model I tempted to follow with diligence and grace:

Be visibly generous, respectful and civil but, at the same time, know exactly what you think ... One needs a strong core and a supple and flexible exterior ... A director who spends most of her time controlling the room in superficial ways, a director who is territorial and inflexible cannot be strong on the inside at the same time. You have to let certain things on the outside be and adjust to the vicissitudes of the moment. You have to let collaborators feel the freedom to breathe and roam around a bit in order to contribute more and also give themselves a break from the relentless point of view of their own discipline. This means that a director should not control the exterior circumstances so much. Not to micro-manage because if you are micromanaging you are missing the truly important and much more mysterious, vast and interesting issues that are indeed present.<sup>22</sup>

In this way, as Peter Brook says, the director’s thoughts surrounding a particular production “evolve continually” so that eventually “he will find that he is understanding everything differently. The [actresses’] sensibilities turn searchlights on to his own – and he will either know more, or at least see, more vividly that he has so far discovered nothing valid.”<sup>23</sup> This is an accurate assessment of the necessity of a shared sense of authority in the rehearsal space, one that engenders a process of discovery and revelation that might have otherwise been glossed over if each member of the ensemble didn’t have his or her assumptions continually and generously scrutinized.

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<sup>21</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Bogart, “Can We Practice Empathy Together?” Anne’s Blog, entry posted July 1, 2009, <http://siti.groupsite.com/post/july-1-2009-can-we-practice-empathy-together> (accessed July 1, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Peter Brook, *Empty Space*, 106.

There is yet another salient point embedded in the transience of knowledge in the rehearsal space: that rehearsal is a time to work, to labor physically, and that it is *not* time to intellectualize or analyze. An examination of my own behaviors prove Anne Bogart's assessment that "being a director is one hundred percent intuitive ... When a door closes on a rehearsal, it is not about thinking, it is not about making intellectual decisions. It is completely intuitive. You have to move in the moment" because, as she continues elsewhere, "in the heat of creation, there is no time for reflection; there is only connection to what's happening. The analysis, the reflection and the criticism before and after, never during, the creative act."<sup>24</sup> This also means that you have to be prepared to throw away all preliminary preparations, because rehearsal is not about forcing things to happen, it "is not about proving that what you have worked out before is the right solution for the play."<sup>25</sup> Precursory preparations are, of course, absolutely necessary to be able to enter a process fully, but rehearsal is a process, after all, and once entered – and *embodied* – there is no telling where the body will take you. Rather, the process of rehearsal is the active "process of subtracting, of taking away whatever is in the way of seeing and hearing ... clearly and feeling the heart of the issue that the play is animating. A key ingredient in any rehearsal process is, precisely, to not know the answers in advance."<sup>26</sup> Composition demands actresses work as much as possible on their feet, creating as they go rather than predetermining the work beforehand. In this way, Composition thrusts the actress into ecstatic state, a kind of "Exquisite Pressure," in Bogart's conception, in which a lot of work is done in little time:

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<sup>24</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*; Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Bogart, "When Does Art Begin?," Anne's Blog, entry posted September 1, 2009, <http://siti.groupsite.com/post/september-1-2009-when-does-art-begin> (accessed September 1, 2009).

“When we are not given the time to think or talk too much,” says Bogart, “wonderful work emerges; what surfaces does not come from analysis or ideas, but from our impulses, our dreams, our emotions ... forces lean on the participants in a way that enables more, not less creativity,” ultimately asking “someone to unveil herself/himself as an artist, to stand behind what s/he makes, and to learn from what s/he and others see.”<sup>27</sup> This is an entire process of looking backwards to move forward: an “inventing of the wheel backwards,” in Mary Overlie’s words, that brings “the [actress] back to the raw materials;” a deep, guttural cry from the dark that might just be brazen enough to make but one small step in reviving what we see as a degenerating American theatre.<sup>28</sup> And so here, dear reader, I give you public access to that very private process:

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*You once again find yourself on the precipice of adventure, only this time you are formed into a rather unfamiliar shape: your feet are turned in to one another, left in front of right, your knees pressed are together, and your hands are placed palm-up into the small of your back. Suddenly, your right foot sweeps forward, coming to a stop in front of your left in a semicircular, scalloping motion. Instantaneously, the left foot circles in front of the right, and then the right comes forward again, and then the left, and then the right, and then the left, and then the right, and so on in a flurry of movement that carries you across the space. Observing the nearly imperceptible stop in each articulation of this expeditious progression is an absurd proposal, you think, and you are finding it incredibly difficult to maintain the full connection of your foot to the floor. When your scallops become too broad as a way to negotiate the arduousness, the Teacher admonishes you to “Keep the motion small, underneath your center! Do not lead from the foot! Lead from center – ALWAYS FROM CENTER!” As if trudging through mud, each foot moves forward with great resistance. As you cross the*

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<sup>27</sup> Bogart and Landau, *Viewpoints Book*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Overlie, “The Six Viewpoints,” in *Training of the American Actor*, ed. Arthur Bartow (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 191.

space, your endurance lags and preserving the swiftness of each motion becomes an increasingly impossible enterprise. Sensing your encroaching listlessness, the Teacher commands you: "Don't not follow or fall behind the music. You must ATTACK the beat!" And so on you go, focusing squarely on image, praying it will sustain you across this demanding, burdensome landscape.

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October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008: The Voyage Out

Tonight we reconvened after five days of f, and spent our first night in the Corner Playhouse. We began with our first Company Class. The actresses are still struggling with the Suzuki (this is good!) and their work is growing deeper. Ashley's presence was particularly powerful: her upper body remained still most of the time, she Stomped with all her humanity, and her stops are becoming precise and articulate. Milbre is still marking - or doing what looks like marking; I suspect she thinks she's fully committing. She's still approaching the work from an analytical perspective. I have to find new ways to nudge her out of her propensity to "diagram the sentence" - and the violent use of my Suzuki stick is not working. Katie said that she feels more powerful when walking around in her daily life, and I take this as the recognition that her body is awakening and she is gaining an awareness of its full potential. Mallory is struggling mightily with the idea of depth vs. distance. During Stomping especially, she is galloping more than she is Stomping, and I will continue to drill her to dig deep rather than gloss over.

After a quick break we began rehearsal itself and gathered 'round the table once again, now to introduce ourselves as a company to the play itself, beginning with a discussion of my intentions with the piece. I tried to keep my own talking to a minimum, so I briefly spoke about the notion of

the theatre of the sacred that we are working with. I am usually long-winded but I worked to keep this as concise as possible. Too much talking about theories could cripple our practice. We are testing the theories; we are not following recipes. I want the actresses to play actions, not ideas, and I don't want to be too prescriptive about what they 'should' be getting out of this process. I am a control freak suffering from an active and accurate intuition, and perhaps part of my unlearning is to finally allow that intuition to run wild and deal with the consequences later.

Before the five-day break I assigned each of the actresses' a mini-presentation: Katie had to give background on John Pielmeier and the play itself, Mallory reported on nuns, Milbre on the Virgin Mary and the notion of miracles, and Ashley had to report on abuse. We had a fruitful, frank and mature discussion about sex, religious beliefs, miracles, faith, etc. that ran way overtime but certainly kept us all from yawning - and I really tried to stay out of it. Even from this early stage of sitting around the table, I wanted the performing ensemble to work together without always counting on me to sustain them. I will probably guide them more in the first few 'on our feet' rehearsals, but eventually they have to take ownership, and my behavior will dictate how adept they will be in doing so. After all, on opening night I could be in Acapulco - and how nice a trip that would be in the middle of a Missouri winter! - but they'll only have the audience and themselves to rely on.

Ashley's report was the most riveting of the night, and our normally easy and often jovial chattiness was stifled listening to Ashley pointed, hesitant presentation of the statistics on how many children suffer from abuse (approximately 20 - 25 % of women and 5 - 10 % of men, according to

her figures!), as well as the lingering effects: depression, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, eating disorders, poor self-esteem, deviant sexual behaviors, substance abuse, not to mention the potential transmission of STDs, infections, pregnancy, bruising, internal lacerations and so on. Yikes! The group concurred it was heartbreaking to think about these things happening to beautiful little Agnes. This was a difficult but important discussion, and I think it really put things in perspective, delving to the depths I was hoping us to get into. One of the things I've been toying with regarding Agnes is the idea of: "Look at what they've done to her. Let's not do that anymore." "They" meaning Doctor and Mother, but hopefully the audience will identify with one or both of those characters in their debate of logic and faith and thus the "they've" in that sentiment will become a "we've," a recognition of our own short-sightedness.

Actually, we didn't talk much at all about the debate of logic and faith that drives the play, and I honestly didn't really want to. I'd rather see it play out physically across bodies in space. We did speak about it in a superficial way, merely stating in open forum Pielmeier's predilection for questions rather than answers, and his own apparent and complicated preference for faith: that, like Mother, he appears desperately to want to operate in full faith but cannot completely rid himself of worldly logic. This discourse of logic and faith is actually a nice metaphor for our entire process, one of the many accidental ways "Agnes" ended up the perfect vehicle for our performative rejuvenations. The intentions behind our work privilege faith, if faith can be understood as conviction founded on tangible and impacting feelings and physical sensations. Of course, our work over these next few weeks of rehearsal will be to work at

the seemingly impossible task of transforming the effervescent into something tangible. In doing so, I hope we can eventually communicate to the audience a sense that, yes, even within our own harsh realities there is still something to believe in, something to hope for, something to work towards, something larger than ourselves and the tedium of our daily existence.

Rather than describing things for our audience, I want us to work towards letting situations play and relationships develop organically: the less we attempt to dictate the meaning of a moment from outside of that moment, the more that spectators will be able to draw their own conclusions.

After another brief break we forged ahead into a read-through of the script. I was very excited for this as it was the first time I was going to get experience the play through the bodies of the actresses who would live it. One of the surprising things I think we found tonight was some of the humor in the play, especially from Mother. She is a worldly and witty nun, and Mallory really found that in the reading. I will be sure to encourage her in this direction because, honestly, expressive movement does not equal melodrama. There is a big difference, I have always believed, between being serious and taking something seriously. While we always should take our work seriously, that does not mean we always have to be serious. I have also always believed you need the light to see the dark, and if the performance played out in an endless and overwrought somberness, who would want to - or even be able to - sit through it?!

There was a serenity and intensity in their reading; it was simple yet with intention, and I have to believe their groundedness was a result of the Suzuki/Viewpoints training. I actually love a first reading: it's the first

step on a long and difficult journey; it allows me to see the world of the play as if for the first time. All my assumptions are called into question. New associations, meanings and intentionalities always seem to emerge. For example, I had previously thought Doctor might pace around the entire space during her hypnosis of Agnes, meaning that she would place the audience at the inside of her trajectory as if she were hypnotizing them too. But listening to Katie read softly and eerily, I had an impulse to record her lines so that we can put some sort of effect on them and make her seem like a distant, hollow voice. In this way, these hypnosis scenes can become an extreme moments of subtraction in which we hear Doctor but see only Agnes, struggling through her repressed memories in a single, harsh pool of light. This might be more powerful, because it will be as if we are inside Agnes's head, in a way, experiencing the world as Agnes is experiencing it at that particular point in time.

My insides raced like gang-busters listening to my intrepid collaborators, but really I was doing more than just listening: I was also responding. At a certain point, I was so stricken with possibilities that I had to get out of my chair and pace the room a bit to quell my raging creative impulses. I had a vision of the piece before tonight's rehearsal, but it was a shell, empty and incomplete. Tonight, that shell began to overflow with the bountiful yield of the actresses' virtuosity, and my malleable and imperfect vision was mercifully permeated and penetrated in ways I haven't fully comprehended yet. With the presentness of their craft, our deep collaboration has begun in all its messy glory.

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*You make your internal bow, believing you have earned it. Having finally redirected His stare only moments ago, the Teacher once again fixes His gaze upon you, somehow sensing your brief moment of pride. Taking the reprimand to heart, expediently you make your way back to your starting position to ready yourself to endeavor yet another formidable voyage across the space. With your arms at your sides, you proceed on high tiptoes. It is difficult to maintain the necessary bend in the knee, but it is even more difficult to keep your upper body from wrenching to and fro. As your body stretches upwards your feet barely make contact with the ground, rendering your connection to the earth all-the-more difficult to maintain. "You must not bounce about!" the Teacher admonishes, "It must appear that you glide across the space!" You work at doing so, but quickly sense that you are not making the requisite stops in each articulation of the form. The Teacher smacks His staff on the floor in rhythm to the music, accompanying it with a vocal slap that sets you on course: "HIT! – HIT! – HIT! – HIT! – HIT! ..."*

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October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008: Corporealizing

Tonight's Suzuki session was the sweatiest, most animalistic and erotic work I've seen the actresses do so far. They really tapped into something tonight, quite literally in how profoundly they stomped into the earth. Their determination was palpable, fighting against lethargy and the easy out, they seemed to have made the collective decision to give themselves over to the unknown, unpredictable and uncomfortable journey ahead of them. It really does make one have to sit up and take note of the volatile ways in which some things just seem to fall together, because this intensity in training came on the very night we were to engage in a series of exercises that I like to think of as physical Source Work. We spent last night around a table discussing history, context, themes, and other cerebral and theoretical matters so that tonight's work could be about awakening in our corporeal

selves those more academic understandings. With the purely intellectual work flowing through our subconscious, working physically and without premeditation allowed us to move, quite literally, in informed-yet-unexpected ways.

As a way to continue to strengthen the ensemble and to begin developing a unique and diverse physical vocabulary for the world of the play, we began the night in Open Viewpoints foregrounding Tempo. From the start, as a kind of transition between daily life and "Agnes" life, I reminded the actresses that in reality most of us live in medium and implored them to play with extremes: for a while, I imposed the rule that they could only move at 100% top speed or remain in absolute stillness. Actually, I favor the exploit of extremes because such work really sets the actress off her 'game,' forcing her to confront her habitual patterns and to allow herself to explore new possibilities. This was especially effective with Mallory and Milbre - both actresses' work tends toward the analytical, each afraid to act before she thinks; imposing strict rules of extremes forced both Mallory and Milbre into other motive options.

Eventually, I coached them into foregrounding Kinesthetic Response and to maneuvering in character so that we might deepen each character as well as explore her relationships. This is not about the actress asking herself something like "How would my character do this?," but allowing her body to make discoveries on its own. This also doesn't necessarily mean moving or behaving differently, but being sensitive to how the notion of character affects her various movement choices. After all, this work is about developing actions, not from a character's psychology or circumstances but

from immediate physical impulses. Thinking and planning are not encouraged here.

Katie's work was very round, very fluid, and, interestingly, very sexualized. Doctor smokes throughout the play, and perhaps this movement was informed by the sensuality of her cigarette smoke. She had this repeated gesture of a grand upward sweeping motion that was seductive and gentle at the same time. The majority of her work happened apart from the rest of the ensemble, both stylistically and geographically. One thing I became aware of was that while the others tended to gravitate towards the floor, Katie worked mostly upright, wielding a great amount of power with her continuously and sensuously slinking legs. Try as she might - and she really didn't try that often - no one else really wanted to play with her. Mallory and Ashley worked mainly in direct relation to each other, Mallory operating with a more compressed, concise palate of movement while Ashley embodied an endlessly shifting gestural life: no consistent Tempo, or relation to Architecture, or species of Shape was foregrounded. Milbre was constantly drawn to the duo of Mallory and Ashley in supplication-like poses. At one point Mallory, Ashley and Milbre grouped themselves artfully upstage: Milbre was bent over double in close proximity to Mallory, who was holding Ashley tightly in a rather maternal way. Yet, it appeared as though Mallory was clinging to Ashley more for her own comfort than for Ashley's. This moment found Katie across the space, laying on her side with her back to the rest of the ensemble in a kind of boudoir pose: her head held up with left arm, her right arm hung longingly across her torso, her left foot provocatively stroking the length of her right leg.

Somehow this all seemed right to me: Katie's sensuousness evidence of the earthiness of her character, Mallory's restrictiveness a manifestation of the cloistered life of a nun, Ashley's fullness of expression marking her thoroughly as a special one, as an innocent who's been touched by God. I suppose, as a nun, the rigidity of Mallory's work is not so surprising, but perhaps the sensuality of Katie's is. Doctor, seeking objectivity, might seem a more direct character, and maybe Mallory, being of the spiritual order - nun's are said to be in but not of world - might have been a bit softer. Yet, Doctor, as she says, wants a miracle, and Mother - no matter how much she wants to commit herself fully to faith - cannot escape the doubt that overwhelms her. Katie and Mallory's complexity of movement showed many things: inner conflict, complexity of character and complexity of relationship; that things are not black and white, that there is no one right way to do something, that no one person is one thing all the time, that because of our humanness and inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies we must listen to each other on a more profound level.

Yet, at this early stage of rehearsal I have to wonder: Is this all organic, or are they layering on circumstances? Were we too prescriptive in our precursory discussions? At this point it's too early to tell, but I know that I'd like to continue to work with these corporeal discoveries and absorb them into our staging of the piece. Already, in the heat of battle, we've come up with some incredibly powerful materials to work with. After bringing the exercise to a close, Katie reported that feeling isolated in Viewpoints was "frustrating in a very evocative way. It's making me work harder." Without prompting, Mallory confessed that she felt her work was "more authentic. We're finding things we wouldn't normally find." But maybe what's most

important to take note of is that I found myself left out of conversation. I couldn't get a word in edgewise, and it was wonderful: they are starting to really own it!

We then moved into our first Compositional exercises, focusing on relationships. I paired Katie with Milbre and Ashley with Mallory, and gave each duo a strict 4 minutes to create a movement sequence (what we would call a physical score), a series of actions - or expressive gestures - that expressed their relationship in the context of the play. These mini-Compositions had to tell a clear story through movement. That is: they had to have a beginning, middle and end. The actresses were not allowed to talk and could only work physically. After a few awkward moments of hesitation, each group got to work. Katie and Milbre's piece manifested as part mirror exercise, part power struggle: their hands and arms stayed in almost constant, breezy contact as each actress investigated the other at the same time she attempted to throw her off her center. Mallory and Ashley's piece began a playful game of cat-and-mouse: each actress took turns literally reeling the other in, only to separate herself from the pairing once again. Eventually, Ashley flopped down into a sitting position and began to thrash at the floor; Mallory sat behind her and worked at quelling Ashley's explosiveness, a moment that eventually transitioned into Ashley huddled into Mallory's lap.

Quickly, the actresses switched partners and we did the exercise again. To call Katie and Mallory's Composition anything less than a cockfight would be an injustice. Stalking each other in a circular pattern like two fighters about to begin a wrestling match, each took her turn stomping at the feet of the other, causing virtual earthquakes that sent the other reeling off her course. After a charged and exciting deadlocked stare, the

actresses parted and went their separate ways to end the piece. Ashley and Milbre's piece played out in soft and circuitous movements that began with what read as a birth (Ashley's) and ended in a crucifixion with Ashley as the crucified and Milbre as the cross. Both pieces were incredibly evocative, and once again my insides burn with creativity. The actresses' work has once again kindled a fire inside of me, and I cannot wait to start throwing the piece together. After communicating my excitement and making a few encouraging remarks, I thanked the actresses for their hard work and send them on their merry way - without discussion! This was not an easy thing for me to do, but I didn't want to obliterate the work they had done by taking it out of the body and putting it into the head. Tomorrow night we will finally start to put the play on its feet, and it will be interesting to see how - or even if - tonight's work will effect our future endeavors.

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*Dripping sweat and short of breath, you survived your tiptoed excursion only to find yourself ready to take up yet another form. With your hands at the small of your back and your feet and knees pressed together, you situate your weight on the inside of your feet. You make your way across the space by kicking each foot out rapidly and directly to the side before returning it forcefully to the earth. As your weight shifts quickly from side to side, so does your torso. "The upper body is still!" the Teacher admonishes, "Control the energy at your center! The work happens beneath center!" As you near the end of this particular phase of the journey your knees begin to separate slightly and you want desperately to lift out of your legs to ease the execution of the form. But, owing to determination and the fear of incurring the Teacher's wrath, you keep low and attempt to remain as fully engaged as you were when you began the journey.*

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October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008: first of all, we need some light

Last night was our first attempt at "Agnes"-specific Composition work and it did not go well. Script preparation is integral to our Composition process, so we began last night's rehearsal by doing the prep work together. With the script photocopied and pasted into every other page of a composition notebook, this involves dividing each Movement of the script into smaller units of action, usually determined by dramatic shifts in action. Horizontal lines are drawn across the two facing pages to distinguish the units, and on the blank notebook page across from the pasted script page three vertical columns are created: one for the character's objective - her goal, her essential desire - in a particular unit of action; a second to write the unit's label, a metaphorically descriptive phrase based on the essence of a particular unit, something like "The Interrogation," or "The Voice of the Goddess"; and a third left temporarily empty, awaiting the notations of the physical score to be developed in rehearsal.

Then, based on their labels and without any consideration whatsoever for the text itself, I had the actresses work together to develop their physical scores, another bad idea. This was a completely foreign process to the actresses, naturally, so I thought that they would benefit by doing everything together. My good intentions blew up in my face, and resulted in over-intellectualization and unnecessary frustrations. The actresses had a difficult time because their unit divisions didn't - and shouldn't - necessarily correlate, and asking them to create labels together was a completely misguided approach on my part. I should have known better: they shouldn't have the same labels. Different labels would lead to an intensification of conflict, conflict being the absolute heart and soul of the theatrical

enterprise. This approach was painful in a bad way, like pulling teeth. No one was confident in what he or she was doing, perhaps least of all me. This simply was too neat and tidy an approach.

So, tonight we re-grouped and found a way of working that I think can sustain us throughout the remainder of the process. They will still prepare their scripts in the same manner, only from now on they will do it on their own. They will do this work at home, and come into rehearsal with that done and their lines memorized for each Movement we'll be working that particular evening. Then, I'll give them 15 - 20 minutes to work individually to create a physical score for each movement based on their labels. And I have developed a more consistent procedure for the development of their physical scores: they will develop at least five expressive actions for each labeled unit, and the overall score of each particular Movement must include a series of compositional ingredients: 15 seconds of stillness, 3 uses of sound, 3 changes of level, a sequence of extreme contrast, a sustain moment of looking at the Virgin/Mother, 1 repeated gesture (5x), sound from an unexpected source, the revelation of an object, 3 changes of direction, and 1 miracle and 1 transformation, with 'miracle' and 'transformation' interpreted however each individual actress sees fit.

I coached the actresses to avoid thinking about their lines while developing their scores, that the text itself should not determine physical discovery. Within this way of working, movement and text are not mapped onto one another. Rather, the physical score and the spoken text exist as separate layers in which the actresses' instinctual movement communicates the essence of the written text. This privileging of movement is fortified with the conviction that the actresses could enact the physical score silently and the

audience would receive the same, if not, perhaps, a more vital experience; were the actresses to speak the text without the movement, the work would fall flat. In our practice, the physical score for each particular scene will be first worked silently and then, without much fanfare, the text will be added, and not much more will, dare I say, be 'said' about it. The aural interpretation of the text will be inherently managed by the actresses' physicalizations, with the voice itself conceived as a site of energy, rather than as an organ of speech. This develops directly out of Suzuki training, which denies the traditional Western mode of the relaxed voice and conceives of speech as a physical gesture. In training, when actresses are fighting to maintain their sense of centeredness in a position of extreme tension, text is called for, and the actresses must recite powerfully, in our case, whichever piece of their "Agnes" text comes to them. (Suzuki himself usually uses passages from "The Trojan Women" or "Macbeth.") What is important is not necessarily the meaning of what is being said, but what that verbalization actually sounds like. In this way, the text can operate musically and in support of an already vibrantly communicative movement score.

After the actresses worked in isolation, they came together in the rehearsal space to tango - as we call it - their individually created movement scores. This involves working in extreme Kinesthetic Response, as each actress allows her score to modify in direct relation to what the other actress is doing. Because Mallory and Katie share the first duet, they were the thrown head first into the experiment. Their work was tentative but focused, and definitely displayed the beginnings of a physical intelligence. I can see their bodies are tuning up; I can see their bodies have been tempered to accelerate and brake, to operate with inner movement and stillness, to

concentrate on the foot's relationship to the floor, to work with performance energy, and so on. Katie swooped her arm up and Mallory pivoted sharply, an instance of apparent cause-and-effect encountered in the heat of the moment. But the moment was not planned; rather, it was born, and so was infinitely more arresting and profound than if we had worked it out for days. Their work shifted from the subtle - Mallory's hand shook as Katie leapt towards the statue - into grander, more grotesque actions: Katie squatted over a sitting Mallory, tracing the arc of her shoulders with her head as if dissecting her to examine her most intimate parts. Most importantly, their work had tension. I don't mean 'tense' as in 'not relaxed,' but rather that their spines were engaged and they were moving from their centers; their bodies were energized and there was nothing quotidian about their movement. There was a playfulness to their work, a give and take, and a wonderful variety: the varied levels of an ever-shifting power dynamic. Our work on this opening moment is so critical, which is why we spent two full rehearsals on it! The choices we made tonight will determine the course of the entire process: if the play is driven by their fight over Agnes, and if theatre is about conflict - and it is! - then the way in which we develop Doctor and Mother in counterpoint now will determine our approach to every other scene as well as each woman's relationship to Agnes, the center of our world. Of course, with that daunting realization comes the recognition that the beauty of this work is that nothing we do today has to be true tomorrow!

Once we layered on text the work took a step backward, and I suppose this is only to be expected. After I allowed them a quick moment to run their lines, we got back to the physical labor and I almost immediately stepped in, perhaps too soon, but I suffer from perfectionism and I am also their

teacher, after all, and wish with every muscle in body that they succeed. I wanted to help shape their work into specificity so that they know what specificity - in my definition - feels like. Also, my constant stopping-and-starting took the work in small doses and made it easier for them to handle their lines. Letting them to slog through it once and fail helped show them all the work they have to do, and then I sailed in there with more demands and knocked them down even more! I am a 'hands-on' director, yet nothing I said to them was improperly imposed: I observed their actions with an extraordinary wakefulness, and I only gave suggestions based on what they'd done. Something would inspire me and I'd exclaim "Ooh ooh ooh!" and start moving about, out of breath and glistening with sweat. "Katie," I'd say, "focus on your spatial relationship there," or "Mallory, can you try that movement again but this time reduce it and use only your left hand?!" It is in the midst of the sweaty creativity of a rehearsal that I am my most unvarnished and buoyant self. I am in my absolute prime having bodies to work with: traipsing down the trail of my intuition physically with bodies in space I am completely in my element and at my personal and creative best. Yet, in this process I am taking special care to step out of the work as quickly as I step into it. I often remain silent outwardly to let the actresses germinate and tune to each other, observing with the eye, my director's eye that can see with extra-ordinary precision the exterior and interior workings of actresses before me, the eye that can detect a false move or an unbalanced stage picture from miles away, the eye that sees images as living beings, as visible to me as tangible objects are to my physical eye, that eye that cannot be taught or trained, the eye that knows what it knows and cannot be explained.

I sat back long enough to realize that Mallory and Katie were really listening to each other, and I don't mean with their ears, but kinesthetically and with the whole of their beings. It's amazing how quickly their work developed: from indistinct and floundering to precise and thrilling in 30 minutes! The work is becoming specific, dynamic, in conflict, physically complex and intriguing. There is a rhythm developing, and the stage pictures are so incredibly striking and I have not imposed one ounce of blocking awareness of spatial relationship, anyone?!)

Yet, Mallory was still having trouble wrapping her mind around our abstract staging methods. "It is very foreign, and it is hard to speak and move at the same time," she said, "I feel like trying to move takes me out of trying to be a character, to be honest and real. I'm trying not to let my movements turn Mother into a caricature, an archetype." I was actually delighted to have Mallory make such an admission, because it allowed me to say for the first time - at least directly - that we wanted the characters to be archetypes, especially Mother and Doctor. The idea that our work could be truthful without being realistic coupled with the fact that these characters, in our conception, are symbols rather than psychological beings was an epiphany for her, and I could see the sting of recognition play across her face.

I always make sure we have time at the end of each rehearsal for discussion - after but not during the physical work - and we actually spent good portion of time tonight processing the complexity of everything that had taken place over the past two rehearsals. "It just seems like so much," said Mallory, "and I'm not used to it. This is not natural for me. This is beyond frustration: I'm like having a panic attack." Katie, who has

probably been the most committed of the group, communicated that for her "it is all about trusting in" me. "I'm just really floundering right now, and that's the way it probably will feel for a while. The import of what we are doing is very real. We feel the weight of it, this space is a lot to fill. It's a shock." Thankfully, our more enlightened way of working tonight provided her the necessary volition to keep going: "Tonight was so much better," she said, "I loved the dynamic of not knowing what Mallory was going to do. I enjoyed her choices and feeling safe in that I can fill them and respond to them." Ashley - who hasn't had the experience of the work yet but has been an active witness to Katie and Mallory working through it - said that she thinks "it's a good thing that we're like 'Oh shit' right now. It challenges you. It makes you a better artist." After I felt that everyone had the opportunity to fully vent her frustrations, I responded to their concerns by speaking about my implicit trust in them. "I'm so glad I don't have to have all the answers and we can do this together," I told them. I also spoke about the beauty of frustration, telling them about the quote I scribbled on the inside front cover of my well-worn Waiting for Godot script: Doug saying "If you can grasp the concept that this isn't easy, then you'll grow as an artist." I told them what I tell any actress or student who balks at something that should be difficult: a single, teasingly pointed "Good!" And I also told them this story: In my senior year of high school, for some reason or another I was in a lower-level government course. My teacher, Mrs. Davis, was well aware of my potential and all but forced me into the Advanced Placement section. Although I was a senior and had no interest in challenging myself so thoroughly in a course on government - a subject I don't think I could have cared about any less - I eventually relented. And

she said something that has stuck with me to this day: "You'll thank me when it's over," she said, "Trust me." I ended up loving the advanced course, and it inspired the social and civic awareness embedded in my theatrical aesthetic. I don't really want to be thanked - and neither did Mrs. Davis, honestly - but what I do hope is that each of the actresses will come out of this process not wounded but healed.

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*Having returned to the starting line, you find yourself in what you think is the most outlandish and implausible iteration of the form yet. Your arms are raised slightly at your sides, your torso is inclined forward with a slight curve in your back over bent, out-turned knees, and the entirety of your weight placed on the outside of your feet. You hurtle forward as your feet circle upwards and outwards alternatingly in a kind of pedaling motion. You wince as your feet land painfully on protruding metatarsals. "You must not bounce! Control the energy beneath and within!" the Teacher barks as you bob your way across the space like so many jackrabbits. Your already red face becomes even redder at the absurdity of the Teacher's demand. It is absolutely impossible, you think, to maintain a level upper body, and this is the closest you come to breaking focus outright to indict the Teacher for His bloodthirsty assaults.*

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November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008: Ashley's Turn

It shows that the actresses are working outside of our time spent in the space together. They must be taking to heart my directive to daydream about the show, to allow themselves the time to let their imaginations flow unencumbered and unforced while performing menial, secondary tasks like cooking dinner or walking to class or showering or what have you. I do this myself when performing in or directing a show, and I've found this sort of subconscious fantasizing can produce compelling material that might not have otherwise revealed itself. In rehearsal, they appear to be working in

deep kinesthesia. Sometimes it appears as if their bodies know each other in intimate ways: a flick of Doctor's cigarette holder sends off a quiver in Mother's fingers that seems as if it could only have been planned in advance - which, of course, it wasn't. Such moments are so incredibly thrilling...

Tonight we finally got to a scene with Ashley!! And, wow - just ... wow! During training Ashley was more timid than I had expected, and I was worried about how that timidity would translate in rehearsals. I don't really know why; my previous experiences of working Ashley should have taught me better. Did I think this work was beyond her? Certainly not. I suppose I was not fully aware of what she could do, of the fearlessness with which she would use the totality of her slight frame as a means of epic expression. Honestly, I think a stranger looking in on our rehearsal tonight would have thought she'd been practicing at this kind of abstract Composition work for years and years, when in reality - due to order of appearance in the play - she'd had the least amount of experience of any of us! She is already doing professional caliber work, comparable, in my opinion, to MFA-trained actresses who have spent years at their craft. Ashley is so willing to play into extremes. Ashley's work overflows with sensitivity, intensity, connection, sincerity, conviction and specificity - and there is absolutely no excess!

Agnes's first scene is with Doctor, and working with Ashley really helped Katie to specify her work. Katie suffers from working too hard: she'll force a moment and over-work it intellectually so that it becomes dramatically lifeless and physically restless. Ashley connects with Katie completely; I can see it in her eyes. I can tell by looking into an actress's eyes if she is in the moment with her partner or partners, or if she is lost in making weekend plans. It's nothing more than a hungry flicker, as if the

actress might either grow fangs and eat her partner alive or pull her in closely and smother her with kisses. The wonderful thing is that in this way of working this sensibility is dilated, made infinitely more perceptible throughout the whole of the body. Tonight, it appeared as if Ashley was privy to Katie's inner-workings. Ashley was open, tempting communion, seducing Katie into giving herself over completely to the unpredictability of the moment kinesthetically, emotionally and physically. It's all about engaging the spine and moving from center, even if it is just the pinky finger that is executing a particular action. It's difficult to describe it but I know it when I see it. How do you describe something you feel? That something that defies the eye, the ear, the word?

Speaking of words, it was also remarkable that adding text seemed for Ashley a non-intrusive step in the process, and her body informed her vocalizations quite profoundly. I've actually been thinking about this, because it's occurred to me that we don't ever really discuss the text or the speaking of it. Normally, a thorough focus on the syntax of the language is an integral part of the process, but working in this way the body speaks and the voice flows as natural extension. Ashley's work is appropriately childlike without being childish. This is no easy feat, as there is a propensity for adult performers to play children not as children but as mentally handicapped adults, commenting on the role rather than living it. Ashley's work in this first scene accentuated Agnes's innocence and should play well against her more aggressive moments in the hypnosis scenes and when she feels the terrifying presence of her mother. Furthermore, it complicates the question of what happened to the baby, which in turn will further complicate the debate of logic and faith: How is it possible for this poor, innocent child -

who doesn't have a disingenuous bone in her body - to have killed another human beings? It doesn't leave many 'logical' alternatives, does it?

It was my idea from the start that the actresses would never leave the stage. Because the play evolves in a series of duets, this means that each Movement will now benefit from the presence of one non-speaking character. I use the word "presence" quite intentionally, capturing the most forceful sense of the term: the non-speaking character will not just sit off to the side but rather become an active beat in the overall rhythm of each Movement. Now that all three of the main players have made her entrance, so to speak, tonight's scene work provided us our first opportunity to experiment with this particular element of our mise-en-scene. Mallory remained in the space as an active observer for the entire time Katie, Ashley and I worked. Towards the end of the evening - once Katie and Ashley's work achieved some degree of polish - I asked Katie and Ashley assume their opening positions and said to Mallory: "Alright, Mallory, I want you to enter the space. But before entering, ask yourself: 'What does the space need?' Don't over-think it; go with your gut and just dive in. Once you've taken your position, Katie and Ashley will play the scene. You can do absolutely anything, so long as you are moving from center and are foregrounding Kinesthetic Response. Let's see what happens."

This can be a tricky thing, because she can't steal focus but we don't want her frozen or out on the sidelines; no, she should be completely in play. What Mallory came up with displayed a great physical intelligence on her part: she paced around the space in a grid-like fashion like a prison guard. Mother is naturally suspicious of Doctor's motives and, above all, wants to protect Agnes - however misguided her efforts may be - and so it was

chilling to have her keeping watch while Doctor is alone with Agnes.

Actually, I think we can absorb this sharp topography into the fullness of Mother's composition: what if she only moves at ninety degree angles - except in her scenes with Agnes?

Towards the end of the scene, Mallory made her way to a closer proximity to Ashley and did some wonderful work with gesture when Agnes tells Doctor about the divine voices inspiring her singing. Mallory echoed Ashley's movements; not quite a mirror, but perhaps the permutations of experience? As we find out later in the play, like Agnes, Mother experienced an angelic voice speaking to her when she was a small child, but unlike Agnes she stopped listening and then the voice stopped speaking. But, Mother tells us, when she first heard Agnes's singing she recognized the voice, and "all of my doubts about God and myself vanished in that one moment" (p. 49).

Of course, in the heat of the moment - and even after - we didn't discuss any of this. Mallory did this all on her feet, completely unplanned. I know from experience that it is a scary thing for a young artist not to be told what to do, but - my goodness! - this work results in openings to more profound experiencings than we could ever hope to forge if we sat around and hammered everything out in advance. The wonderful thing is that I can't always explain why the dynamic of a particular gesture or physical relationship between the actresses works. And I don't want to! Otherwise, where is the room for the audience? How could we invite people in? It would hardly be a dialogue if we did all the talking.

After we worked the scene several times, they ran through it for a final time without any of my directorly interjections. They finished the section and just stood there in energized stillness, as if they were afraid to

Keep going but were too focused to stop. I finally released them, and there was a collective collapse to the floor. They were exhausted, but charged with the wonderful sensations of heightened creativity. After a moment, I asked, as I always do, if there were any questions or comments. After a pensive moment, Ashley quietly shared: "I was watching Katie and Mallory work the past few nights, and I was like 'Oh shit.' But then I went home and looked at my script, and I labeled and prepared some of my score, and tonight I kept some things I did but I really felt myself open up to Katie. It feels weird to use my body this way, but it doesn't necessarily feel foreign to me ... Because at first I was like 'How the hell am I supposed to do this?,' and I was scared and then we got into it and I was like 'Okay. This feels good!'" It is my hope that Ashley can serve as inspiration for the others. We're on our way ...

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*The benefits of the exercise outweighing your fury, you maintain focus, complete your pedaling, and reset to endeavor yet another form. You shift your orientation to face the front of the room and point your left hip in the direction of your destination. With your knees bent and feet pressed together, you beginning to make alternating semicircular, scalloping motions with your feet, keeping them clasped to the ground as you proceed sideways across the space. Weight shifts rapidly, and you are finding it difficult to shift your weight into the left foot while sliding without jerking your torso about. The Teacher senses as much: "Initiate from center!," He admonishes, "Not from the foot. Weight shifts with each motion!" Finding the precision in the stops is equally as difficult, and it isn't long before you find yourself lagging behind the beat of the music. The Teacher raps His stick rhythmically against the floor again: "HIT! – HIT! – HIT! – HIT! – HIT!" You have managed to maintain level focus, and so when you have made it half-way across the space you momentarily*

lock eyes with the Teacher as He savagely beats His stick. This frightens you but you do not break and you do not blink. You take a deep breath and carry on as a tear begins to stream out of your dry left eye.

November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008: The Audacity of Hope

The candidacy of Barack Obama made this election momentous, a defining moment in the history of America and, indeed, the entire world. Hope was the platform on which Obama ran his entire campaign, and it has been our platform in the "Agnes" process as well. By the time tonight's rehearsal began, most polls were several hours away from closing and the ensemble felt the weight of the impending outcome. After years of deceptions and buffoonery, we - the ensemble - were ready for a change, and as we entered the space our hearts raced with both excitement and fear. It quickly became apparent that the actresses would have liked to have the night off so that they could remain glued to their televisions, anxiously scrutinizing the polling results as they flooded in. Although I certainly understood their desire, it actually never occurred to me to take the night off. The last time there was a presidential election was, interestingly, during my initial study of Suzuki Viewpoints and Composition. I remember the difficulty of coming to class the morning after the re-election of George Bush, a disappointment to nearly everyone in our company. Maria was anxious that morning, clearly upset and off-kilter, but it was her perseverance that has remained with me all these years. Shaking her hands violently and pacing about the space, she muttered "All we have is the work" several times before commanding us to "Get ready for Stomping/Shakuhachi!" This was always what she said to us at the start of class, yet today's directive seemed to come with more purpose than ever before. I can honestly say that I don't think I have ever

Stomped harder in my life. 'All we have is the work': an essential aspect of my personal aesthetic that I wear as proudly and prominently as I did my "I VOTED" sticker as I entered the rehearsal space tonight.

I began by addressing the elephant - no pun intended! - in the room immediately, reading from today's blog posting ("From Hyde Park, Chicago") of the goddess herself, Ms. Anne Bogart:

I am full of thoughts and feelings about the world we inhabit and where we are headed. How will we function productively in the future, this very particular future we are headed into? ... In this uncertain and cataclysmic climate, the creative impulse and the art experience is essential. In art we find a direction. The capacity to see, to perceive the world through another's eyes, to empathize, is a vital sign of a civilized culture. To touch upon the unsaid and find articulate shapes for our present anxieties is the goal of our work together ... The artist searches for lightness and for exactitude in the face of rot and decay. Fueled by curiosity, energy and hope, we enter the darkness. We accept the darkness and in that acceptance sometimes we discover a thin vein of light.

Stressing especially the underlined words above, I offered that no matter what happened, we had work to do, and the thought that the election might not turn out as we hoped - not surprisingly, the ensemble was unanimously in support of Obama - is all the more reason to work. Our 'theatreing of the sacred,' after all, is aimed at this very thing: a confrontation of our deepest, darkest selves so that we might tempt the impossible task of making the invisible visible in the face of our own uncertainties. That is: a return to

the primal, transforming ourselves into unvarnished, somatically communicative beings that can engender a galvanizing experience for an audience and perhaps even be a model for how a more empathetic society might function. It is the miracle of the theatre to face degradation and provide hope. All I can think of when I read Bogart's thoughts about "a thin vein of light" is Mother's speech lamenting the fact that what we've gained in logic we've lost in faith, "those bits of light," she says, "that might still, by the smallest chance, be clinging to our souls, reaching back to God" (p. 51). At any rate, my comments, unsurprisingly, were met with a profound silence. The ice was broken mercifully by Mallory asking in an intentionally silly, childlike voice if we could check the Internet for updates over the course of the night. "Of course," I said, after we all had a good laugh, "now get ready for Stomping/Shakuhachi!"

If they were at all distracted - and no doubt they were - I couldn't tell, for the actresses' work in rehearsal was more intense and sophisticated tonight than ever before. It was as if they were Composing into existence the future they so hungrily desired. Their increased sense of purpose was remarkable. There was a charge in air, it was electric, the room was ablaze; the actresses were exuberant, joyful, almost giddy - but still completely focused. The physical dichotomy of the Doctor/Mother relationship and their individual relationships with Agnes were phenomenally clear tonight. Milbre made an astute observation: Doctor and Mother's relationship is to each other, whereas Agnes's relationship is to her own body. Doctor and Mother work in constant counterpoint. Katie's Doctor is beguiling in a serpentine topography that employs the entirety of her corporeal frame to communicate sensuously her most innate essence. Mallory's Mother is exacting in a rigid topography

that uses her body in a more restrictive way. Walking in a grid-like pattern, moving only forward and turning only at right angles, Mallery uses mainly her hands, usually held in front of her, as her particular means of embodied expression. Within this structure, Katie and Mallery have worked out - on their own - a neat little motif that they've taken care to carry through each scene, something they call 'Dueling Topographies.' In each Movement, they've managed to include a brief section where each actress will foreground her individual topography in tandem with the other: in one scene, Mallery grids about the perimeter of the space as Katie circles around it; the next scene finds them on opposite sides - Mallery upstage left and Katie downstage right - moving in their patterns in smaller, separate quadrants; in yet another scene Mallery remains still and Katie circles around her, and then Katie remains still and Mallery grids around her. This work, conceived kinesthetically and on their feet, has proved essential in deepening the complexity of their relationship and in giving their physical lives personalities all to their own.

Ashley's been working from an immense palate of movement choices that displays a great range of physical expression. Her overt playfulness is very much in touch with its creator and, thus, the Creator, as her hands keep in near constant contact with the rest of her body. In this way, Ashley's Agnes is displaying a profound other-worldliness. Her explosive and unclassifiable rhythmic pulse magnifies the idea that Agnes has indeed been touched by God, as her special qualities are now not only sensed through the virtuosity of her singing, but through her physiologically perceptible non-quotidian gestural life.

At the end of rehearsal, with the election of Obama all but guaranteed, Mallory launched into a wonderfully fiery stump-speech that showed, I think, that she's been profoundly effected by what's happening in rehearsal. She was telling us about an experience she had had the day before performing a sketch with the Interactive Theatre Troupe, a social-action form of participatory theatre aimed at enhancing awareness of the multicultural dimension of higher education that draws upon the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques of Brazilian theatre director and politician Augusto Boal. What was especially disturbing to her was that it was theatre majors she was performing for and no one from the class was interested in getting involved: "Do you all consider yourselves artists?," she said, "I had to get on my bandwagon because they were all pissing me off! As artists, your art is your way of changing the world. That's your imprint that your leaving the world. And you have to open your mouth, and if you're not going to open your mouth than you shouldn't be an artist. I was just so taken aback. No one really wants change. No one wants to get out of their comfort zone. I was just so disgusted." All this, from someone who at the beginning of our process was incredibly resistant to the work we were doing! And then she added: "It made really think, Matt, about how you say its not good enough to give people what they expect, and that this - 'Agnes' - is our imprint, this is how we're changing people. How dare you call yourself an artist and not be willing to change and not be willing to affect change." Yes! This is the work! God forbid someone has an opinion. Ruffle a damned feather, people! I am famous for saying "You can't just do whatever," which most times can be transcribed with several exclamation points, I'm sure. I say this as a bitter reaction to those undiscerning, middle-of-the-road theatre artists - so-

called - who, in my opinion, prefer to settle for what they see as the best that they do rather than rolling up their sleeves and engaging in the dangerous and exhausting interrogation required of the serious theatre craftsman.

For as small and subtle as it is, this is turning out to be a very loud show.

Mallory - unintentionally and perhaps unsurprisingly - wore her cross home tonight, out into a world facing a new president and a hopeful new future.

I was very proud of her.

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*Once again facing the front of the room, you stand with your feet pressed together and pointed forward. Your right foot rises sharply only to cross your body and land in a violent Stomp on the opposite side of your left foot. Your left foot then rises instantaneously, Stomping out several inches beyond your planted right foot. This rapid exchange of Stomps continues rapidly and repeatedly, transporting you across the space sideways. The motion of your legs is pulling your body out of alignment, you notice, and you are jolting up and down as you execute each successive Stomp. The Teacher, observing you bouncing about and listing to and fro, commands you: "You must keep the torso forward and the body level!" As you adjust yourself, you almost chuckle with the recognition of the impossible multidimensionality of the form. While working at the alignment of your torso and the stillness of your upper body, you have allowed the activity of your lower body to go slack. "The knee must rise to maximum height!," the Teacher reprimands. How are you to do so, you wonder, without your wrenching your torso about? Resolved to achieve perfection, you Stomp more profoundly than ever, struggling mightily against the urge to mitigate the rigor of the form by allowing a flaccidity to creep into the rest of your body.*

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November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008: Where are we?

I think we've been getting so wrapped up in logistical concerns that we're forgetting why we're doing this in the first place. Several nights ago we hit the proverbial wall and I was stern and reproachful for the first time in the entire process. None of the actresses were focused, and I chastised them: "The God of Perfection is nowhere in sight. This is not good," I said harshly, and it cut them to the quick. I was disappointed, and felt we had worked too hard for too long to surrender to complacency now. I am a demanding director, I know, and I expect one hundred and ten percent one hundred and ten percent of the time. I demand 'perfection' on the first try even though I know I'm not ever going to get it - and I don't want to get it. The idea is to set a high standard of achievement just beyond the edge of the attainable, so that the actress can always taste it but never quite reach it. You see, it is not failure or floundering that's to be discouraged, but laziness: LACK of focus in rehearsal, LACK of preparation before rehearsal, etc. Doug, my undergraduate mentor, actually used to scream at us - and I mean scream - when we screwed up, something he's described as "his head popping off." Doug's hollering was something we'd come to expect, but every now and a gain he would say: "You know, I only yell when you are not living up to your potential." And he was right. And it was hard to take, but now that I'm sitting on the other side of that experience I can recognize that I am the better artist for it. I did not scream at the actresses that night, and I'm glad I didn't because I think it would have shut them down. The bite of my more pointed, stinging approach was meant to reprimand them as much as say "I know I am pushing you hard, perhaps too hard. But I know I am doing that and I am doing that on purpose. You might not like it now but in

the long run it's what has to be done." The next night's rehearsal was more focused and certainly more constructive, but it seemed like they were just going through the motions.

So, tonight I thought I'd take a minute to check in with everyone before we did any scene work. Katie, always the most vocal of the group, was the first to contribute. "I have no idea what this show looks like," she said, "I have no idea what it will be. I have no goal, really." I was actually relieved to hear her say this, because it quelled some concerns I've been having. Sometimes, I fear I am coaching them into getting what they 'should' be getting out of this process rather than letting it happen naturally. I need to guide them through the process without dictating to them discursively the benefits they should reap and without intimating that if they don't feel 'x', 'y', and/or 'z' they're doing something wrong. That kind of brainwashing is not the idea at all. Katie continued: "I'm not focused on my process. It's a lot of work, different kind of work, but I don't feel as if my acting is where it could be, or where it should be, if this were a more realistic process." I was also glad to hear Katie say this, and answered her concerns by reminding her that we are not simply experimenting with training and style here, but that we are also shifting expectations, especially regarding what is considered effective acting. It should feel grander, larger-than-life, but still truthful. I assured her that clear, specific, and mesmerizing acting was indeed happening, and she said: "It just doesn't feel like it does. It doesn't feel like work. It's enjoyable." I said that I have always found that great acting feels like you're doing nothing, and that when you get off stage you probably won't remember much of what happened onstage because you've been in an altered state. I'm

glad Katie is finding this enjoyable: self-confrontation is certainly not a task to be taken lightly, but that doesn't mean the rehearsal process can't be pleasurable and, after all, I wasn't trying send the actresses into madness. I just wanted them to reveal the full breadth of their creativity and provide them a means to use that creativity in rewarding and productive ways.

Mallory said: "This is breaking me. Since I've been in this show, my life has literally and physically fallen apart. Nothing's going well. I go to counseling, and my counselor asked if I thought this show was the catalyst. And I said yes, but I realized its also saving me. There hasn't been one rehearsal where one of us hasn't stomped around or screamed or pulled our hair out. It's breaking me down, but its building me back up. I came to rehearsal once crying my eyes out saying 'I can't rehearse, I can't rehearse!' but ended up doing some of my best work. When we started that night, I honestly had no idea what came after what. But I did it. The body knows." What Mallory was alluding to was her first real confrontation with the abuse she faced as a small child at the hand of an acquaintance. She first opened up to us during Ashley's Source Work report on abuse, telling us that we were the only people to whom she's ever confessed her abuse. After finally telling her mother about it, she came to rehearsal in shambles - crying her eyes out, as she said - and she and I spent a good while in the privacy of my office talking things through. I care about Mallory as if she were my own flesh and blood, and I am happy to lend an ear, a shoulder, a tissue - whatever she needs. And I'm glad she found in the ensemble a safe space to help her finally face such a horrible experience, but we are not professionals, and I am also glad she has sought the help of a counselor. I don't want to push her in directions she isn't ready to go, but

by her own admission it is through the work that she is finding the means to confront the darkest parts of herself, as well as finding the courage to wake up in the morning and do it all again in the face of such atrocities. Mallory is indeed a brave young woman, and I so admire her for the fearlessness with which she is approaching such an awful situation. I will continue to check in with her to see how she's doing. I have also gathered that Ashley has become an especially trusted confidant, and I am glad that Mallory has found such a compassionate, kind-hearted and gentle companion.

Mallory's comments have made it clear that we have crafted a safe environment to tempt such dangerous and personal work. I am glad that she doesn't feel as if I am forcing her to expose herself only to leave her to hang there on her own while I'm safely positioned on the other side of the footlights. Ashley said "You can't do theatre unless you really know yourself, but then you have to go home with that self, with your problems, your issues. This one, more than my past plays, is forcing me to confront myself a lot, and it's scary." She paused for a moment before adding: "But I know I'm going to know myself a lot better when this is over." She didn't say this to convince herself it was true; rather, she spoke with a slight smile, and it was clear that she understood the benefits of our difficult work.

The conversation then turned to our actual rehearsal procedure, and Mallory shared that, in the beginning, "I couldn't fathom putting a show together like this. I thought, What does that even mean? We're doing the whole thing in expressive gesture like that?" Ashley immediately agreed, and offered evidence as to what facilitated our flourishing over the past few weeks: "This has been the most collaborative process I've ever been a part of."

I think we've all had more input than we would normally have." I told them that this was a totally different way of working for me too - reminding them that I had never before trained anyone in Suzuki/Viewpoints myself nor used the Composition method to stage a show nor exhibited such hubris in revisioning a text - and that I was relying on them as much as they were relying on me to carry through.

At the end of our discussion, Milbre made her contributions. She said she saw an "enormous dedication and integrity in learning a new language and in the willingness to speak in that new language with enormous authority. Your building the work from the floor up," she continued, "and it is very impressive in the short time we've had the tools to do so. You all have an incredibly mature approach to the work, and the story you are telling is enormously believable. Wondering if it's working - that goes along with being the composer. But you have to trust that Matt - who knows what he's looking for - is seeing what he's looking for. And even if there are people who don't know what to make of the style of this play, I don't think there's anybody who will not be blown away by the quality of the work that you're doing. It is experimental, it is risk taking, but there again: that's the work of the artist." I think we were all stunned by Milbre's words, and have been so appreciative of having a more experienced - and movement-trained! - artist such as herself in the space with us. Mallory, Katie and Ashley all thanked her vociferously for her assistance in refining physical choices and functioning as an unyielding beacon of support. For my part, it's actually been wonderful to have a second eye in the room. Our previous experiences in movement training have given us different dialects, if you will, with which to speak the same essential language: we are always in tune with one another

and she understands completely where I am coming from and what I am after. I am such a control freak and would normally never even think to work with an assistant director, but somewhere in my subconscious I knew that our collaboration would be a fruitful one.

To transition us from discussing to doing, I led the actresses in a prolonged Viewpoints session. Although through our Composition work we certainly use the Viewpoints vocabulary - both physically and linguistically - I don't think we return to Open Viewpoints training enough, a casualty of logistics: there is so much work to do in crafting the score of any particular Movement - we need to give the work the space to live and grow and breath - that we often just don't have the time. Tonight's session was particularly productive, and appeared to reset the actresses in a way. Giving them the license to play ignited scores of fresh creativity and vision, and they were clearly working in deep, deep kinesthesia.

Once we finally got to the scenes themselves, their Composition work had a new life to it, and everyone seemed back on track. Finally, I can see it! I thought this would all work, and I had confidence in myself and in my intuition and in my collaborators, but honestly I had no real way of knowing if it actually would work. I had no real way of knowing what it would look like, if it would cohere, if its complexity would unsettle people in a productive way, if it would turn people on rather than off. And, my goodness, there it is! It's evocative and erotic and sweaty and thrilling and unsettling and a g gravating and slick and meaningful in ways even I will probably never be able to describe or understand fully. And I can't wait for people to see this ...

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*You point your body at your image horizontally across the space once again, standing with your feet parallel and facing forward, your knees bent and your arms at your sides. You glide briskly down the length of your lane, your feet enacting a rapid series of small, shuffling steps in which you roll continuously through the whole of each foot. You gather speed as you go, but this is not acceptable: the Teacher violently cracks His staff across the floor, and commands you to return to the starting line to begin again. You do so, and this time you achieve maximum speed immediately, although you are not out of the woods yet: "Even in great speed you must move with resistance!" the Teacher thunders. Your torso jostles back and forth slightly as you go, but you barely have time to correct yourself before you stop dead in your tracks at the far end of your lane. As you make your internal bow, you feel a powerful gust of wind brush past you, having been displaced via the velocity of your progression. Your skin becomes alive with goose pimples and your energies rage inside you, barely able to contain themselves. You have been touched by something, you feel, although you are uncertain of what that 'something' is.*

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December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008: And so it goes ...

Well, we've come to our final rehearsal. The actresses were wonderful in Company Class tonight; it's amazing how profoundly they commit to the rigor of Suzuki and how well the Rules have become absorbed into their bodies. Their work in show itself is specific and solid, evidence of their hard work and determination. The visual composition of the show is absolutely stunning: the technical elements have come into play nicely, and, rather than throwing them off-center, they have only enhanced the actresses' work. As an actor, I actually love tech rehearsals because the director is distracted with the new elements of sight and sound, taking some of the pressure off of my performance. I take this as my time to unpack my bags and fully and finally move onto the stage, to make it my home for the entirety of the

run. I told the actresses as much, and encouraged them to take ownership of their work.

After the run-through, I found myself thinking about how certain things we developed organically during physical source work have found their way into the performance score, such as Doctor and Mother's cockfight, which now explodes into Mother's deafening exclamation of the expletive "Goddamn liar!" when Doctor heatedly accuses Mother of killing Agnes's child. This moment serves as the startling climax to their relational arc, and arrives quite unexpectedly. I was also thinking about how clear the argument is - the debate of logic and faith - dilated and expanded through the expressivity of the actresses' bodies. And it occurred to me that we rarely spoke about the play itself during rehearsals. I suppose we didn't really have to because we so thoroughly prepared ourselves via our training and Source Work practices. Our work was always about clarifying the actresses' physical relationships to themselves and to each other. And so Agnes, literally born before our eyes, became the future we are trying to describe. Perhaps it is better to say that she is an extreme manifestation of a future we don't want, because Doctor and Mother's argument destroys her. Doctor and Mother both want to save Agnes, but they have different ideas about how to do that, and that clash of seemingly impermeable boundaries leaves Agnes a painful reminder of what might happen if we don't operate with a more acute, multi-perspectival sense of compassion and human understanding.

After rehearsal, we gathered for one last time to go over notes, to ask questions, and to discuss our process. The first thing I said was "How do we feel?," to which Katie enthusiastically replied: "Great! I'm beginning to see what this is going to look like. It's comforting. It took until yesterday."

She thought for a moment, and then continued: "This process really taught me about struggling, and how important that is to acting. And about myself, I learned that there's a wrong way to struggle and a right way. The wrong way is closing myself off to it and getting mad at myself or my director, or complaining that I'm trying and it just isn't coming, because that's when it's just about to come." This shows Katie's increased maturity and sense of personal awareness, for she was the last member of the ensemble to 'get' it. We talked about this: that whereas Mallory's struggle was getting over the attitude of "This is what we're doing?!" Katie's struggle was to do just that: struggle. Thinking about it this way, perhaps Katie's process is the clearest practical example of what we were all tempting: the miracle of the impossible - every day - so that we may be granted the privilege of calling ourselves an artist in the first place. Katie fought valiantly, and her courage should be admired and honored.

Mallory said, "I feel like I have more discipline," to which Katie replied, "I second that." Mallory's opening up to discipline is a major step in her process. My strong belief in training and technique means that I'm not someone who usually speaks of acting in terms of talent, but I do believe that some people are simply born to do certain things. Katie - like myself, I must admit - does not suffer from natural acting ability, whereas Mallory does: a natural sensitivity and sincerity she doesn't have to work too hard to evoke. What this means is that, because of her natural abilities, Mallory has spent most of her artistic life skating by without much demanded of her: without trying, she usually gives the strongest performance in the room. However, as one who understands the blessings of struggle, I was not about to let her 'phone it in' this time. This was not my expressed agenda, but rather

a necessary aspect of the process that she, of her own volition, was willing to commit herself to. "This was so hard," she said, "we've been screaming and having heart attacks and sore stomachs, but I just thought today: Thank you God, who gets to do this? Who else can do this? It was a real blessing." She should thank herself as well, because she earned the privilege to "do this" in the face of great adversity. Indeed, Mallory was alluding to each actresses' struggle with physical illness: Mallory herself was out for several days with severe gastroenteritis, I took Ashley to the emergency room myself when she was suffering from anxiety-related heart flutters, Katie came to Company Class once with food poisoning and vomited throughout the entire session (but kept working!), and Milbre was constantly trying to maneuver around with a badly bruised pinky toe. They all earned it!

Ashley said that she is not the same person she was before we began, benefiting from a shifted sense of bodily awareness and a peaceful acceptance of her albinism. "I feel older," she said, "I feel completely different. This is the closest I've ever felt to a character before. I mean, we are completely different, but when Agnes blames God for everything that's happened to her - and not that I do that - but growing up with this physical scar, but having to grow up with that and having to deal with it and having to deal with other people dealing with it ... I think it's appropriate that my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday is Friday. I just feel older, like I've really learned something. My skin is just itchy to show people this." Goodness, what do you even say to that? I can't imagine the ridicule she's faced. Talk about struggle! Her comments quieted the room, and all I could say was: "Ashley, at the end of your "Body Maps" piece you gave everyone the finger, and I hope you know your finger is still up." It shows: her work is

incredibly strong; tonight I actually wept at her delivery of the performance's final moments.

Milbre didn't say much, and she really hasn't said much at all about her own process over the course of our time together. I've gathered that she conceives of herself as separate from the ensemble in many ways. I suppose this was inevitable: she does not speak or move very much and spends the majority of the piece behind a window. Yet, I hope she understands that without her active presence as both the Virgin/Mother and as assistant director we would not have crafted a piece of theatre as beautiful, as challenging, or as precise.

For as much as there was at stake in its outcome, this process has been wonderfully low stress for me. My partner Ryan and I have worked on several productions together (he served as musical director and sound designer here), and a running joke between us is using the level my blood pressure as a barometer for how well things are going. With "Agnes" I am happy to report that my blood pressure was always low! At one point during rehearsal, I said as much and Ryan quipped: "Yeah, because you don't have to do everything yourself!" And he's right. I wasn't immune from the process of unlearning, and nor was I intending to be. Challenges make you discover things about yourself heretofore recognized. These discoveries force the instrument to stretch and push you beyond habit and convention. I can be too controlling, and in previous productions I think I've coached performers into playing characters I've created rather than assisting them in revealing their own performances. But here the work simply happened, and many things - like pace, for example - took care of themselves. It's a wonderful feeling. I think of myself as the "auteur" of this process, but really it

was the actresses themselves who wrote it into existence. I was more of a shaper or arranger rather than a director in the traditional sense.

What a fabulous ensemble we've been - and will continue to be! The training shows in their performance work, it really does. Their maturity, focus and intensity is to be commended. At the outset of the process, I told them two things they were never allowed to say: (1) "I'm sorry," and (2) "Matt, what do you want?" - and they never did! It was quite a leap of faith they took, well - that we all took. Thanking them for their implicit sense of trust, I encouraged them with the thought that they will never be more ready for an audience than they are right now: "It's not perfect," I reminded them, "it never will be perfect, and we don't want it to be perfect, but we will still kill ourselves trying!" I hope you all realize the profundity of what you're doing out there. I could teach you many things, but some of the stuff that's happening out there cannot be taught." With a dime and a flashlight - metaphorically speaking - we've carved out quite a stimulating little evening of theatre.

Before we adjourned for the night, Mallory said "My poor little behind was just in shattered pieces on the floor, but I feel put back together," before adding in a true comic take: "But, Matt, you wouldn't let us make fools of ourselves, would you?" After taking a moment to laugh with her, I said "My instincts are never wrong," with a wink. And Milbre replied: "Well that's why they're called instincts!"

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*As you crouch down to adopt the final form of this particular exercise, your bones creak from the strain. Up on your tiptoes in a low squatting position, you stretch your arms out in front of you, hands splayed, palms up-turned. With a straight back you shuffle forward at an incredibly high speed. The burn in your thighs is*

*so fierce that you nearly scream from the agony. Anticipating the potential to reduce the struggle, the Teacher bellows: "Keep on your center! Do not sit back on the haunches!" Your breathing becomes conspicuously heavy as you make your way across the space. Finally, you reach your destination in a swift halt. You rise laboriously to make your internal bow. You close your eyes, and an overabundance of intimate associations with all manner of strange matter begins to form. You realize that each of these nine disparate forms has conjured within you energies and imaginings and sensitivities of varying magnitudes. They now clamor about inside your still corporeal frame, vitalizing you, electrifying you, nearly setting you on fire – and so very certainly propelling you into a nascent but sensational future.*

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“You’re losing sleep, thinking of her all the time ... The symptoms are familiar. *I* know. I’m an expert on the disease. We’re in this together, you and I.”

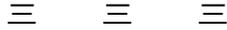


Figure 8. *Left to right:* Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom as Mother and Katherine Hamlett as Doctor. Photography by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

## Interlude

### *kinesthetic response:*

#### *opening play*



There's something so absolutely unbreakable about the link of a person sitting in the audience and a person acting on the stage. Person-to-person: a human connection.

- David Wheeler, quoted in *Chaos and Order: Making American Theater*

The [actress's] act – discarding half-measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from [herself] as opposed to closing up – is an invitation to the spectator. This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings.

- Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*

I think that what is marvelous is if, for ten seconds even, one can have a taste of a better world ... A theatre experience should bring one to a moment where, even on a very simple level, you see all that's going on in the world, and yet you live the fact that the same people who are killing one another can work together ... If it can happen for ten seconds, then your belief that it's worth struggling for makes sense.

- Peter Brook, quoted in Dale Moffitt, *Between Two Silences*

All people are fundamentally empathetic beings, and all of us would practice empathy if we knew what it could do for us.

- Tony Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here*

Christ died for our sins because He loved each and every one of us. When we do not remember His great sacrifice, we condemn ourselves to repeating its terrible consequences ... Look. Remember. Weep, if you will, but learn. And don't let it happen again.

- Terrence McNally, introduction to *Corpus Christi*

The instance of here and now is almost impossible to bring into focus, yet when some trigger causes it to occur to an assembly of people, the chances are that they will always remember it, as if it were a shift in consciousness resulting in breakthrough to some normally excluded dimension of experience. Holy theatre seeks to access this, and demonstrates how through extreme rigours of performance technique, the body and mind are torn from their comfortable lodgement in habit and circumstance.

- Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence*

The stage is a radical question. The theater appears only when we ask that question and hold the answer in suspense. The theater, if it has a future, belongs to the artists who take the art in their hands and who know the properties of their instrument as you would know the seat of your bicycle. The stage's poetic is terror's anatomy. You must act now, and life or death depends on your choice. If you don't know that actors die, I can show you how to do it.

- Hollis Huston, "The Secret Life of a Theoretician"

If my plays are about anything, [they're] about being alive and understanding the thrill of being alive ... and the thrill of being so present in a moment that it illuminates the mystery just for a flash.

- John Pielmeier, quoted in Gregory Bossler, "Writers and Their Work"

Movement 7:  
Suffering for Hire, Finding the Light

*statues:*  
*extending outward*

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*You and your fellow neophytes are scattered haphazardly about the space, each inclined forward in a low crouching position, your feet firmly planted on the floor and your arms hovering in soft tension over your knees. Blood rushes to your head in dizzying torrents as you anxiously await the Teacher's command. He stalks around the room slowly, ominously and, you think, with vile intentions. Suddenly He stops, and although you cannot see Him you sense He is standing barely an inch in front of you. After several searing moments of silent stillness He cracks His staff across the floor, screaming "HIT!" Your ears ringing, you shoot up into a dynamic upper body pose of your own instantaneous choosing. You teeter on the balls of your feet, your arms and torso contorted into a rather wild position that you struggle to sustain through a strong focus on image. "BACK!" He thunders, and you return swiftly to crouching to face the full brunt of His reproach. "Accelerate and break! There must be no bouncing, no overflow of energy! From center! HIT!" And with another whack of His stick you launch another pose. Quickly, the Teacher sends you "BACK!" for further reprimands: "No matter their individual trajectories, your arms, torso, head – the whole of the body – must move as one unit! HIT!" He leaves you suspended in midair for several precarious seconds before calling "BACK!" to issue yet another rebuke: "You must never predetermine and you must never repeat patterns and shapes. Allow the full palate to reveal itself through a strong focus on image. HIT!" Up you go again, your body writhing rapidly into your most complex shape yet. Finally, the Teacher calls "BACK!" and you descend into crouching. Barely in place, He thunders "HIT!" again and you rise in an unsteady rush of movement, and come "BACK!" to crouching only after an eternity spent tottering in your convoluted shape on overextended tiptoes. And so He continues, like a sadistic puppeteer, to bring you to life and to put you to rest at impossible intervals: sometimes the shifts are so fast that you feel as if you are wriggling about like a*

*fish out of water; sometimes you are commanded to hold a particular Statue for so long that you feel as if your bones will crack and you will simply disintegrate right there before the Teacher's very eyes.*

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“Isn’t it true that the only thing you can predict about the theatre is that is it unpredictable?” quips Angela Lansbury’s affable and wonderfully nosy mystery writer-cum-amateur sleuth Jessica Fletcher in one of my all-time favorite episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*.<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of one of her novels into dramatic form has taken Jessica away from her home in the cozy hamlet of Cabot Cove, Maine and brought her all the way to the glitz of New York City’s Great White Way, only to find herself put to the task of solving yet another murder. However, before we are treated to the latest installment of her keen – and persistent – investigatory prowess, we are first treated to a scene that is awfully observant of what I suspect many of us in theatre feel when our work, plied in the sanctity and privacy of the rehearsal hall, is put up for public performance. During the intermission, playwright Walter Knapf – worrying over the reception of his first Broadway bow – adjourns to the bar to get drink. Along the way, he pauses occasionally to listen in on the discussions of certain audience members, catching them in mid-conversation: “Best party I’ve been to in years. Daphne was there – and with Charles! Can you believe it?!” exudes a spunky lady wrapped in fur. “Don’t you tell me how tired you are! Do you know what my day was like?!” scolds a dowdy housewife, “First I rode the car pool, then I had to run all over town looking for *your* golf clubs –” She trails off as Walter finally arrives at the bar, only to over-hear two chummy businessmen: “First I get an estimate, and then I gotta knock down the wall. I mean, I gotta knock down the whole wall!” complains one suit to the other. Walter eventually makes his way back to Jessica and the extravagantly-swathed producer Shayne Grant: “No one’s talking

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Kasica, Michael Scheff, and Arthur Weingarten, “Deadpan,” disc 4, *Murder, She Wrote: The Complete Fourth Season*, DVD, directed by E. W. Swackhamer (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2006).

about the play,” he laments. “Well that’s great!” Shayne beams, “That means it’s taking their minds off their lives.” Walter retorts, “All they’re talking about *is* their lives!” and Shayne, spin doctor that she is, counters with: “Well that is wonderful! That means the play has relevance!”

The irony runs thick in this little display. In my estimation, audience members talking about their lives as a consequence of a night spent at the theatre *should* indicate that the performance has indeed had some relevance. I am reminded of a comment made by *New York Times* theatre critic Charles Isherwood in his review of David Cromer’s recent acclaimed production of Thornton Wilder’s masterpiece *Our Town*, a stark and galvanizing piece of the theatre I had the privilege to witness and found to engender the presentness and visibility of direct experience: “[The production] expresses with a fine clarity the idea that theatre is not, ideally, an escape from life but a means of entering into it more fully.”<sup>2</sup> Isherwood is, of course, absolutely correct, yet the tempering of his insightful sentiment with the word “ideally” is evidence of the prevalence of the tepid, uninvolved theatre apparently experienced by the unwitting cast of arts’ patrons in this particular episode of *Murder, She Wrote*. They go about their business during the intermission, picking up where they left off an hour or so before as if their lives have been uninterrupted, at least by anything worthy of redirecting their attention. I find indifference – in life and in art – absolute blasphemy, the most offensive act one can make against my work as a theatre craftsman. Indeed, I couldn’t agree less with Jessica’s own attempt to quell Walter’s concerns: “Well, at least they’re not saying anything negative about it.” If only she knew of my deep desire that someone protest one of my shows some day, that I would rather someone feel *something* – even immense

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Isherwood, “21<sup>st</sup>-Century Grover’s Corners, with the Audience as Neighbors,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2009.

distaste – rather than sit there – dispassionate and unresponsive – and leave the play worrying over nothing more than where to go for dinner.

Pielmeier himself has said: “I wanted to write a play that people would talk about afterward. The best compliment I ever had about *Agnes* was from a woman who said, ‘My husband and I were up all night arguing about this play’.”<sup>3</sup> Our production tempted such extended engagement, and so our theatreing of the sacred took full advantage of *Agnes*’s fundamental interrogatory nature to unsettle spectators unexpectedly and cause a momentary rent in their daily lives, hopefully leaving them profoundly affected and even, perhaps, altered. Anne Bogart has said that “if the theatre is an art form, then its function is to stop us ... I want to create work which creates questions rather than answers. Because as soon as you have an answer ... you fall asleep. But with a question you’re irritated and awake, and I’m interested in creating theatre that irritates and awakens us.”<sup>4</sup> It was, of course, our express purpose to irritate and awaken, and I take it as no small achievement that one audience member actually used the word “irritate” to describe her experience! “What I want,” Bogart continues, “is for us to engage together around a theme, a play, a question, and to find a vehicle in which that question or theme can live. A vehicle meaning a staging ... that you can share with an audience, that an audience can go through that vehicle ... and be stopped by [a] certain strength of presence.”<sup>5</sup> It was through our rhythmic rendering of the play – our Suzuki/Viewpoints-modulated Composition work and corporealization of the

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<sup>3</sup> John Pielmeier, quoted in Gregory Bossler, “Writers and Their Work,” *The Dramatist* (September/October 1999): 20-1.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre: Preserving the Legacy Volume Three*, DVD, Theatre Communications Group Oral History Project, produced by The Ford Foundation, The Allen Foundation for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Virgin/Mother – that we found *our* vehicle, the sacred conduit that tempted performers and spectators to experience contiguously and interactively “the metaphysical world through physical acts,” because, says internationally renowned Japanese actor Yoshi Oida, “ideal theatre is the creation of an invisible world through visual presentation.”<sup>6</sup>

I have heard it from more than one theatre artist over the years that he or she could simply rehearse forever and never transition into public performance; I could not, and, indeed, don't feel there is much reason to rehearse if we are not going to share our work with the larger community. I disagree with this sentiment not because I am interested in seeing my name in lights or in receiving some sort of laudatory pat on the back to make me feel good about myself. Rather, I conceive of the rehearsal process as a progression towards public performance because the work, I believe, should always be crafted with the audience in mind, not to talk down to them, not to cater to them, not to give them what they ostensibly want or, perhaps more predictably, expect – *‘The audience knows what it wants. My job is to prove them wrong’* and *‘The audience doesn't know what they want, they want what they know’* are two particularly pithy adages I've come to embrace – but to occasion “fresh ways of perceiving and experiencing life and issues of what it means to be a human being in this world now.”<sup>7</sup> My collaborators and I trod a difficult terrain throughout the training and rehearsal process and indeed reaped personally the affective benefits of the unlearning characteristic of sacred experience, but this would have been nothing more than an exercise in self-indulgence were we not to offer to the community our more whole, discovered selves as gifts of renewal within the carnal event space of public performance.

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<sup>6</sup> Yoshi Oida with Lorna Marshall, *An Actor Adrift* (London: Methuen, 1992), 159.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*.

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*“HIT!” the Teach bellows, and you shoot up after an exceptionally long period of crouching. Over the course of this particular exercise your focus on image has sharpened with an incredible clarity. These images are stirring you, igniting your creativity and broadening your sense of the possible.*

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Moreover, I do not conceive of the public performance of a play as a *product*, but rather as a living, breathing, ever-evolving phenomenon, one that demands the spectator become a coconspirator in the creative process: “The relationship is circular,” says Bogart, “The [actress] initiates and the audience completes the circle with their imagination, memory and creative sensibilities. Without a receiver, there is no experience,” and, elsewhere: “The idea of being in the room together, of sharing common air, of being able to reach out and touch somebody and to be addressing issues together, is an extraordinary thing.”<sup>8</sup> In our work, we conceived of the relationship between performer and spectator as one of *reciprocity*, a concept articulated by Stacy Holman Jones as “the idea that a performer will meet her audience halfway in creating the experience of performance. It refuses to construct the audience as passive and distant observers of an aesthetic event,” because, she continues, “reciprocity *implicates* the audience in the creation of the performance” so that they are “not encouraged so much as *expected* to participate.”<sup>9</sup> Holman Jones asks us to listen to Lena Horne’s road manager Ralph Harris speak about the profoundly reciprocal art of her singing: “[She] works on a crowd’s insides, until the crowd is giving her as much as she gives the crowd ... She is not singing at them, and they realize they’ve got to give something back or

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 69; Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*.

<sup>9</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, *Torch Singing: Performing Resistance and Desire from Billie Holiday to Edith Piaf* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 117.

it's no dice. She's crystallizing something for them that needs *their* help."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, scholar Christian De Quincey has observed that "direct interior-to-interior engagement ... is the *only* way people can share meaning and understand each other."<sup>11</sup> By "working on a crowd's insides," we hoped to inspire spectators to recognize and consent to the challenge of participation, to encourage a "willingness to engage more fully in the performance and," in a significant and liberating way, "a responsibility ... to confirm what is happening" that creates a sensuous knowledge in and through each fevered moment.<sup>12</sup>

Holman Jones asserts that reciprocity is not achieved "in an audience's *witnessing* of a performance," but rather by way of a performer giving "artistic expression to a community message or idea in *collaboration* with spectators."<sup>13</sup> However, Bogart proffers an alternative understanding of the idea of witnessing, exposing nothing more than a mere semantic difference between the scholars' arguments and actually confirming and expanding Holman Jones's sense of the term. Bogart reminds us that the etymology of the word *theatre* is "a place of seeing," from the Greek *theatron*, *thea* meaning eyes and *tron* meaning place. "The theater makes witnesses of the audience," she says, "a witness is not a bystander, but rather a perceiver whose presence makes a difference. A witness has a role to play and can verify and testify that something indeed did happen ... Being a witness makes you responsible. Once

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Harris, quoted in James Haskins with Kathleen Benson, *Lena: A Personal and Professional Biography of Lena Horne* (New York: Stein, 1984), 136, quoted in *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Christian De Quincey, "The Promise of Integralism: A Critical Appreciation of Ken Wilber's Integral Psychology," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7 (2000): 188.

<sup>12</sup> Henry J. Elam Jr., *Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Louis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 112, quoted in Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 117-18.

<sup>13</sup> Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 117.

an observer, you have become a participant.”<sup>14</sup> Bogart maintains that it is the quality of an audience’s attentiveness that determines the trajectory of a particular performance because, as quantum physics has proven, “the act of observation alters what is observed ... Intense watchfulness is what generates a pressurized environment, the cauldron, in which chemistry occurs.”<sup>15</sup> Participation and thus collaboration are still implied in Bogart’s interpretation, even though central to her position is the irrefutable fact of witnessing characteristic of a performative event. And, after all, we do not mean ‘participation’ in the sense that audience members literally are playing about the stage, but rather, through the intensity of their attentiveness. The vitality of our work was meant to tempt a full-bodied commitment that would give the actresses the “permission to make unexpected leaps of flight” which then, in turn, would compel spectators to do the same in a sensuously interactive experience. This is not the kind of performance that creates a room in which the audience may peer into, but rather establishes a playing space that includes *everybody*.

Renowned playwright Tony Kushner has spoken eloquently on the “unbelievably powerful partnership between an audience and the staged event,” discovering that the “wild, intense, [and] complicated negotiation” between actress and audience shows “that our boundaries are much more permeable than we realize ... That possibility of response ... means that you are not there simply to partake of it; you are actually the point of it in a certain way, and it is so much a give and take that if you have had a good experience at the theatre, you leave feeling just incredibly full of your own humanity.”<sup>16</sup> In this easy

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Kushner, quoted in Anne Nicholson Weber, ed., *Upstaged: Making Theatre in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 160-61.

information age where the world is at our fingered tips and we are conditioned into passivity by the fact that we don't even have to leave the house to communicate, our tempting of a sensuously communal experience demanded that we recall *imagination* to the forefront, that we make it an *effort* to attend a performance, that we engender moments that encourage our audience – through the actresses' sheer physical virtuosity – to *participate* in the performance and affect its very *evolution*; that we profoundly stir the audience, to make the experience nourishing and to transport spectators to a world that is both shockingly unpredictable and thoroughly illuminating. We did this in recognition of the fact that, in the words of the great Paul Scofield, audiences “may have many different reasons for their attendance, but the root cause is because theatre is living flesh and blood and breath. Nothing can displace the communication between [actress] and audience,” and because “great theatre is an unexpected happening, like a volcanic eruption; it can never be anticipated. It occurs as a source of amazement and shock, and of enlightenment.”<sup>17</sup>

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*The Teacher calls “BACK!” sending you careening downward. You are reluctant to relinquish focus on this particular image, and a sense of loss accompanies the trip.*

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I have come to think about audience via Herbert's Blau's theory that it “is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it ... The audience is what *happens* when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response.”<sup>18</sup> Each spectator brings to the theatre certain expectations fueled by a lifetime of experiences, and thus as a collective is perhaps the greatest unknown in the vast series of

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Scofield, quoted in *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 25.

unknowns that fashion theatre into an altogether disorienting encounter. The audience is at once an anonymous gathering of individual strangers and a community intricately and – hopefully – sensuously bound through – also hopefully – the fleshy vitality of an evening’s proceedings. “The audience is always the wild card,” performance studies scholar Christie Logan has discovered, “We can predict but can’t control what they will do. We also know there is an inherent suspense in the progressive present of performance. Once we enter that space, as performer and audience, anything can happen.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, our work took full rein of the volatile notion that compelling theatre is, in the words of Anne Bogart, “what *happens* [emphasis added] between spectator and [actress].”<sup>20</sup> As I have established, we understand the sacred as an event – a *happening* – as much as we understand theatre as such, and so in plying a sacred performative confrontation between and among performers and spectators, we worked to fill the experience with uncertainty and the all-important sense of danger, that element of risk so incredibly crucial – and *unique* – to the live theatrical enterprise. Robert Falls, Artistic Director of Chicago’s renowned Goodman Theatre, calls this the “thrilling” sense of immediacy: that an “[actress] could have a heart attack or [she] could forget [her] lines, [she] could trip over a table, or a lighting instrument could fall and stop everything. And because,” he continues, “anything number of things can happen in theatre, it’s alive, and I think the audience senses that.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, we tempted a sweaty, animalistic, and, I daresay, *erotic* encountering that – to paraphrase Bogart’s discussion of “the archetypal pattern of a passionate relationship” – stops you in your tracks, draws you in, disorients you,

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<sup>19</sup> Christie Logan, “The Space Between: Phenomenologies of Audience, Performer, and Place for Three Performances of *Menopause and Desire*,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25.3 (2005): 288.

<sup>20</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Falls, quoted in Weber, 136.

and leaves you “changed irrevocably.”<sup>22</sup> However, it must be understood that from our perspective, this erotic tension – what Bogart calls “the drama of co-presence” – is not *inherent* in the act of theatre, and indeed neither is its very eventfulness.<sup>23</sup> The responsiveness of an audience must be inspired by something *worthy* of their fiery attention. Such wild elemental – and communal – forces can only be wrought, I believe, through a profound and unsettling interrogation and excavation of a piece and its players and then, perhaps most importantly, *offering* that experience to all those who bear witness.

Proceeding from the belief that theatre is an event experienced through its moment-to-moment materialization between a particular audience and particular performers on a particular evening, we recognized that, “as theatre artists, we cannot create an experience for an audience; rather, our job is to set up the circumstances in which an experience might occur.”<sup>24</sup> The initiation of that seed of experience was, for us, the Compositional score developed and practiced throughout the rehearsal process. We consistently and conscientiously labored at, in Bogart’s words, “constructing a framework that [would] allow for endlessly new currents of vital life-force, ... a vehicle in which the [actresses] can move and grow” in relation to an audience, because, “paradoxically, it is the restrictions, the precision, the exactitude, that allows for the possibility of freedom.”<sup>25</sup> This is actually a metaphor for how Suzuki and Viewpoints work together to temper the body to generate Composition work: Suzuki training strengthens and focuses the instrument, facilitating a fecundity in the playfulness of Viewpoints that exercises one’s physical intelligence and

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<sup>22</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 61-62.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

readies one to initiate action instinctually and authentically and without excess. Elsewhere, Bogart has asserted that “art happens once something is set, once it is decided upon,” yet “a successful production is one in which moments that have been carefully selected and artfully arranged feel spontaneous, natural, full of life,” and I am inclined to agree with her.<sup>26</sup> The ability to make specific choices is an essential – and inherently violent – tool for the artist because the theatre is, fundamentally, the art of repetition, an endless – but not static – resurrection of the birth of the originating impulse. And so we entered into the public space of performance with our score – our *vehicle* – a highly stylized, symbolic and collaborative dance of the actresses’ gestural expressivity, itself a series of spontaneous individual moments shaped and then solidified into an ever-evolving, riveting, and overwhelming whole.

Richard Schechner has referred to score as “the most visible part of the performer’s life as lived in performance.”<sup>27</sup> In Schechner’s conception, a score is comprised of “the exact physical actions, musical tones, and rhythms that embody the themes and moods of the production ... *tuned* the way a sailboat is tuned for racing: taut, sparse, efficient, active.”<sup>28</sup> However, Schechner is careful to mark the mutability of the score, reminding us that “the performer’s score gives [her] anchor points – moments of contact, an underlying rhythm, secure details: places to go and get to ... The score is not hard like glass. It is a membrane, a skin of an extended life-system that only an ensemble/group can create. The score is alive,

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<sup>26</sup> Anne Bogart, “When Does Art Begin?,” Anne’s Blog, entry posted September 1, 2009, <http://siti.groupsite.com/post/september-1-2009-when-does-art-begin> (accessed September 1, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Applause Books, 1994), 295.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

sensitive,” and perhaps most importantly, “responsive.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, the animalistic sensitivity encouraged by the special attention paid to our particular methods of training and performance-making – our sacred praxes – worked towards inciting “a transgressive interactive event” during which the actress “[touched] the audience sympathetically through the rhythm of [her] physiology, words, breath, and movements, and [acted] sensing the audience’s response to it through [her] body.”<sup>30</sup> Such activity was intended to create a sense of intimacy within our act of theatre that demanded the audience experience the performance on a visceral level, to become somatically involved in the event as they are emotionally aroused and physically confronted. Paul Allain describes this as a mode of performance in which “the spectators almost actively ‘participate’ in the event through the vitality of their physical responses, which affect the performer’s impulses in a continuously interactive cycle.”<sup>31</sup> Their bodies eloquent and articulate and carried by Meyerhold’s notion that “movement is the most powerful means of theatrical expression,” each night the actresses ignited their intricately and meticulously crafted scores as if for the first time, each night entreating an immediate, spontaneous, transitory and kaleidoscopic experience.<sup>32</sup>

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*The Teacher propels you into a frenzy: “HIT! – BACK! – HIT! – BACK! – HIT!” He leaves you to heave on your tiptoes for several moments, bent over, extended out to your left and facing backward in a hopelessly warped position. You amaze yourself, contorting yourself into shapes you might have thought were otherwise impossible for your body to achieve.*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 294-95.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Allain, *The Art of Stillness: The Theater Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 5; Tadashi Suzuki, quoted Ibid., 121.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 147.

Ours was a kind of total theatre, “a corporeal and spatial event, in which all the [actress’s] faculties of bodily expression animated the empty space of performance,” tempting “an experience that reintegrates the spectator’s mind and body in a primordial unity of being.”<sup>33</sup> Artaud wrote: “The theater is the only place in the world and the last collective means we still have of reaching the organism directly and ... by physical means which it cannot resist.”<sup>34</sup> He believed “the domain of the theater is not psychological but plastic and physical. And it is not,” he continues, “a question of whether the physical language of theater ... is able to express feelings and passions as well as words, but whether there are not attitudes in the realm of thought and intelligence that words are incapable of grasping and that gestures and everything partaking of a spatial language attain with more precision than [words].”<sup>35</sup> Reacting violently against civilization’s repression of the carnality of human experience, Artaud’s theatre sought to make manifest the intelligence of the body in performance, to make the encounter between spectator and spectacle an entirely visceral one through symbolic action evolving as a series of “violent physical images [that] crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces.”<sup>36</sup> Artaud’s deepest desire, of course, was to “restore all the arts to ... necessity” by “finding an analogy between a gesture made in painting or the theater, and a gesture made by lava in a volcanic explosion,” and that to do any less meant “we must stop painting,

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 278-79.

<sup>34</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 257-58.

<sup>35</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-3.

babbling, writing, or doing whatever it is we do,” a sentiment I agree with heartily.<sup>37</sup> Artaud made this wonderful call to action in full recognition that – and I *love* this – “there is risk involved, but in the present circumstances I believe it is a risk worth running. I do not believe we have managed to revitalize the world we live in ... but I do propose something to get us out of our marasmus, instead of continuing to complain about it, and about the boredom, inertia, and stupidity of everything.”<sup>38</sup> *Love* is probably the most accurate word I can find to capture the sensibility of the – I daresay – erotic relationship I find myself in with regard to the extremity and passion of Artaud’s vision, a vision advanced nearly a century ago but that was, for myself and my *Agnes of God* compatriots, an accurate depiction of *current* society, a society removed from its fundamental corporeality, ravaged by wars – both actual and ideological – and mired in hard-edged cynicism and deep-seeded distrust. Indeed, our staging *Agnes of God* as a theatreing of the sacred was our proposition for sustenance and – remembering Meyerhold’s theory of the Theatre of the Straight Line and its conception of actress and spectator as mutually affective – once born, it was time to take our work that crucial final step and stand face to face with spectators, so that the actresses might freely reveal their souls in an intricate, bewildering and, hopefully, an ultimately rejuvenating circle of attention.

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*The Teacher whacks His stick across the floor to deliver yet another directive, and you rush downward only to realize you have done the unspeakable: you anticipated His command and so are crouching rather than up in your Statue forcefully answering His call for “TEXT!” “NO!” He bellows, “BACK!” sending everyone down with a reproving smack of His staff. Your face turns red with shame.*

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 83.

“The way a production begins,” says Anne Bogart, “should already question the familiar range of my habitual perceptions.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it has always been my belief that the audience’s attention must be captured *immediately* and *with surprise*, and I don’t mean at the invocation of the first line of text. Rather, the experience must begin *before* it begins, at the exact instant the spectator enters the theatre building. It is in the lobby – that “classic liminal space” that marks out “a spatial and temporal threshold between the outside world and the inside world of theater” – that, if used appropriately, we can momentarily erase “the boundary between the world on stage and the world inhabited by the spectators” and so induct spectators into the play-world.<sup>40</sup> Rather than provide the usual foyer fodder – production photographs, reviews, posters, cast biographies with accompanying headshots, etc. – we tempted a less common – and potentially more interactive – link to the performance about to unfold. This developed, as much of our work did, as a exercise in subtraction: after going through several iterations of lobby display – including spattering the walls with our favorite quotes regarding the theatre and its function in society – we eventually decided it might be more striking to do nothing, that perhaps a cooler rendering of the lobby might clear spectators of expectation, effectively piquing their curiosity and better preparing them for the investigation and participation that was to be expected of them in the hot zone of performance. This meant leaving the walls bare, actually removing the few photos from previous productions hung about the lobby and emptying a large display case. That is, except for one single item that *we* placed in the display case, a quote from Yoshi Oida that read: “When people leave the theatre, they should be different to when they arrived. In the old days, people went to church once a week in order to be spiritually

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<sup>39</sup> Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 46.

cleansed. Nowadays this seldom occurs. But good theatre should fulfill a part of this function. Like a shower, it should cleanse people.”<sup>41</sup> In these few sentences, Oida summarizes the motivations behind *all* of this work, and I could not resist tacking it up as a cryptic placard that, without be too obvious, clued spectators into the fact that *something* was about to happen, something that would require more of them than they might have been ready or willing to give.

But our work did not end with bare walls and enigmatic quotations. The lobby of MU’s Corner Playhouse is a tight, uncomfortable space short on fresh air, seating, and room for movement. Taking advantage of the limitations of space, we kept spectators – with nowhere to go lest they desired to venture out into the frigid winter air – packed in this hot climate like so many sardines for as long as the house staff would allow to aggravate their sensitivities and shock them into wakefulness. Spectators were inundated by the far-away strains of Agnes singing gloriously the *Preces Nostras*, our own musical rendering of a portion of text from the Rite of Baptism, invoked by the priest as he makes the Sign of the Cross with his thumb on the candidate’s forehead and breast: *Preces nostras, quaesumus, Dómine, cleménter exáudi: et hanc eléctam tuam Agnes crucis Domínicae impressióne signátam perpétua virtúte custódi*, she sung in Latin – “O Lord, we implore Thee, in Thy kindness hear our prayers, and guard with unfailing power this Thy chosen Agnes, who has been stamped with the seal of the Lord’s cross.” Spectators were greeted by box office staff and ushers who were dressed similarly to Mother – they wore all black and silver crosses – and who provided programs that included the extended quotation from *Fifth Business* cited by Pielmeier at the outset of the play text as well as my own director’s notes. My original thinking was to deliver programs at the *end* of the performance, but this was to be a unique experience witnessed by no one

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<sup>41</sup> Oida, *An Actor Adrift*, 162.

who knew much – if anything – of the history, philosophy, or utility of our methods. I am always invested in audience education and so with the encouragement of the entire ensemble I thought it best to give spectators *some* context for the strange and seductive play of sight and sound about to play out before them.

Once the doors were finally opened unto the shabby but wonderfully flexible black box space located in the former Baptist Student Union-cum-Fine Arts Annex, spectators were overwhelmed by Agnes's singing and were treated to an arrestingly beautiful – and frightfully unexpected – vision. It has been my experience that many people are familiar with *Agnes of God*, if not via some high school or community theatre production than the Academy Award-nominated film of 1985 starring Jane Fonda and Anne Bancroft. *Our* production was not advertised to the community in any way that gave even the slightest hint at our revisioning of the quasi-classic text. While this was not intentional, I take it as another 'accident' that worked in our favor, because whether or not any particular audience member knew anything about *Agnes of God* – and as many would later confirm – no one could have anticipated the experience about to unfold. Indeed, it must have been quite a sight to walk into the small, intimate space and find Milbre, outfitted in full Virgin/Mary regalia, standing in dynamic stillness in the center of the moon-like playing space<sup>42</sup>, in front of her Mallory, splayed out on the floor in the silhouette of a crucifix, wearing not a habit but a jacket and *pants*, and, perhaps most disarmingly, Katie, in not much more than her slick red wig and black dress shirt, sitting *in the audience*, seductively slunk about her chair, puffing away at a cigarette-less cigarette holder.

Suddenly, and without the disturbing interference of a house speech, a church bell began to strike fervently. As the bell chimed and Agnes's singing faded into silence, Mother

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<sup>42</sup> It seems worth noting that several people commented that they thought Milbre was *actually* a statue until they noticed her blink. Bravo, Milbre!

briskly came to a kneeling position, crossed herself, and quickly seized the vessel of holy water awaiting her at the foot of the statue of the Virgin/Mother. Standing sharply, she advanced in her characteristically rigid stride, stopping before each section of spectators on all three sides of the playing space to sprinkle them with holy water, effectively baptizing them into the experience. Finally, she reached the section of the audience where Doctor was sitting. Mother blessed these spectators as she did the others, moving the sprinkler with the directionality of the Sign of the Cross, but then gave an additional, high-arc'd sprinkle aimed directly at Doctor. Once the water hit Doctor, she stood, violently striking her high-heeled foot against the hard wood of the risers. The space went momentarily silent, before Agnes's intonation of the Kyrie began to engulf the room. Mother made her way to the center-most point of the extreme downstage arc of the circular playing space at the same time that Doctor made her way through the audience to the center of the aisle separating the two main sections of spectators. Here, Doctor and Mother leaned into one another across the void in an extremely tense moment of hot anticipation that was held for several eternal seconds. Eventually, Doctor and Mother released the hold, and Mother retreated to the shadows at the rear of the playing space as Doctor snaked her way to the floor of the risers to begin her opening monologue. From here, the piece evolved as a dance of symbolically significant and precisely crafted gestures, the actresses' shadows extending out across the space, enveloping spectators as they orbited one another on a full moon, that wonderful "archetype of cosmic becoming," a symbol of maternity and life-rhythms that "waxes, wanes and disappears," as does the theatre itself, and whose repetitiveness of function features an "ever-recurring cycle" that facilitates the "perpetual return to its beginnings."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1959), 180; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1966), 154.

It is worth taking a moment to discuss Doctor's audience-directed monologues. Taking full advantage of their function, we staged each aria *outside* the circular playing space, placing Doctor in and amongst spectators. In this way, Doctor's speeches were particularly useful sites for the creation of what designer and scholar Arnold Aronson calls "unified space," an integration of stage and auditorium in which "the distinction between spectator and performance space becomes less definable ... as there is a greater sharing of space."<sup>44</sup> These moments of – sometimes literally – direct contact featured Doctor in extremity: bent over backward, sprawled out across the length of the central aisle of the risers, crouching, crawling, throwing herself about, seductively and oftentimes rather violently contorting herself into all manner of complex and seemingly impossible shapes. Doctor's ferocity was enacted beautifully and unashamedly by a scantily clad Katie Hamlett working on a tightrope at the far edge of the possible, and was set to encourage that sensibility of abandon within the spectators. Indeed, these moments served as the most obvious invasion of our work into the private space of the spectators, a space turned inside out and made public – made *communal* – through Katie's sacrificial act of self-revelation.

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*"HIT! – TEXT!" Having refocused your energies, this time you respond appropriately to the Teacher's challenge, once again reciting Menelaus's speech from The Trojan Women. The precariousness of your position compromises your ability to breath deeply, and you must struggle more profoundly to maintain the powerful and communal recitation of text.*

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The physical score of the piece was necessarily expressive of the fraught encounter between Doctor and Mother played out at Agnes's expense, resulting, in our conception, in her bloody crucifixion. Pielmeier has said that he was rather intrigued by "the theme of

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<sup>44</sup> Arnold Aronson, *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1981), 5, 7-8.

innocence with blood on one's hands."<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, he explains: "I've always been fascinated by innocence. I find it compelling and mysterious. If this nun were in some way spiritually, mentally innocent – and yet capable of committing a horrible crime – well, I became fascinated by the duality."<sup>46</sup> We took full advantage of this confounding binary, and by giving actual body to Pielmeier's mystifying premise via Agnes's crucifixion, we worked to leave our audience profoundly rattled. There Agnes stood in the center of the space all by her lonesome, blood dripping from her outstretched arms, opened up to the audience as if to say "Look at what they – Doctor, Mother, *my* mother – have done to me. Remember this. Don't let this happen again."

Wonderfully, Pielmeier leaves his puzzle unfinished, for some exasperatingly so, to be sure. He does this by crafting Doctor's final speech as a series questions which strikes a lasting blow and makes good on his promise, cited earlier, "to write a play that simply asked questions, because I don't think answers are as important."<sup>47</sup> Although the monologue is the last bit of text, it doesn't so much close the piece as open it up, and displays for me the script's most electrifying feature: that the play never really terminates. Yes, of course, there is no more dialogue after page seventy-five and the event itself is over – I am not writing from wings! – but is it really a coincidence that the final line of text is *not* followed by the customary "END OF PLAY" marker? The play does not conclude inside a tidy little box wrapped up in a tidy little bow. Made especially pungent through our sacred eventing, this is theatre you have to continuously rethink, theatre that, in Grotowski's words, "is capable of

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<sup>45</sup> John Pielmeier, quoted in Nina Darnton, "Theater; Young Actors Seek Their Own Truths About Vietnam," *New York Times*, November 24, 1985.

<sup>46</sup> John Pielmeier, quoted in Trevor Thomas, "The Headline that Became a Play," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1984.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

challenging itself and its audience by violating accepted stereotypes of vision, feeling, and judgment – more jarring because it is imaged in the human organism’s breath, body, and inner impulse.”<sup>48</sup> By way of the perplexing and symbolic play of the actresses’ sensuous rendering of the text and a disinclination to put forth definitive answers at the behest of definitive questions, the piece forced itself into the hearts and minds – *and bodies* – of all those who attended to it.

“Why?,” Doctor asked as she made her way back to her original seat in the thick of the audience,

Why was a child molested, and a baby killed, and a mind destroyed? Was it to the simple end that not two hours ago this doubting, menstruating, non-smoking psychiatrist made her confession? What kind of God can permit such a wonder one as her to come trampling through this well-ordered existence?! ... I *want* to believe she was ... blessed! And I *do* miss her. And I hope that she has left something, some little part of herself, with *me*. That would be miracle enough ... Wouldn’t it?<sup>49</sup>

Katie followed Pielmeier’s single “Wouldn’t it?” with wave of additional “Wouldn’t it?”s, growing in intensity as she directed each one at various individual spectators both near and far. Finally, she trained her gaze on the crucified image of Agnes, and begged the question one final time. The audience was treated to several uncomfortable and interminable seconds of absolute stillness before the house lights were brought up. Spectators were forced to walk past Agnes as they exited the space, enveloped by the profound silence of her weighty sentence as Redemptrix and, we hope, leaving with that “little part of herself” that might enlighten and revitalize each and every one of them. If “emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns,” says Peter Brook, “The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a

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<sup>48</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 22.

<sup>49</sup> John Pielmeier, *Agnes of God* (New York: Samuel French, 1982), 75.

trace, a smell – a picture. It is the play’s central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say.”<sup>50</sup> And so we left each spectator with a “kernel engraved on [his or her] memory:” a poor innocent covered in blood.<sup>51</sup>

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*In the middle of the speech, the Teacher thunders “BACK!” and you burdle into crouching, the shock of the invasion nearly throwing you out of center completely.*

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In *The Way of Acting*, Suzuki discusses at length his interest in recovering “the fundamental concept of a communal art ... [that] has become virtually extinct.”<sup>52</sup> For him, this “involves the establishment of a community of place and time, encompassing both performers and spectators, so that a dialogue may pass between them.”<sup>53</sup> He conceives of this community in an “open space,” by which he does not mean “‘large,’ but a space that is only defined by the performance.”<sup>54</sup> He continues: “In principle, an open space does not create itself” but is formed when “a group of people collects in one spot – they may be eating and drinking together, discussing one thing or another, as though they had all come together as part of a larger conversation.”<sup>55</sup> Harking back to the theatre of the ancient Greeks – in which, after a performance was over, spectators would reflect on what they had seen and ask questions and carrying on discussions with the actors – Suzuki laments the fact

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 136.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 80.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

that the economic and logistic efficiency of our current “mechanized culture” often means that theatre today “can be performed only ... in as brief time as possible, for an audience that watches, then departs very quickly,” a fact that “severely limits the possibilities of drama in our generation.”<sup>56</sup> In establishing an open space to allow for dynamic performer-spectator dialogue to occur, Suzuki believes that audiences “will not only feel that [the performance] has some connection to their own lives, but they will sense at the same time that they are stepping into a somewhat different atmosphere ... they will begin to examine themselves from new and unusual angles ... [and] begin to contemplate their own actions.”<sup>57</sup>

It was always my intention to engage the audience in a post-show discussion because I wanted to increase the impact of the evenings proceedings, because I wanted to provide a space for the audience to inquire about and reflect openly on the dizzying and seductive performance, and because I wanted some sort of gauge – however imperfect – of the efficacy of our intentions. In this way, our ‘talk-back,’ as we called it, provided a venue for the expression of reactions and feelings, as well as engendering a mutual exchange between and among performers and spectators that facilitated growth and consciousness-raising. Anne Bogart has said that “theatre is not about understanding what’s going on. It’s being caught up in the experience of meeting something that you don’t know, rather than something you know,” and this, certainly, was the kind of experience we were tempting.<sup>58</sup> However, the animated and illuminating experience of the *post*-show discussion is the time for understanding, a more intellectualized accompaniment to the performance that extends the experience and, perhaps, transitions it from play world to real world. Moreover, the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 78, 81, 79.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*.

perspective of an attentive audience can make fresh our experience of our own work, providing insights heretofore unconsidered by myself or my collaborators, and so render such discussion a lush period of illumination for spectators *and* the entire ensemble.

Although I wanted to have a talk-back after *each* performance to capture the widest possible spectrum of responses, it was made perfectly clear to me that it would not be convenient to do so due to the ‘extra’ considerations of what is to MU the unfortunately uncommon but, in my opinion, absolutely vital experience of a post-show discussion. Thus, we held our single talk-back on opening night – December 4, 2008 – and indeed it proved to be an exuberant and enlightening discussion that went late into the night and kept all of us talking and reflecting well past our bedtimes. And, as I restage and interpret the event across these next several pages, please know I do so in full recognition that, as Jill Dolan has noted, the “meanings derived from any one performance ... vary endlessly.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, no two spectators see the play in exactly the same way, or, perhaps better stated: no two spectators see the same play. That is something to be encouraged, in my view, because, like Anne Bogart, I believe “it is easy in the theater to create a moment on stage where everyone in the audience feels the same thing. But what I find much more interesting and challenging is to stage a moment in which everyone has different associations and feels something different.”<sup>60</sup> This density of performance engenders a complex and infinite range of individual responses, leaving our work open and vulnerable to interpretations that might actually be at odds with our intentions. There are, of course, a vast multitude of indeterminate factors affecting one’s reactions, owing much to one’s preconceived

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<sup>59</sup> Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 293.

<sup>60</sup> Anne Bogart, “Nude with Skeleton,” Anne’s Blog, entry posted April 1, 2010, <http://siti.groupsite.com/post/april-2010-nude-with-skeleton> (accessed April 1, 2010).

expectations and private agendas, which themselves are formed via *anything* constituting one's personal experience from birth through to the communal act of witnessing the moment-to-moment actualization of the performance. Christopher Isherwood has noted that "seeing live performances ... is both personal and collective. Everyone interprets [the event] through a distinct, idiosyncratic prism shaped by taste and experience, but we're also exposed to the responses of the people around us, who are also interpreting the show through their own individual prisms."<sup>61</sup> This horizon of perspective engenders a wild unpredictability that heats the air in the theatre and makes the encounter a wonderfully vibrant and revitalizing experience. In a talk-back session, the rewards bestowed during the heightened actualization of performance can be apprehended in more concrete ways and thus transformed into material to (re)animate life lived outside the confines of the performance space. And so, in my reporting and interpretation of reception, I ask you, dear reader, to give each of these wonderful respondents the benefit of the doubt, not to get lost in whatever unknowable factors might have affected their responses, but rather to take them at their word – founded on their visceral and immediate reactions to the piece – no matter how contingent or curiously motivated those words might be. In saying this, I am not asking for – nor making myself – an uncritical elision of determining factors – factors we can't know and shouldn't assume – but rather tempting the notion that we have *faith* in the ability of our fellow citizens to express sincerely their genuine reactions to a work of art.

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*The Teacher thunders "HIT!" once again, and you rise up into an incredibly evocative pose. Your entire torso is inclined forward, hovering perilously in a nearly parallel relationship to the floor, but your arms are stretched out behind you and your gaze is arched as far upward as your frame will allow. You incur the*

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Isherwood, "On Being an Island in a Sea of Laughs," *New York Times*, April 16, 2010.

*barrowing sensation of being wrenched – physically and emotionally – in several directions. You want to rush forward to meet your image in a hot embrace, but something is pulling you back, something so anfully terrifying you could not speak its name. But some deep part of you craves this frightening specter as much as another part of you – equally as mysterious – is repelled by that which you desire. You cannot explain this sensation, but it is as disturbing as it is electrifying, and you feel more alive than you have in a long time.*

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Approximately thirty of the nearly ninety spectators remained for the talk-back, including several members of the Theatre Department faculty, Katie’s family, a handful of theatre majors, Dr. Chip Callahan, and many people I did not know. The actresses and I gathered in the foreground of the stage space, and began by introducing ourselves and explaining our process in brief. We were looking at how the theatre *creates* a sacred experience via our particular training and staging methods, I told the spectators, without really explaining our specific definition of the well-worn term. As can be evinced in the comments below, most respondents’ use of the term ‘sacred’ owes more to its religious sense than our conception of “secular holiness,” and, in retrospect, I wonder if I shouldn’t have been more specific about its use in our process. But I was hoping to elicit the spectators’ most immediate, honest responses and so did my best not to steer the discussion in one way or another. “What did you see?,” I asked them, “What were your reactions?”

Dr. Suzanne Burgoyne, Curators’ Professor of Theatre at MU, was the first to speak. After admitting to seeing two realistic productions of the play, she said:

My impression of this was that this approach to it made the possibility of there being a miraculous or sacred much more palpable to me, much more tangible, much more possible to me. Because the quasi-realistic productions tended to make the Doctor’s point of view the “normal” point of view, and the Mother Superior’s point of view the “old folky religious,” you know *bad* [she said with emphasis] point of view, and this production kind of turned that on its head so it ... balanced the characters and made Agnes seem so

much more possibly touched by God, that I found it much more sacred, if you will.<sup>62</sup>

As the first comment of the evening, Suzanne's words were overwhelming, especially so because she, an internationally renowned scholar and practitioner of directing, was the mentor of *my* first mentor in directing – Dr. Doug Powers – before becoming my directing mentor herself at MU. Her comments were wonderfully heartening and humbly accepted, and are significant not only because she is an artist/scholar of bountiful experience and high esteem, but also because, for one reason or another, she and I had not spoken previously about my work with *Agnes of God* in the slightest. Yet, in her case, we seemed to have hit the nail on the head, as it were, for crafting an experience that made the unknown – read: invisible – tangible and palpable – read: visible – was, of course, the express purpose of our work, and I can only imagine how incredibly foolish I must have looked smiling from ear to ear, gawking at her wide-eyed while she proved our point in her own way. Of course, a *balancing* of the characters was never part of our process – at least consciously – but I think that shows how well-attuned our revisionist Compositional methods were for engendering a more primal and reinvigorating experience in the theatre. The reflection required by this writing has shown me that *all* we did in rehearsal was craft our movement scores, focusing quite thoroughly on the extra-ordinary qualities of Agnes and the Virgin/Mother and the dynamic opposition of Mother and Doctor, providing them each a physical distinctiveness. I do not mean to give a false, over-simplified portrait of what the crafting of that movement score actually entailed – and will let its depiction across the various pages of this writing service as evidence of its ruthless severity – but rather I am acknowledging the fact that our time was spent 'writing on our feet,' as it were, feet that were so thoroughly prepared for

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<sup>62</sup> Suzanne actually said “quote, end quote” before “normal” and “old folks religious,” but for clarity sake I have chosen simply to place the quotes around those terms.

such writing that it was unnecessary to discuss the play or think about theory or trouble ourselves with *anything* but the physical means through which we tempted our miracle of vitalization.

Actually, I would find Suzanne's characterization of the, I daresay, unsuccessful productions of *Agnes* she has seen baffling if it did not confirm my own suspicions regarding the frequent tendency to misinterpret the play and transform it into a vulgar, over-acted melodrama. Pielmeier is clearly *suspect* of the supposed normativity of Doctor's disbelief, as much as he seeks to reinvent the presumed "old folkiness" of Mother's faith as a vital tool for the betterment of humanity, and, importantly, part of the profundity of the play is that Doctor desires faith as much as Mother suffers from doubt. Suzanne's comments confirmed for us that our more even-handed but no less pungent approach – embracing inconsistencies and accepting a myriad of complex personal philosophies and belief systems – paved the way to a more ready embracing of faith via our disinclination to point fingers or label anything as either 'right' or 'wrong.'

Indeed, a gentleman who characterized himself as "a scientific researcher here on campus" – Dr. Donald Burke-Agüero, Associate Professor of Molecular Microbiology & Immunology, as I would discover later – interjected that although he "traffics in facts" and "trying to make sense of things," the "strong balance of the various characters ... drew me in to each one and I really felt that each one is right." In perceiving each character as 'right,' Dr. Burke-Agüero seems to have experienced the increased sensitivity and depth of humanity our work tempted, although I might phrase his observation another way: that each character was, in fact, *wrong* – not for believing what she believed but for how she allowed those beliefs to contribute to the destruction of another human being. Mother never really acquires an expanded sense of understanding; by the end of the play, she has shut herself

off: “I’ll never forgive you for what you’ve taken away,” she says, “You should have died. Not your sister. You,” recalling harshly the death of Doctor’s sister in a convent many years before.<sup>63</sup> Doctor is encouraged to move beyond her narrow perceptions the hard way, as we do – by witnessing Agnes’s sacrifice. Intentionally, the question at the forefront of our production of *Agnes of God* was not “Who was the father of Agnes’s baby?,” but rather: “How could we have reacted to her situation in a more compassionate and productive way?”

It was sometime during what would be the closing moments of this particular exchange that I mentioned that character of the Virgin/Mother is not in the script, an admission that sent the small crowd abuzz with side conversations. Over the din, I did manage to hear one spectator cry: “Oh, it set the tone for the whole play!” At Chip’s suggestion, I began to explain why I chose to stage a Virgin/Mother, but did not get very far before I was interrupted by a mysterious older woman who nobody seemed to know and who did not give her name. “I believe that God does do miracles all the time,” she said, “miracles that we as human beings do not even recognize, but I don’t think it would be anything like this. I think it would be good miracles that help people.” I agree with her, of course, but not necessarily in the way one might think. Although I understand her characterization of Agnes’s suffering as a ‘bad’ miracle, I refuse to see it as such. As much as I am disinclined to play with the ideas of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ I am equally resistant to the labels ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ for they are terms far too general and reductive to capture appropriately the complexity of how circumstances actually play themselves out. What happened to Agnes is awful, certainly, and our present, bodied, and symbolic rendering of Pielmeier’s parable hopefully shows that anyone of us who has failed to see beyond the edge of his or her own self-expression is ultimately culpable in her undoing. However, our

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<sup>63</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 73.

particular delivery of the play offered up Agnes as the sacrificial lamb that she is; she suffers so we don't have to. In this way, she *is* a miracle that can help people – good, bad, or otherwise. I admit I was a bit blind-sided by this woman's comment, especially because it interrupted what, in my estimation, was an unrelated point of discussion. It seems to me her comments were born of a lifetime of strong institutional religious influence, and I would have liked to have spoken with her more. However, the discussion twisted itself in a different direction – as these things often do – and before I knew it she was gone.

Ryan McNeil, our musical director, did manage to sneak in one remark related to the mysterious woman's admission. "The play doesn't attempt to explain anything or confirm anything or deny anything," he said, directing his comments to the mysterious women, "Pielmeier characterized the play as a place to hang questions, so the questions are brought up, nothing is ever actually answered. That's where the miracle comes in is that it lets each individual decide for him or herself what it means." I really appreciate Ryan's characterization of the play's fundamental and generous accessibility as a miracle, because that is one of the lessons it teaches us, isn't it – to be accepting of other ways of doing and seeing; to keep ourselves open to things that might not be fast, easy, and conclusive; that it would be a miracle indeed if we could move ourselves out of our current moment of disconnected and pre-packaged experience and into more fully engaged – and compassionate – relationships with one another?

I do wish we had spoken more about the Virgin/Mother and her delivery of Agnes, especially because She was perhaps the most personal – and original – ingredient of our revisioning and, I suspect, She had an incredible influence on everyone's reactions,

recognized or not.<sup>64</sup> However, Associate Professor of Acting and Theatre History Dr. Cheryl Black – who was not present for the talk-back but did attend a subsequent performance – was generous enough to provide some feedback regarding the character. Cheryl commented to me in passing that she had a “religious experience” viewing *Agnes of God*, indicating that it had everything to do with the presence of the Virgin/Mother.<sup>65</sup> Some time later, I queried her regarding her characterization of her contact with our work. She admitted to “being slightly facetious” in using the expression “religious experience” because “I have a pretty skeptical nature about ‘religion,’ especially organized religion in any of the currently popular forms: Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, etc.”<sup>66</sup> However, “what I really meant,” she said, “was that I had an experience that somehow seemed to transcend the aesthetic or ... [the] intellectual – I do believe that there is an ineffable aspect to human life, which is better expressed as ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’ [I agree!] and that was really what I had. It was kind of like being brushed with something – a sensation, some sense of that aspect of life that is ineffable and inexplicable through rational or ordinary means.” In Cheryl’s estimation, such experience was engendered “primarily [via] the image of Milbre and the visual and aural presence of Ashley. They both seemed unearthly ... Maybe Milbre’s Virgin/Mary did tap into some suppressed memory from my Christian upbringing, but she embodied and exuded an unearthly – moving – presence [that] is hard to explain” but “meant something to me. I was touched. It evoked such pain and sorrow and yet wisdom and comforting.” As for

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<sup>64</sup> Agnes’s birth was indeed a well-received moment. It was met with an audible gasp each night, and many people who approached me to compliment our work characterized her delivery as a one of the most memorable and electrifying elements of the performance. One spectator went so far as to herald it “The reveal of the year.”

<sup>65</sup> Cheryl Black, personal conversation with author, December 9, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Cheryl Black, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2010. All subsequent quotations are from this correspondence.

Ashley, Cheryl found her “just unearthly. Unearthly. Disconnected from [the] rational, a strong belief in her spiritual life, her life outside of the rational or even ordinarily emotional.” What a wonderfully frank and penetrating rendering of experience, a sensitive and very personal account of a fleeting but radiant moment of connection – *physical connection* – to what is ordinarily out of reach. I believe it is no accident that Cheryl employed the vocabulary of the physical realm in characterizing her encounter with those larger forces that guide existence: via our corporealization of the Virgin/Mary, we “brushed” an admittedly “spiritually skeptical” woman with the transcendent “sensation” of what is normally intangible and in many ways unimaginable.

During the talk-back discussion itself, Chip offered that “having the Virgin/Mother as a character really focuses [the performance] ... on something that is beyond an answer.” Indeed, as a mythic figure-come-dramatic character, the Virgin/Mother operated beyond rational explanation and assisted mightily in lifting the performance above the ordinary. However, senior Theatre major Nathan Pierson reported that while he was in the lobby waiting for the talk-back to start, he “overheard the chatter and actually heard one person say ‘I want more answers!’,” prompting an uproar of laughter to fill the room. Baron Hartell, a student in one of the department’s many sections of Acting for Non-Majors, said that the reason he “stuck around” was because he’s “a person who needs a lot of answers,” and was “very curious” about what he had just seen. Hartell – an admitted theatrically inexperienced young man – was required to see the production by his instructor, and while I cannot know whether or not he might have come anyway, I take it as evidence of the vitality of our work that it attracted him so thoroughly that he spent *more* time with us than what was required of him. Milbre actually asked him what his questions were, and, after a moment of intense introspection, all he could muster was a puzzled “I didn’t even know what to think about

this.” Nathan suggested that it might help people understand things more clearly if I explained the reasoning behind our stylistic approach, and I obliged.

I went on discussing in a good amount of detail our Suzuki/Viewpoints training and the process of the Composition method before I was interrupted by my advisor, Dr. Heather Carver, most likely sensing that my tendency to be long-winded had gone on for too long! “We know all this,” she said matter-of-factly, “We saw it. And it was fascinating to watch. [All the work you did in rehearsal] was evident to me in the production ... As an audience member I felt it ... There were just so many moments that were just incredible. I just viscerally felt them rather than –. It was because of what you were doing and you all were so engaged in it ... I *felt* [she said with emphasis] all of that, and could see it.” Again, these were heartening words to hear, especially from my most trusted mentor, a mentor who trusted *me* enough to give me the space to do what I needed to do and, thus, had not seen a bit of our work in rehearsal and only asked me to explain the process in sketches. Of course, it was our express desire for people to *see* and *feel* the sensations engendered by our work in quite the literal sense, yet I do wish Heather had finished her statement that began “I just viscerally felt them [these “incredible” moments] rather than –.” Rather than *what*, I can only imagine, but she was a bit more effusive about the physical impact of our work in an unsolicited e-mail sent to the entire ensemble the following day:

What an absolutely amazing experience I had last night seeing your performance. It truly felt like a gift of grace to be present in the audience ... You all absolutely blew my mind away with each and every moment of the performance right from the first of entering the sacred space you created in the Corner Playhouse. Your voices, gestures, movement, commitment, deep connection, and intensity were mesmerizing. I couldn't take my eyes off any part of the set, the lighting, the silhouettes, the way in which every beat of the performance held together in a seamless burst of energy. The singing was so incredible, and the power of sound was so evident. Know that you have touched people at a very deep level – my insides were so charged that I got an actual stomach ache from my aching for Agnes – talk about experiencing at a visceral level! So kudos to you all, because that is what a great production

is, a truly collaborative experience, when each element is an integral piece of the whole – each breath taken, each paintbrush stroke, each bowl lovingly placed, each light carefully thought out, and each body sharing the power with one another and truly giving in its generosity to the audience.<sup>67</sup>

I sat in my office stricken immobile by the grace and benevolence of her words, words that characterized our work so beautifully but also captured the *purpose* of that work so accurately: the generosity of spirit and hypersensitivity to other engendered by the sharing of a gesture crafted collaboratively in the privacy of a sweaty rehearsal hall and then extended humbly-but-hungrily to a haphazard group of strangers in a communal act of self-sacrifice.

Heather was not the only spectator to admit to the physical affects of our rhythmical theatring of the sacred. Vicki Palmer, a major player in the Columbia community theatre scene, confessed that the combination of the rebirthing scene and the moment when Agnes receives the full stigmata left her “insides churning.” Linda Hamlett, mother of Katie Hamlett, stated: “My knees and thighs are so sore because all of that tension and that emotion – I just sucked it all in. I’m mean, I’m dying right now!” and then added humorously, “I need some Advil!”

Mrs. Hamlett’s admission was actually part of a larger comment, in which she described vividly her immediate reaction to the early moments of the performance: “I’m irritated when I first come in. There are characters in the audience – I don’t know what to do with them. There are characters up there [indicating the stage] not doing anything. I’m thinking your [indicating Mallory] back and knees are like broken – oh my God, get that child up off the floor! I’m really irritated! But for a very short period of time. And then you’re engaged in this dance.” Also characterizing our work as a dance, Hannia Burke-Agüero, wife of Donald and a Medical Terminology Interpreter for University Hospital, stated that although at first she was trying to make “something coherent” out of the

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<sup>67</sup> Heather Carver, e-mail message to author, December 5, 2008.

relationship between the movement and the text, eventually she began to understand the language that the actresses' bodies were speaking, and, she said "it engaged me in a very natural way, and it became like a dance." Nathan admitted that "at first it was very daunting because Katie was running up and down everywhere and she and Mother were constantly bantering back and forth. It was rugged, almost. But for me the moment it all came together was when Agnes was introduced. She was the only character that actually flowed, like she was the glue that held it all together." I think Nathan made a rather astute observation that, in a way, articulates Mrs. Hamlett and Mrs. Burke-Agüero's experience of being danced away into somatic engagement. Agnes did indeed *flow*; as I have described in earlier portions of this writing, Ashley's movement work did not follow one set of rules or another – as did Katie and Mallory – but rather embodied the fullest range of gestural expressivity dear Ashley could manage – and manage it she did! Although not crafted specifically to this end, Doctor and Mother's scores *were* rugged, almost unbearably so, so that it was almost a relief when the cool presence of poor, innocent Agnes once again washed over the playing space. In this way, Agnes *herself* was the dance that cavorted spectators through this perilous landscape laid out before them. And herein is evinced the unlearning characteristic of sacred experience: shaken to their core, spectators were forced to give themselves over to an entirely different way of experiencing theatre and – even if just for a moment – life itself.

These comments brought the dialogue around to a discussion of the stylization of movement. Chip informed the crowd of the Directed Reading he and I were engaged in throughout the course of the semester, proffering succinctly the information I have advanced at length across the landscape of this writing:

So many of these books that we've read are talking about theatre ... that's about taking apart the world and putting it back together. And these kinds of gestures, this kind of movement that is recognizable not on an intellectual level but that you feel this stuff that is not the way we move everyday. [It]

takes you out of the everyday and puts you in this other space and sort of as you go first you're disturbed but as you move into it you sort of leave your mind behind and you learn this new space and you go with it, it takes you with it.

Just before the talk-back began, Chip had privately – and generously – communicated to me his sincere intellectual and sensorial appreciation of the piece, exuberantly informing me that, to him, the performance did indeed appear as an extra-ordinary manifestation of the kind of galvanizing work I have quoted him as describing above. In public forum, he admitted his own curiosity as to whether or not “witnessing this, being a part of the performance” brought this experience to the audience as well. Suzanne responded that, to her, “the thing about style is that each stylistic choice – as you move away from realism – is not only a style but embodies a worldview. And so when you make stylistic choices you’re moving into a different worldview and therefore a different world, and so to me the joy of seeing style well done – as it was done here – is to be transported into another world and another worldview where,” reiterating her earlier observation, “miracles are in this case possible.” She prefaced her comment with the disclaimer “Matt knows this,” because I do *know this*: indeed, most of what I have learned about directing with style I have learned from Suzanne, understanding it as an imaginative, often grotesque departure from the ordinary and the mundane. Although I admit I did not approach this process with any conscious concerns regarding style as I might have if I were going to direct, say, a production of Beckett’s *Endgame* in the absurdist style or a production of O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* in the expressionist style, Suzanne was once again sharp in her evaluation of our work. The *style* of our production – born of our Compositional rendering of the text – was indeed founded upon a faith in *faith*, if you will, that necessitated our moving into a worldview – a particular philosophy of life – where miracles are possible, and, thus, into a more hopeful and benevolent world that embraces the unexpected and the unknown.

The discussion wound itself around to the blood used in the piece when Mrs. Burke-Agüero inquired as to why, when everything else in the piece had been “conveyed with a gesture or in some magic way,” we chose to have *actual* blood. My immediate response was “I don’t know,” because, honestly, I hadn’t ever thought of it any other way. Indeed, as I hope I have made clear over the course of this writing, asking why certain choices were made is like asking why the sky is blue; certain elements of the performance were not intentional choices but organically induced happenings fashioned via our intuitive, body-first method of performance-making. It was actually Dr. Burke-Agüero who gave a much more eloquent and insightful commentary than I might ever have given: “The container that the blood came in looked like a wash basin,” he said, “and it conveyed to me as [the Virgin/Mother] was carrying it that it would be something [Agnes] would use to cleanse herself and to wash. And so the contrast – it wasn’t so full that you could see what was in it, so when [the Virgin/Mother] put it down – and then oh boy the hands came out, and that was a strong moment.” A bloody ritual bath: an unparalleled – and unplanned – embodiment of the challenging theme of innocence with blood on one’s hands. I smiled at Dr. Burke-Agüero graciously, and said to the crowd with a smile: “Sometimes you just luck out and miracles do happen.”

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*The Teacher calls “BACK!” with a fervent whack of His staff and as you dart down in a flash, once again you are overcome with loss. The Teacher leaves you in the down-turned position of the form for some time, and you grow increasingly light-headed. Bizarre images appear to hang in midair before your eyes. You breath deep into your core to alleviate your on-coming hallucinations.*

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It was not until later in the evening that Professor Clyde Ruffin, Chair of the Department of Theatre and Senior Pastor of Columbia's Second Missionary Baptist Church, spoke:

I just wanted to commend the actresses for their stamina ... I wanted to echo what everyone else was saying because it is so rare that we get the opportunity to experience live theatre doing something that is unique, that cannot be compared to anything you see in movies, you know, that special world that live theatre inhabits. It's rare for *me* [he said with emphasis] to see a production that moves me visually, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually ... This work has done that, and it's very, very special ... Part of my other profession [indicating his pastorship at Second Baptist] deals with confronting your faith and religion and how it affects lives. And we know that there are no easy answers, there are no direct answers, that life is always a complex dance of faith and doubt. The scripture says "Lord I believe, but help thou mine unbelief." And it speaks to the place where the performance came from ... and this is where we exist.

Clyde is usually as laconic as I am loquacious, and for him – a man of the theatre and of the cloth – to confess so candidly and so effusively how deeply our work had touched him left me awestruck. I have a tremendous amount of respect for Clyde, and his reaction – even if it had not been so favorable – meant a lot to me. Actually, Clyde was probably the first person – and certainly one of the very few – I spoke with regarding our process during its actualization. Early on, I met him in his office for one reason or another, and, having caught wind of my unusual and unexpected vision for *Agnes of God*, he queried me about my intentions. I described our as yet nascent process in brief, saying: "I am doing all this for many reasons. But I think the most concise way I can put it is that I believe in live theatre, I believe it is an integral thread in the fabric of our society, but, from my perspective, I see it hurdling towards extinction. It is simply no longer good enough to give people what they expect." He agreed, sharing that what he had taken away from the previous summer's Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference – arguably the largest and most significant annual gathering of theatre artist/scholars in the United States – was that "we

can't keep doing these museum pieces anymore," but that rather we needed to be doing "more experimental work" that "can actually reach humanity."<sup>68</sup> That is, of course, my philosophy in a nutshell, and we spent a few more moments discussing the issue before he flashed one of his characteristically sly smiles at me and said: "Well, I'm looking forward to being educated." I sincerely appreciated his open-mindedness, and took it as a lesson in graciousness. Although I am usually proud of my roguishness, during the *Agnes* process I always felt the impending doom of someone coming in and canceling the production because what we were doing was just too weird. Walking out of Clyde's office that day, I felt a few feet taller, which – if you've ever met my not even five-and-a-half-foot tall frame – you know is no easy feat!

Not surprisingly, Clyde's comments turned the discussion towards the struggle of logic and faith lodged in the heart of the play. Baron Hartell confessed he identified with Mother's observation regarding gains in logic equaling losses in faith. "I've had a very large struggle with faith," he said, "and usually my biggest argument in my own head is that I'm so logical that my brain won't allow me to believe in anything that requires faith without answers." This is not so unusual, for as humans it is in the very fiber of our beings – sent down from our earliest ancestors – that we seek answers; after all, this is why religion and theatre exist in the first place: to order the chaos of existence, even if they do so in invisible, abstract terms. I am not advocating for the abandonment of logic, but perhaps we needn't work so thoroughly at destroying any and all sense of the "primitive wonder" Mother speaks of so longingly. I grapple with this myself: I sit here night after night, championing the unknown with each and every key stroke, while another part me is as equally fervent in its Gladys Kravitz nosiness. From a very young age, I always snooped through my parents

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<sup>68</sup> Clyde Ruffin, conversation with author, October 23, 2008.

closets looking for Christmas and birthday presents, and I usually read the last chapter of a book first and scour IMDb.com to find out the ending of a particular movie or television show before I view it because I absolutely *detest* surprises. When I inform people of my disinclination for surprise, they usually look at me in absolute horror; one person even said to me: “Well, that must not be a very pleasant existence, then.” At the time, I thought that was a rather odd thing to say. I hadn’t made the connection, but now I see it oh-so-clearly. What kind of a life is a life without wonder? The gift of experiencing our sacred rendering of *Agnes of God* is, I think, being confronted with a vision of what can become of us if we allow ourselves to be completely disconnected from faith, and thus from a certain amount of trust in existence and in our fellows citizens that cohabit that existence with us. When we need to have an answer for everything, we begin to see things in black and white terms only, as both Doctor and Mother do, each in her own way. Doctor wants to overcome her insularity, but her rational mind cannot allow herself to be swept away. Mother advocates for faith yet is unable to see past the harsh realities of her own life to actually embrace it; her inaction regarding Agnes’s pregnancy owes more to a fear of its effect rather than a faith in its divine cause. And so because everything is *not* ultimately definable within an inch of its existence, a search for answers can become a dangerous crusade, our narrow views preventing us from seeing the world from alternate perspectives. And then – no matter how well-intended our actions are – we are only left with ill-fated Agnes, the wonder one, dripping blood and silenced for all eternity because of our own shortsightedness.

Just before we ended discussion for the evening, Mrs. Hamlett made one final comment: “I think one of the best, most sacred things about church,” she said, “is not necessarily the individual prayer or the individual relationship that’s going on with your God but it is the quest with other people and that is very much what I felt here tonight.” I actually

found myself become emotional listening to her say this. It was opening night – an exciting time in the life of a theatre artist – and I was so incredibly proud of my dear, dear collaborators. Our process was one of “checking the parachute by leaping out of the plane,” and I honestly had no idea how people would react to the performance.<sup>69</sup> Yet it appeared as if once again my intuition had guided me in all the appropriate directions. *It worked*, I thought to myself, *it actually worked. People actually responded in ways we’d hoped they would* – people were physically confronted, profoundly unsettled, transported to a different world, opened to alternative angles of perception, etc. Most of all, the sense of community articulated by Mrs. Hamlett was, by all indications, felt by everyone. And, after all, in a world full of people trapped in isolation behind computer screens, isn’t that the most we can ask for?

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*“HIT! – BACK! – HIT! – BACK! – HIT! – BACK!” the Teacher thunders at break-neck speed. Dizzy and fatigued, your articulation has become sloppy. You’ve been flopping about as you travel up and down, and now you wobble hopelessly in a tired, recycled position. “WITH ALL YOUR HUMANITY! FROM CENTER! – HIT!” the Teacher bowls, cracking His staff so violently against the floor that you are certain it will splinter into a thousand pieces.*

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The comments above are startling and affirming, especially because they unwittingly employ a vocabulary to describe our work that closely mirrors our own – *undisclosed* – vernacular. Yet they are but a small sampling of an entire range of reception, full of unknown reverberations as well as those that are known but were delivered in passing and are too numerous to delve into here, such as the anonymous gentleman who told me he left the performance grieving for the characters; or the young lady who was so thoroughly stirred by our work that she rushed home to call her father, a Lutheran pastor, to process her

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<sup>69</sup> Ellen Lauren, “Seven Points of View,” in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1995), 70.

thoughts; or the young man who approached Ashley several months after the show closed to tell her she had given him nightmares. However, I am not so naïve to believe that every one of the nearly four-hundred spectators who witnessed the piece over its four-performance run was as emotionally and physically touched as those cited above, although nearly everyone who spoke to me – either via the talk-back or incidentally – communicated similar reactions. I would have certainly welcomed less affirmative responses, yet only received two comments that could, I suppose, be characterized as dissenting.<sup>70</sup> The first was from a member of the Theatre Department staff. He actually complemented me rather enthusiastically, calling the production “beautiful” and the acting “strong,” but tempered his remarks with the fact that he “did not care for the movement.” I found this comment baffling, because to me it seemed oxymoronic. The production values and the acting were *intrinsic* to the movement; I’m not sure I completely understand how someone could have been attracted to the performance yet repelled by the Composition work. So, my interpretation of his remarks follows as thus: his response assumes that the actresses’ gestural life operated on a separate level, as if we had rehearsed the show in a more traditional manner and then layered on the movement afterward. Of course, what he enjoyed about the production was *because of* the movement, whether he realized it or not; the Composition work was the kindle that sparked the fire of the *entire* performance event. In my analysis, his reaction owed more to his acknowledged inexperience in seeing the style of theatre we were offering than anything else.

And so his comment begs the question: How do we *get* people experienced in this kind of work, especially people – and I am speaking generally here – who harbor the common misconception of the experimental as being too strange, self-indulgent and

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<sup>70</sup> I have preferred to keep both parties anonymous, lest they feel as if they are being portrayed in a negative light.

abstruse to stomach? A member of the faculty ran into me in the Department's front office a few days following the production's close: "Saw the show the other night," he said, and then stared off into space for several long, pensive seconds before adding somewhat condescendingly, "It wasn't like any production of *Agnes of God* I've ever seen before." *Good!*, I thought, *That was the point!* The truth of the matter is he was not alone in this feeling – remember Mrs. Hamlett's irritation? – but, *unlike* the others, he had not been vitalized, we had not 'worked on his insides,' to borrow the words of Lena Horne's road manager. Why? I think it is for the simple fact that he didn't *want* to be vitalized, that he hadn't come to the theatre to be challenged. So, again, I beg the question: How do we get people to come to the theatre wanting, needing, expecting a challenge; to have their eyes opened and their horizons widened?

Anne Bogart says that although many theatres plan their season around what they think the audience wants, "it is actually ... always important to make theatre in an institution based on the artists' interests ... I think second-guessing the audience is the biggest problem that we face," she continues, "Without ... the ingredient, the recipe, of interest, of deep galvanizing interest on the part of the artists involved ... no matter what you put in front of the audience ... the level of engagement [with] the material is what will galvanize it, ultimately, an audience, and get them to come back."<sup>71</sup> Ms. Bogart, insightful as always, is right to indict theatre artists who make assumptions based on speculation and conjecture. How dare we treat our audiences as anything else but the perceptive, sensitive, and exquisite people they are? We cannot blame the audience – that great, gaping unknown – for their disinterest in our work; it is *our* job to reach *them*. Ultimately, the baton falls to us, those brave artists who are audacious enough to think that they can change the world with, in our

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<sup>71</sup> Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre*.

case, a gesture crafted collaboratively and kinesthetically and articulated with precision and restraint in the face of great adversity. Refusing to give up, give in, or give out, the depth, extremity, and sheer impossibility of our work was our imprint, an extra-ordinary performance-life set to encourage such fullness in *daily* life. In today's digital climate, it is perhaps the theatre alone that can engender this kind of physically impacting experience. We can – and should – leave an audience hungry for more, and so we scholars and craftsman of the theatre need to offer up for communal consumption food capable of nourishment. This is a formidable and honorable act and serves as a model for improving the dynamic of our togetherness.

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*The Teacher whacks His staff across the room once more, commanding you to "Release the right arm." You feel like the Tin Man, mercifully liberating your arm from its strained, out-stretched and convoluted position and laying it at your side. With another bit He calls for you to "Release the left arm," and then the neck, and finally the whole body. As you lay splayed out across the floor, the Teacher thunders: "Do not let your energies dissipate. Be still, not relaxed!" And so you lie there, the cool surface of the floor generously abating the sweaty heat of your fevered skin. You breath deeply as your feet throb, grateful to be released from the burden of carrying your weight in all its precariously crafted forms. Finally, the Teacher calls "Release!" You rise laboriously and with a good degree of reluctance. As arduous as this particular exercise is, you were enjoying the heretofore untapped use of your body and the sensations conjured therein, and you were not ready to resign from the experience.*

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Why a theatreing of the sacred? Why work at a return to the elemental, at a renewal of faith? Why break our backs crafting riveting live theatre? Why spend a lifetime toiling at the ephemeral? Why be professional? Why *not* another revival of *Guys and Dolls*? Why challenge ourselves and our audiences? Why reach out across the footlights with the

temptation of *actually* touching someone? Why must there be something personal at stake in our work? Like Julliard president Joseph W. Polisi, I believe “that artists of the twenty-first century, especially in America, must re-dedicate themselves to a broader professional agenda” in which they “must be not only communicative through their art, but also knowledgeable about the intricacies of our society ... so that they can effectively work toward showing the power of the arts to a nation and its people who are often uninformed about the arts and view these activities with suspicion, occasional disdain, and frequently as being irrelevant.”<sup>72</sup> But, for me, this is still not enough. Why are the arts so powerful and so relevant, and why must we focus so thoroughly on the “intricacies of society”? Because “performance can be an occasion to transcend differences in search of common understanding,” and “be a space of dialogue where different voices, experiences, and positions can question, debate, and challenge each other.”<sup>73</sup> Because at the core, at the heart of the theatre experience is a sensation that functioned as our driving force and – we hope, we *always* hope – emerged as the final consequence of our temptation of a sacred experience. This is a sensation that I have yet to name outright but one that has nonetheless permeated each and every inch of this writing and, indeed, this Movement in particular. And that sensation, dear reader, is *empathy*.

Anne Bogart has written eloquently on the subject of empathy, writing:

Empathy allows an audience not only to enjoy the big theatrical brushstrokes but also to identify and relate to the event personally ... Empathy is the ability to identify and understand another person’s situation or to transfer your own feelings and emotions to them ... We reach outside of ourselves toward understanding and appreciation for the actions of others ... It is a positive and creative act [that] stems from a very deep and sacred human

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph W. Polisi, *The Artist as Citizen* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>73</sup> Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 149.

need to commune with the world through the imagination. When we lose our capacity to empathize, we lose an essential part of our humanity.<sup>74</sup>

Bogart's conception of the "act" – no accident there – of empathy encapsulates why I have always considered the theatre a necessary thread in the fabric of our society: in the performance space, we dilate life via extra-ordinary and vitalizing means, thrusting a magnifying glass over existence that enables us to do the investigating of the human condition that needs to be done. In this way, through beauty and provocation, art engenders important conversations that can lead to advocacy. We artists step into the shoes of people who are strange to us only to traipse through worlds equally as strange, and dare entreat those who witness our bizarre, unsettling journey to do the same. Regardless of this adversity – or perhaps *because* of it – we do it anyway, and through the difficult terrain of playing at the unknown, we are treated to a many-hued and interconnected view of ourselves and our world that can be sensed across the landscape of our bodies. Jill Dolan reminds us that the "magic of performance, the privilege of relief from banality and the pleasure of working at creating the ever shifting, always partial understandings and empathy that the stage allows" is a model of "a way to be together, as human beings, in a culture and a historical moment that's working much harder to tear us apart."<sup>75</sup> When crafted by an intensely collaborative ensemble engaged in deep, exhaustive exploration, the theatre can posit fresh new ways of being together, alternate, non-hierarchical models of behavior. Such work makes visible an impression of the possible, and is rendered intensely because the spectator is in the same room with the work, the rawness of the performance crashes against them in waves of vitalizing recognition and understanding. If *we* are so brave as to step outside the comfort of

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<sup>74</sup> Bogart, *And Then, You Act*, 65-7.

<sup>75</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 165.

the ordinary and into a dangerous and ever-shifting event-space that challenges our most fundamental apprehension of the world, then might spectators be so moved to do the same?

Tony Kushner calls this intense and self-effacing approach to performance

suffering for hire ... an extremely difficult thing to do [that] ... puts immense demands on the people who do it ... Stunning: very painful, beautiful, and really, really just amazing ... And you know while you are watching it that [the actresses] are finding it inside themselves to go through it every single night ... And everybody's watching it; everybody's minds transfigure together. It's profound, and it tells us something about ourselves that is, I think, the deepest and the most powerful and most un-ignorable aspect of human beings, which is our incredible genius for connectedness and for boundaryless-ness.<sup>76</sup>

Kushner links the sacrifice of the actress to the formation of a sense of community in a way that implies, I believe, a fundamental sense of empathy. He is careful to qualify his remarks with the fact that not just *any* performance involves suffering that leads to transfiguration, citing as examples Fiona Shaw's renowned portrayal of Medea and Tonya Pinkins's embodiment of the title character in Kushner's own (lesser-known and too-experimental-for-Broadway) musical *Caroline, or Change*. I am privileged to have witnessed Ms. Pinkins's positively earth-shattering performance, can testify to its technical and poetic virtuosity, and can say that it impacted me so profoundly that I left the theatre in that hard-to-characterize mix of exhaustion and exhilaration that only comes after running a marathon, or, say, attending a truly dynamic piece of theatre. Pinkins's performance penetrated me quite literally, in a reciprocal way that left me heart-broken for her rendering of a poor, troubled, and ill-fated African-American maid in 1960s Louisiana. Indeed, a performance of this caliber is so incredibly entrancing by means of its unimaginable depth and extra-ordinary sincerity that it is inherently community-building: actress and spectator become bound in an sensuous and interactive dance, as does each spectator to another, until the energy generated

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<sup>76</sup> Tony Kushner, quoted in Weber, 161.

is palpable and the theatre is alive and electric. In this way, something altogether unsettling happens; spectators begin a process akin to that of the actress: facing strangers-come-kinsfolk in intimate ways, their preceptors are compelled to open themselves up to heretofore unconsidered ways of seeing and understanding each other and, thus, the world. Grotowski says that “if the [actress], by setting [herself] a challenge publicly challenges others ... reveals [herself] by casting off [her] everyday mask, [she] makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration.”<sup>77</sup> In the case of *Agnes of God*, the actresses’ offered their deepest, most private selves via animalistic and symbolic means, a more elemental approach aimed at the very heart of us. Experienced in a communal way, this return to the primal ignites the spark of empathy: increased sensitivity that hopefully can lead to change. And so because the theatreing of the sacred implies “a shift in consciousness that effects a blurring of boundaries between ... self and other,” it is ultimately “what opens us to the Other” in mutual and startling confrontation.<sup>78</sup>

I can’t help but take note of Stacy Holman Jones’s recognition of German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht’s “criticism of empathetic identification” which asserts that “empathetic reaction ... reinforces a dominant, oppressive ideology” that “evokes feelings of powerlessness in audiences” because such theatre leads them to accept what they see as inevitable.<sup>79</sup> “Yes, I have felt like that too,” Brecht wrote, “Just like me – It’s only natural – It’ll never change – The sufferings of this [woman] appall me, because they are

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<sup>77</sup> Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 34.

<sup>78</sup> William S. Haney II, “The Phenomenology of Nonidentity,” in *Sacred Theatre*, ed. Ralph Yarrow (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 68; Ralph Yarrow, “Preface,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 121.

inescapable.”<sup>80</sup> Rather, Brecht preferred his conception of “epic theatre,” a theatre that purported to be objective and unemotional as a way to “isolate and manifest certain ideas and relationships that make ideology visible.”<sup>81</sup> The spectator of the epic theatre says: “I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop – The sufferings of this [woman] appall me, because they are unnecessary – That’s great art: nothing obvious in it.”<sup>82</sup> Brecht’s characterization of the effects of the epic theatre seem curiously close to my own words regarding the repercussions of *Agnes of God*, and so I must ask, as Holman Jones does, “Can’t emotional, empathetic identification lead to action?”<sup>83</sup> I answer a resounding “Yes!” The difference is that Brecht prefers to play at his theories in very obvious, didactic ways, whereas in the empathetic theatre, the performer moves “audiences out of passive, complacent spectatorship” via “an intimate and confrontational atmosphere” in which she creates “a reciprocal relationship – a conversation – so that the palpable emotionality” of the performance “might ‘jolt’ audiences” out of a witnessing “that stops at passive identification and immobilization.”<sup>84</sup> Our work demanded reciprocity because “reciprocity insists that it’s not so much whether emotion or catharsis isn’t necessary or productive, but what audiences *do* with their emotions and identifications

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<sup>80</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 71.

<sup>81</sup> Janelle Reinelt, “Beyond Brecht: Britain’s New Feminist Drama,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 150.

<sup>82</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 121.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-122.

that counts.”<sup>85</sup> This a kind of performance is all the more powerful for its lyricism, infinitely more affecting and *infecting*; a kind of performance that “voices the invisible without getting caught”; a kind of performance that, because of its density and complexity, works at you long after you have exited the theatre building.<sup>86</sup>

Anna Deavere Smith asserts that “presence is empathy.”<sup>87</sup> Seen in this way – and if we remember the important role presence plays in the theatreing of the sacred – our particular methods of training and performance-making seem tailor-made not only to generate this sensibility but render it palpable. Indeed, Dr. Cheryl Black shared:

I do believe there is a component to life that goes beyond the rational – something that can connect human beings to each other, in fact with all life, with love and compassion. I don’t think we understand this very well at all, but if we did life would be infinitely better ... Whatever it is, your production seemed to offer a glimpse of it, and the fact that I seemed to be able to receive it to some degree was a bit comforting ... I would like to be more open to that aspect of life, and an experience like that surely helps.<sup>88</sup>

I don’t think we understand “it” well either – and perhaps aren’t meant to – but we still must *try*. This is where *faith* comes in, the faith that my *Agnes of God* collaborators and I had in the significance of our work and in the capability of spectators to apprehend it, the same faith that fashioned in corporeal terms the “glimpse” of the “love and compassion” that can connect us and assist us in building a better world. It is my conviction that Cheryl was not alone in this feeling, but even if she stands unaccompanied – and can we hope for anything more sublime than the irrefutable testimony of that *one* person our work has reached? – I truly am humbled and honored that our sacred rendering of *Agnes of God* was able to speak

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>87</sup> Anna Deavere Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 19.

<sup>88</sup> Cheryl Black, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2010.

to her so intimately, that we could comfort Cheryl in a way that did not lull her into a romantic view of the world but rather by making tangible to her the dream of a finer existence. As anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has observed, “the creative potential in theatre resides in the space between the [actresses] and the audience, even if the artistry belongs to the [actress]. It is artistry which makes the audience see the possible world – beyond the obvious.”<sup>89</sup> As so we hope that we encouraged in *everyone* the “deep, physical listening” that makes “action and interaction both outwardly visible and inwardly transparent” via our open practice of extra-ordinarily collaborative, non-hierarchical and sensitive corporeal methods.<sup>90</sup>

In her discussion of “the light of hope,” Smith quotes at length scholar Cornel West:

Hope and optimism are different. Optimism tends to be based on the notion that there’s enough evidence out there that allows us to believe things are gonna be better, ... whereas hope looks at the evidence and says, “It doesn’t look good at all. It doesn’t look good at all. Gonna go beyond the evidence to create new possibilities based on visions that become contagious to allow people to engage in heroic actions always against the odds, no guarantee whatsoever.” That’s hope. I’m a prisoner of hope though. Gonna die a prisoner of hope.<sup>91</sup>

And so I propose that we *all* become prisoners of hope as we fight to “go beyond” expectations and assumptions and traditions, recognizing the difficulty of the road ahead but no less fervent in our travels across and through it. And we will not be alone in our journey so long as we attend it with presence because, rather than “grabbing the light,” presence is “about *finding* the light and being a part of it,” a “light that might just be *in* the audience, *with* the public, *in* the world, *among* the possibilities of ‘us’ human beings rather than in the

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<sup>89</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, “Theatre as a Site of Passage: Some Reflections on the Magic of Acting,” in *Ritual, Performance, Media*, ed. Felicia Hughes-Freeland (London: Routledge, 1998), 42.

<sup>90</sup> Anne Bogart, “When Does Art Begin?,” Anne’s Blog.

<sup>91</sup> Cornel West, quoted in Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist*, 160.

language of ‘self.’”<sup>92</sup> In these words, I can’t help but hear Mother aching for “those bits of light that might still, by the smallest chance, be clinging to our souls, reaching back to God.”<sup>93</sup> And so regardless of one’s individual perception of “God” – a Christian deity, some supernatural force that guides the universe, a component of life beyond the rational, or what have you – Mother’s primordial cry functioned fundamentally and ferociously – and with tenderness and beauty – as *our* cry for light, for empathy, the miracle of humanity.

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<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist*, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 51.

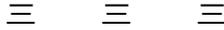
“I have some more questions I’d like to ask you. Is that alright?”



Figure 9. *From top to bottom:* Milbre Burch as the Virgin/Mother and Ashley J. Hicks as Agnes. Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

## Postlude

*duration:  
dilating impact*



Well, here I am ... waiting ... If you're an ending ... which is what I am, in case you hadn't guessed – if you're an ending you have to wait around until the writer *gets* to you, so to speak. An ending can't just ... be there without everything that goes *before*.

- Edward Albee, *3 Minutes or Less: Life Lessons from America's Greatest Writers*

Writing, like performance, is always only an experiment, an audition, always only another place to practice what might be an unreachable goal that's imperative to imagine nonetheless.

- Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*

Picture how in the expansive scan of narrative space connections between things are always partial ... there is always something more to say, always an uncaptured excess that provokes further questions, new associations that just come, and fresh gaps in understanding.

- Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*

When to let go, to say it's finished, complete? The poem will not rest. It always wants more. One writes as long as one has faith, as long as one believes in its promise. In the end, one simply abandons it. Left on its own, it waits for others.

- Ronald J. Pelias, *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher's Body*

We can seldom differentiate between the emotions which belong to the past as we remember it, and those which belong to the actual moment of remembering ... When we manage to disentangle ourselves, we enter the fertile zone in which actions, passions and past circumstances release their pollen towards the present day. Memory no longer belongs to what we were; it is no longer sentiment, but flesh and blood. It is an integral part of what we are and will be.

- Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House*

But ain't it strange how it all makes perfect sense, once your life becomes evidence.

- Stew, *Passing Strange*

I know now ... what matters in our work. What matters for a writer or an actor is not fame [or] glory ... but knowing how to endure – how to bear your cross and have faith. I have faith now, and it's not so painful anymore. When I think about my calling, I'm not afraid of life.

- Anton Chekhov, *The Sea Gull*

This isn't the end. It never is. It's the middle. It's the beginning. It all depends on when you came in and when you have to go.

- Peter Gaitens, *Flesh and Blood*

You're been so kind ... Thank you, you've really been so kind. You, and I speak, I am sure, not for myself alone, but on behalf of all of us ... All of us here, when I say that these ... *these* moments make it all ... they make it all worthwhile ... The lights dim. Each to [his or her] own home. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight.

- David Mamet, *A Life in the Theatre*

Cooling Down:  
Staying Hot:  
The Gift that Keeps on Giving

*slow ten:*  
*focusing beauty*

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*You and your fellow neophytes face each other in staggered vertical lines at either end of the space. Suddenly, a woman's voice fills the air. Her timbre is rich and hauntingly beautiful. You cannot make sense of her words – Is that Latin, you wonder? – but she is engaged fervently in deep tonal chanting, her voice washing over you in powerful waves of sound. Under the Teacher's reproachful glare you form yourself slowly into a shape of your own instantaneous choosing. Your arms stretch out in front of you in a writhed, supplicated formation, your palms turned up and your torso arched forward and to the right. Onward you go, focusing tightly on your image out on the horizon. You move slowly with an impossible amount of resistance as your energies surge with an almost irrepressible charge. You struggle to control your center, keeping your torso level and still as your feet rise and fall in protracted arcs, meeting the floor alternatingly with the whole of each sole. You fight to control your forward momentum as you appear to float across the space, advancing longingly but somewhat apprehensively towards your image. In this more meditative form, the opposing sensations of exhaustion and exhilaration, of fear and desire leave you overwhelmed with emotion and through the strain of execution you realize you are weeping.*

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My birthday is September 1<sup>st</sup>, a day that never fails to emerge as a bittersweet celebration. Oftentimes, my birthday will fall on Labor Day weekend – which usually symbolizes the unofficial end of summer – and in any event the transition of August's hot sun into September's falling leaves marks the progression of summer recess into yet another semester. I have lived my life by an academic calendar – as a student and, now, as an instructor – continuously since the age of four and will continue to do so for the greater part

of the rest of my days. In the context of my existence it somehow seems so incredibly appropriate that the commemoration of my birth should herald the genesis of yet another arduous but fecund year in the academy spent acting, directing, teaching, researching, writing, and reflecting. Even so, on this very special day – the only day of the entire year that is unequivocally *mine* – my excitement is inevitably tinged with sadness. The promise of summer – its warmth, its respites, its diversions, its jollities – gone, I must now face the challenge of yet another concentrated and expectant period of high-functioning mental and physical activity. Having endured the previous year’s provocations, I once again stand on the precipice of the great unknown that is the year to come, as well as the dark, loathsome bitterness of the winter that will accompany it. It always seems impossible that I should be able to steel myself for yet another endeavor into unmapped territories. With the past fading at my back, a new day dawns before me, and the exhilaration of leaping into it is always tempered by a intense sense of loss for that which has come and gone, for what I must leave behind as I collide with new and unfamiliar forces. And so today feels like my birthday: as I sit here and compose these last few pages, I can’t help but mourn for the vitalizing, life-changing and life-*affirming* process I am about to bring to a close. I grieve even though I know I must let go, I must move on, for there is always more to do and more to learn and I am sure to encounter increasingly galvanizing experiences along the way.

But before I go, I can’t help but wonder where this work has left us, my dear collaborators and I. Some six months after the production closed, I meet each of the actresses individually to provide them the necessary time and space for reflection, to allow them to give voice to their own reverberations and longings and so deepen the effects of experience. “Where are you now?,” is all I asked each woman, permitting her to speak unencumbered as she unraveled her ruminations. Accompanied by the ding of the elevator

in an otherwise quite space in MU's Ellis Library, Katie Hamlett gave the following account, one full of loss but also so wonderfully full of *gain*:

I feel a little lost now. I'm really missing the show. I miss the period of warming the body, awakening the body. Suzuki really affected me. It made me feel more powerful as a human being, as a woman, but also on stage. I feel more equipped to take on roles now. I have gained so much confidence in the choices that I make because I was given free rein to make absolutely any choice I wanted to. I just feel like I'm more on the right path now.

[*After a slight pause, she remembered the tiny white ceramic crosses I gave each of them on closing night.*] I'm not really religious, but I keep it in my car as a sort of reminder of achievement as well as a heightened spirituality that I have felt since doing *Agnes*. Because I was basically very spiritually dead from a relatively young age, but I feel like my spirituality now was encouraged by the questioning. Now my practice is always a questioning and never a closing of the mind. I think about miracles a lot. I hope for miracles a lot. I'm sure miracles have already happened to me. It's an awareness. It's what it means to you. I meditate on these themes a lot.

[*She paused again, staring off into space for a moment before continuing.*] I've never grown so close to a director and a cast before *through the work* [she says with emphasis]. Through the work I think we became that much closer because it was a little bit bigger than us. I felt like we were communing when we came to rehearsal. Even when I didn't want to be there, or felt sick, or was mad. There was still a sense of community and something holy about the space we created. I feel like your clarity of vision, how specific everything was, made us fall into place. You didn't tell us what to do, you made it possible for us to see it as well. I appreciated the specificity. I was not initially off-put by hearing about the style. There was a level of trust, and I saw it as an opportunity to learn methods I wouldn't get exposure to otherwise.

I didn't immediately take to the Suzuki. I always say that I'm not a very physical person. I don't play sports or exercise, but that's because I haven't chosen to be physical. The body has all these untapped energies to it and ending with Slow Ten when you feel all the energy of your body flowing and coursing – its that reverent slow movement when you really feel in tune with the earth after you've gathered the energy from the earth. It's just so real. I *am* a physical person because you have to be if you're doing that kind of work.

At first, we all thought: "I cannot believe that he wants us to do Suzuki every night before the performances! We're going to be so tired!" We weren't tired. We were energized. It was a kick-start. We were put in the place we were when we were creating the piece. We were back physically and mentally in the right place to perform this thing that we all created together. It was not tiring, it was reminding us why we were here, rather than going out on stage with this 'performative idea,' because you can get very narrow-minded when people are watching. It was only enhanced by having an audience there.

I watched some of the video of the show the other day. The audacity of us – it made a huge statement, but it wasn't scary. This continuous ballet. It was brave, it was so brave. Just the three of us and statue on stage the entire time. And we did it. I realized that it is so important not to be obvious. Don't be every day, because the artists and the audience deserves more. I've really taken that away.

My dad was captivated for a couple weeks. He kept asking me questions, like: "So, if you made up that movement score, how did you know if it was right or wrong or what the director wanted?" And I was like: "Dad, we knew – it worked or it didn't." I think that it made him able to take seriously that I do very much care about this and that this is what I want my life's work to be – somewhere in the theatre.

A few people said to me "That was some of the bravest acting I've seen at Mizzou." That's about as good as it gets, because what else do I have right now except some immature bravery? I will always remember how capable I am to make choices. I feel invincible, kind of, that I can take on anything. I've fallen back into not being a very physical person. It's just this memory, and it's kind of sad, actually. But I just feel like we could meet up in McKee and do Suzuki and still be on point. I think that's neat – I think that's proof that something has lingered, definitely.

*[She paused again as if she were finished, but added a final rejoinder:]* I needed to be inspired, and I was.<sup>1</sup>

Mallory – at her family home in Chicago – and I spoke over the telephone. She gave an eloquent and heart-rendering portrait of a young woman coming to terms with a difficult past by pushing her way into a brighter future, a woman unashamed, finding the strength of her voice through the galvanizing medium of her artistic expression:

Before *Agnes* I was floundering. I wasn't sure if theatre was the path that I was supposed to take. And then we started this work, which was the most difficult technique that I've ever had to learn, and it was so hard for me to get that in my body. And after *Agnes* I knew that without a doubt this is what I'm meant to do. I'm working at a summer camp in Chicago and these kids always complain about how hard everything is, and I tell them I had this director once who changed my view of the world when he said its not supposed to be easy. How simple. If it was easy it wouldn't be worth doing. I believe with every fiber of my being that theatre is my contribution to the world and that I can change the world one person at a time through the work that I do.

I've also become very taken with physical movement as a form of expression. Now I'm looking into Lecoq study.<sup>2</sup> I don't know too much

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Hamlett, interview with author, June 2, 2009.

about it yet, but I know that it's hard and that doesn't scare me anymore – it being hard. It doesn't intimidate me at all – it actually excites me, the idea of something being difficult.

I feel more complete. I'm a happier human being, and I really made lasting bonds with the women in that cast. I realized that I need to be around real artists, people who are really dedicated to the work. This process gave me direction in life, and the confidence that I can pull off this work.

I was daunted by the work, but because I came in late, because I was behind, I didn't have a choice but to throw myself into the work. It was just like: "What are we doing?! We can't possibly do a whole show like this?!" I think doing this work has opened my mind to other facets of performance. I say all the time: we need to give them something knew.

Getting the movements into my body was very difficult, but after a few weeks of doing the Suzuki, my body had kind of loosened up. First I was hobbling around sore, cursing Matt Saltzberg's name for making me do all this Stomping, but then it became kind of second nature, very natural, and I really miss it.

Before we did this work I was – and I still am, I'm working on it – a very heady actor. I'm very stiff on stage, I've noticed. But doing the Suzuki training I was able to pinpoint the tension and release it and I'm very aware of my body now. I was completely ignorant of how my body moved on stage, especially how my foot would hit the floor. Different characters walk differently and that changes everything. Now I have so much more to work with. I can't tell you how much more accomplished I feel as a performer.

It was also helpful to me in my relationships to other people on stage. You know, you go into autopilot but now I'm aware of distance, of the planes that we're on, I can sink into the work and I have a sixth sense of how my body moves in relation to everybody else on stage.

Suzuki gives you the body discipline, the mind discipline. It forces you to focus, and that should be so easy – but it's really not. We need to be taught to focus and to really listen and pay attention to what's going on. And so when it's taught in tandem with the Viewpoints training it helps because you're focused – you're reaching for the God of Perfection – but the Viewpoints allows you to layer your work, to give it range.

[*After a long silence, Mallory's quick, spirited delivery transitioned into somber recognition:*] I was dealing with so much that I hadn't dealt with – that process is what brought my abuse back up *and* what helped me deal with it. Now I am not ashamed of that portion of my life. I don't feel like God hates me, and I don't feel like it's a sin to be beautiful anymore. I think that the pressure you put on us was absolutely necessary, because there was no way we could have devoted so much of ourselves to the work if you didn't make

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<sup>2</sup> Mallory is referring to the work of French acting instructor Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999), who practiced a "non-naturalistic alternative to devising and improvising performance" through the use of neutral mask exercises and "gestural/mimetic improvisations." Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 214, 118. For further study, see Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, trans. David Bradby (London: Methuen, 2000).

that an absolute necessity. If we didn't have that pressure, we would have gotten lazy. It was necessary and it was warranted. It was important to you, and not just because of your dissertation or to increase your name or whatever – you gave us this pressure because you believed in us, and you knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was going to work and it was going to be pretty and it was going to be beautiful. We thought we were looking like fools, and the pressure you put on us made us get through that.

But we got that trust. I think that is so innate with being a performer and being a whole person, trusting and allowing yourself to trust these people. I have to be very, very honest: I don't trust men and I don't trust most people, actually, at least I didn't before we started this work. As a woman of color, I live my life through the black experience and we are definitely taught not to trust – or cry in front of – particularly white men. And after that show, I'm pretty sure I had balled lots of times on your shoulder, and I trusted you. I still do – I trust you with my life. Just think about the time when we were putting on this play: a time when our country was going through a huge change. And I remember that one rehearsal when we opened the doors and could hear people cheering for Barrack Obama ten blocks away. I am hyper-conscious about my race, but this is the cool thing because I normally very aware of my race when I'm on stage – or off stage – its just ingrained in me, I'm just aware always that I am a black woman, but that kind of dissipated with me during this work. I really didn't think about skin color.

*[Her voice began to choke with emotion, and I wished I could be there with her to provide comfort. After taking a moment to collect herself, she continued:]* When Ashley and Katie and I talk about the show amongst ourselves, the one thing that always comes up was how educational and enlightening it was. Matt, your training shows because you're very committed to teaching what it means to be an artist, and I really did appreciate that it was such an educational theatre experience. It wasn't necessarily about 'the picture' *[she said with the bravado of an old movie star]*, you know, how pretty it could be. It was about how real it could be, how we as actresses could stretch ourselves.

How nice for young women who aspire to be artists, for us to now be heading into life feeling that our differences are good. Feeling that – especially as women who are taught not to be in our bodies, that it's okay to be aware of your body, it's okay to be sensual being or a rigid being, that it's our right to feel comfortable and beautiful all the time.

I am more confident, more defiant and quizzical, more patient and fearless and definitely more certain that there are miracles, that there are questions that lead to more questions, and loving a more confrontational form of expression that can reach into a audience members' souls and leave them as changed as we were.

*[After a loud sigh, she concluded:]* Agnes was the cherry on the pie of a very difficult time in my life. But at the end of the process, I felt put back together. And I don't think that would have happened otherwise. I still dream about it. It fell together in ways we'll never know. We'll probably

never know. And that's so cool, it's like the gift that keeps on giving.<sup>3</sup>

In the privacy of my office, Ashley gave – in her characteristically unguarded way – her stirring testimony of self-acceptance:

When I got cast as Agnes, I had no clue what you were going to do or what the end product was going to be. I was just really open to the idea of doing something different. I remember when we finally got to me. I was like: “Well, first of all, breathe, and it's not stupid, because you're making a choice and it's something that you're doing, and if Matt likes it he likes it, and if he doesn't, we'll adjust it and fix it.” I just remembered to play and to have fun, and honestly I don't know where it all came from. Looking back on it, I think: “How the hell did you even think to do that? I mean, what the hell was that?” And I really don't know where it came from. But it became easier.

The whole thing of never saying you're sorry, to never apologize for what you do because it's a choice you make and you stick by it – that was important. And knowing that going in made it a lot easier to go as far as I possibly could. I think if I hadn't had that training, it would have been a lot more difficult to do it. I think I would have been a lot more constricted and a lot more in my head and not, you know, throughout my body, it'd just be in my head.

*[She paused for a moment before continuing.]* But when we started creating the character, and with me relating so much to my body – every night I'd go home with a little bit more of a sense of who I was. And by the end of that experience – as hard as it was some nights – I think I definitely became stronger. I developed the sense of humor that I didn't really have before because I was so bitter about everything.

It was interesting growing up with albinism. The strange thing was that it was never explained to me by my parents, and I don't necessarily blame them. My sister has a caramel complexion – that's pretty much how everybody in my family is – and I was never sat down by my mom and told: “This is why you don't look like your sister, why your complexion isn't like hers.” So when I got to school people would see my mom and say: “You're not – your skin's not like hers, what's up with that?” They'd be mean with it, but children tend to be that way. They would single me out because of it, and they would single my mom out too. She would get these, like, really, really weird suggestions on how to make my skin darker. One friend – who is no longer a friend – of hers told her to bathe me in tea. When I was a baby, nobody believed that I was hers, but when you look at her, I look just like her!

As I got older ... *[Her voice trailed off and she sat for a moment in silent contemplation.]* The difference between now and then was that people were a lot more open with “Oh, you're weird,” and “You look different from us” then. Now people have a little more tact, so it's a lot more quiet and I'm

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<sup>3</sup> Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom, interview with author, June 7, 2009.

never really sure if I walk in somewhere and people are staring, if it's "Oh, look somebody just walked in," or "Oh, look *somebody* just walked in."

With Agnes, she was wondering why did God choose her, what was it that she had done, or why was she chosen to bear this, you know, this gift, or curse, or what have you. Why her? And so I would ask myself the same questions. I felt like I was Agnes if you take away the circumstances of the play. I am Agnes, you know, for all intents and purposes. I remember us talking about how my skin brings me out, how *I've* [she said with emphasis] been touched by God. I relate to Agnes because she's different and that because she's touched by God, and my having to deal with this physical presence that no matter where you go everybody notices it because it's something that's physical. She just ... [*her voiced trailed off and she thought for a moment*] ... At a point in my life there was so much about the world that I didn't know and being so ignorant – and not in a bad way, just in an "I don't know" type of way – and there are times even now that I still feel like that. Agnes was such an innocent character, and to have those circumstances forced upon her and to still have such an innocent way of looking at things, and saying "I love you" to people that she didn't know. I just related to her – I expect the best out of people, not even knowing them. I don't know why I expect the best of people, I don't know why I always have to think that deep down people are good at heart. And I think Agnes felt that way about a lot of the people in her life.

But physically, I'm a lot more comfortable with myself, and being in my skin and, um, funny thing, taking off my clothes [*she said with a sly chuckle*]. I used to *hate* [*she said with emphasis*] mirrors, I just didn't like them at all and after *Agnes* it became okay for me to look. I mean, I would look in mirrors more for necessity than to want to, like to apply makeup or to wash my face or to do my hair or something like that, but other than that I wouldn't really *look* [*again, with emphasis*]. I'm trying to be more comfortable with cameras because I hated having my picture taken. So physically, it is not as much of a scar as I referred to it before. Physically, I'm just more intrigued by myself.

Emotionally, I'm a lot happier. Everything's more balanced, and I just have a lot of positive energy and I'm just really, really grateful for that experience because I think Agnes was the one role that really carried on to my life specifically. The experience of *Agnes of God* has almost impacted my life as a human being more than it has as an actress. I am more comfortable in my skin. I don't feel the need to apologize for my existence. I'm happier, more free.

Everything was just so jumbled and unbalanced at first and just all over the place. After the experience my mind calmed down a little bit and I see things – and people – in a different way. I approach things a lot differently than I did before. I don't know, I just feel lighter, if that makes any sense at all. In the middle of everything – even doing *Agnes* – it felt like a weight was slowly but surely being lifted. *Agnes* was ... [*she paused for an extended moment*] ... it was an experience. A good one. It was hard, and I always say that with each play I do something comes to light and I'm a better person afterwards. And this time there were questions that were asked that at first I didn't even want to deal with, that I didn't even want to answer. I

thought, “Well, if I answer this question, what does that say about everything that I’ve been believing up to this point?” And I had to answer those questions, I had to deal with those things that I had to deal with, because otherwise I don't think the performance would have been as good, as real, as honest.

I have a better sense of what I know I can do, and what I want to do, if that makes any sense. If I don’t feel like I’m being challenged, then why even bother? Why the hell am I doing it if I don’t feel like I’m gonna learn something or be a better person or take something from away from the experience?<sup>4</sup>

In the comfort of her own elegant kitchen, Milbre proffered, as always, penetrating observations and confessed to a personal process not necessarily of transformation, but rather of *validation*:

I was very interested in and moved by the work. You had so complete a vision for the play that it was fascinating to watch the process come together – and have your vision overcome my doubts that the Virgin/Mother statue would have any value to the show!

I felt more like a witness to the group process, mostly because I’m a solo performer to the absolute atoms of my being. I was intimidated by stepping into an ensemble of people who had already worked together before and established a rapport, established a relationship – and I am in a different developmental moment in my life. But I was open to what I could offer the process and grateful that you felt there was something that I could offer the process. I haven’t really seen the play, even though I was in it. But my impression is that it was beautiful and challenging and profound in terms of really asking the audience to experience something unexpected, out of the ordinary.

And just seeing the work that you got out of the three young actresses was really something. And to see them go through their – in many ways – birth process. When you get to the transition between labor and pushing, the way a birth practitioner knows that the woman is ready to push is when she starts saying “I can’t do this! I can’t do this!” We saw, in many ways, each of the actresses go through that – “I can’t do this! I don’t know what’s going on here, I’ve never done this before, I have no idea what I’m doing” – that kind of frustration, the disbelief that it was making any sense. I got to see the struggles of the young women. You know: “I’m used to relying on the text, relying on the blocking, relying on the director to tell me where to go and what to do. What is this?” To see their confidence being born – just as my confidence was born that I had some reason to stand on the damned block or get behind the window.

You demanded a professional behavior, to get there on time, to come prepared and so forth. I saw the undergraduates rise to the level of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ashley J. Hicks, interview with author, June 16, 2009.

expectation. And I saw each of them learn something about herself as a woman and as an individual because of the content of the play in part, and what they were being asked to do, and because of the process and because maybe they were just ready for that surge forward in their work that took them beyond it being just another college play. I think for Ashley it came on the tail of the Tim Miller work, for Mallory it seemed to come at a moment when she was really ready to deal with some pretty deep stuff that she hadn't been dealing with, and for Katie too.

I love that there is a physical training available for the actress or the solo performer, as opposed to just "Go emote" or "Go learn your story." And because I'm a kinetic performer – it's hard for me to sit still and work on a thing – I was ripe for the picking for learning the training. What I like about Suzuki and Viewpoints is that there is a whole practice than an actor or a storyteller might develop, that he or she could use as a basis for keeping one's instrument ready, willing and able, because I do think that there's so much about storytelling as it is done at present that is intuitive and unexamined and really sort of jumping off a cliff and building the parachute as you fall. I think its useful to have specific things that one can do to ground you and to ask you to challenge yourself physically, which is a great metaphor for challenging yourself mentally and emotionally, to go deeper in the work. And with a lot of folks who are doing storytelling a certain amount of what they're doing goes unexamined, and the trick is to find ways to freshen or challenge yourself or to begin to understand the enormity of what you're doing, because I do think that its an enormous responsibility when you stand up in front of people and take them some place. So our work felt very familiar, and I get very little opportunity to pursue ensemble physicality. That is the one thing being a solo performer doesn't afford me. Doing the training was an enormous validation of the body work that to me is integral to what I do. And having that validation remains with me: "Yes, this works. This embodiment works."

One of the things I loved was getting back into my body over the course of doing that work, and finding a place where that was valued. It was lovely to be part of a group creative process, and it was vindicating [*she said with a question mark, her voice trailing off*] ... It reminded me that this is the work that I love, this is the work that I do – being in my body and communicating with my body whether my words are talking or not is sort of what I was born for in a certain way. The sweet value was to be reminded how I love the physical expression of the human experience.<sup>5</sup>

Milbre wonderfully crystallizes the truth our process laid bare, however idiosyncratic and contingent that truth might be: that we must proceed bodily and professionally; that theatre is not some casual, recreational activity to dabble at but a formidable and revitalizing adventure indispensable to the continued amelioration of our individual and collective

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<sup>5</sup> Milbre Burch, interview with author, June 10, 2009.

humanity. *Bodily*, because “the human body is indeed a wonder. In its beauty it is a miracle. The beautiful body can heal itself in mysteries beyond science. In marvelous precision the beautiful body can inhere remarkable strength ... and endurance past its own expectations.”<sup>6</sup> Because the theatre is – or should be – pure hard work, calling us out of apathy and lethargy to tempt the impossibilities of our task. Because “the passageway is the body ... it’s the only sure common denominator we still have,” and alternative perspectives made flesh prevent us from relying on our prejudices and preconceptions: they live and breath immediately within and before us, and we can literally reach out and touch them – or, perhaps more profoundly, *they* can reach out and touch *us*.<sup>7</sup> And, yes, *professionally*, because it occurs to me that others don’t take us seriously because too many practitioners don’t take *themselves* seriously, that others don’t see what we do as ‘real work’ because, all-too-often, it isn’t much more than superficial fun and games.

So why must we sacrifice so much energy to our art? Grotowski answers: “To learn with [others] what our existence, our organism, our personal and unrepeatable experience have to give us ... in short, to fill the emptiness in our soul ... Art is a ripening, an evolution, an uplifting which enables us to emerge from darkness into a blaze of light.”<sup>8</sup> Insofar as Katie, Mallory, Ashley, and Milbre evolved into luminescence during our all-too-brief time together, it was their individual and communal artistries that saw me – and our process – into that blaze of light. And that is why I cannot agree with Milbre on one particular point: I did not ‘get the work out of them.’ I certainly laid the ground work for it

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<sup>6</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 197.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Lauren, “Seven Points of View,” in *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc., 1995), 65.

<sup>8</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 256.

via extra-ordinarily difficult methods of training and performance-making, but it was their *commitment to* and *application of* the work that defined the process. For each of these women, this was admittedly a life-changing decision, made in the heat of battle, and I have so enjoyed watching these ladies grow and do and change and tear themselves apart and put themselves back together again. Their work was so incredibly intense, specific, and sophisticated, and I hope the sense of personal and artistic expansion, maturation, and validation they each felt will continue to carry them through in ever-increasing ways throughout the rest of their lives. I know it will carry me: their work burns with intensity at the front of my memory, the flames of their fiery sacrifices singeing into my soul imprints of themselves that will continue to inspire me for the many years yet to come. And from these four marvels I have learned this: that even *before* training, one must attend – with every fiber of her being – to her work; this is *the* essential ingredient: that she *cares* about her craft with an almost manic intensity. I don't know how long I can sustain working at this level, but I'm from good Italian stock and I can go a lot of years. Art is *not* easy, but my *Agnes of God* collaborators have shown me that I must never give up. We must continue the cycle: my mentors and previous collaborators inspired certain sensitivities in me that I then entreated Katie, Mallory, Ashley, and Milbre to absorb in the hopes that they will then operate with the same open-hearted zeal in relation to *their* future colleagues. Because, after all, it is not about us, it is about the lives we are privileged to touch. I am privileged to say Katie, Mallory, Ashley, and Milbre have touched *my* life, and I am the better for it – and I so love these four smart, brave, and beautiful women.

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*You have made your way halfway across the space, and you and your fellow neophytes momentarily form a single line, dividing the space vertically into two equal halves. Once at center, you do not halt your trajectory but rather revolve in a lengthy pivot, forced to face the Teacher in a fleeting and frightening instant of*

*connection. As you turn, your body intuitively morphs itself into another configuration: now your arms extend behind you and you arch your torso upwards and backwards. As you make your way back to your starting position, you are overcome by the sense of loss incurred by turning your back on your image. But this loss is suddenly tempered by the emergence of the specter of a new image out on the horizon, just as disturbing and alluring as the first.*

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I am left-handed, and it is my favorite thing about myself. Before *anything*, it is what makes me *me*. In a world so thoroughly oriented to the right, my view of things is always unavoidably skewed. In the face of insulting metaphors, insipid jokes, and cultural prejudices, I am forced – by some act of genetics – to apprehend the world from an alternate perspective continually, *and I revel in it*. Perpetually on the opposite side of ‘normal,’ my left-handedness gives me my quirky creative edge and never fails to incite me to do things unconventionally. Now I have crafted this strange and intricate and incredibly vulnerable piece of writing, and have had the audacity to tempt you to roam about its treacherous terrain. And so where has this work left *us*, dear reader, *you* and I?

In a beautiful essay on the importance of the tandem experience of practice and scholarship, Anna Furse says she writes “to be able to turn theory into evidence ... to make jargon sing.”<sup>9</sup> Like Furse, I want “to be able say: you know this theory here? Well it is at least partly about what I have done with my life and my work ... And the only way I can do this now is through sharing the practice itself via my own body, via training.”<sup>10</sup> And so because I no longer want to write only on my own body and because I admit “to a terror of making things circulate – I speak, I write, I publish. Because somehow, despite everything, I must

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Furse, “Those Who Can Do Teach,” in *Theatre in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, ed. Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

...”<sup>11</sup> My auto/ethnographic memoir is a writing *of* the body and *by* the body, a training for life lived beyond the last page. Patricia Hampl asserts that “true memoir is written, like all literature, in an attempt to find not only a self but a world”; ethnographer Laurel Richardson says, “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is through remembering and reflecting that the work has truly come into focus, and so by making the invisible and synchronistic machinations of my intuition visible, this writing – this memoir, this *act of remembering* – is perhaps the zenith of our theatreing of the sacred: a wish for the future actualized via a vitalizing restoration of the past. “Why write?,” asked John Updike so many pages ago. Oh, but we *must* ...

Furse observes that “as artists we can offer a (fallible) human perspective which deconstructs the tendency of academia to see a body of work in logical arcs where we more often than not work from chance and intuition,” arguing against academic writing that “over-endows the work with coherence.”<sup>13</sup> This reminds me of something Doug would often tell us to remind us of the impossibility of perfection: the common Native American custom of knitting a small flaw into the otherwise unbroken weave of a blanket in order to let its soul out. And so I hope I have let the soul of experience out by being clear without being pedantic and prescriptive; I hope I haven’t reflected us out of the mysteriousness of our miraculous process. This writing is not about turning a living process into a fixed system, it is not about transforming the dynamic into the static. Rather, it tempts the challenge of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 35; Laurel Richardson, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000), 924.

<sup>13</sup> Furse, “Those Who Can Do Teach,” 69.

depicting human experience in all its “muddy, bloody, messy, complicated [and] sweaty” glory.<sup>14</sup> I hope in striving for detail I haven’t explained everything away. I have told my story, but I hope I have left room for *your* story, and her story, and his story over there; I hope I have left you the space to make meaning when and where you may. I hope this writing has been not a closing-off, but rather an opening-up.

I like Stacy Holman Jones’s observation that “the stories of ethnography seek to create a highly charged, emotional atmosphere that encourages the participation of readers,” that ethnography is “an intimate provocation” involving a “charged exchange of presence – or mutual presentness.”<sup>15</sup> It might be obvious by now that I am tempting the same sense of reciprocity through the performance of this writing that was tempted through the performance of *Agnes of God*. Whether or not I am successful in this venture is, in the end, up to you, dear reader. Inevitably, you have brought your own thoughts and desire and beliefs into your reading, and I’m glad you have. But I hope I have inspired you to embrace the contradictions and the accidents, to take up the invitation to share in my experiences and my dreams. I have intended to provoke only more questions rather than provide any easy answers. Something you read on page one might only come into focus after page one hundred and one, and even then only if you are willing to call on imagination and your own vulnerabilities and experiences to fill in the gaps. Intentionally, I have not connected all the dots, and indeed it would be rather presumptuous of me to think that I *could* pin down wonder with such authority. Rather than simplifying lived experience, I hope I have made it only more complex.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>15</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, *Torch Singing: Performing Resistance and Desire from Billie Holiday to Edith Piaf* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 177; Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 151, quoted in Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 177.

Earlier, I cited Ronald J. Pelias's assertion of empathy as an essential ingredient of effective poetic performance writing. "Empathy is a step," he says, "an essential one, if people are to move toward one another with understanding and compassion."<sup>16</sup> I have been thinking a great deal of my previous citation of Anne Bogart's belief that, in the rehearsal space, we must "be visibly generous, respectful and civil but, at the same time, know exactly what [we] think," that we need "a strong core" but "a supple and flexible exterior."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is *essential* to operate with conviction and a specific personal philosophy, but not in such a way that we become provincial. This is actually a wonderful metaphor for the practice of *life* – that we can be firm but not intolerant, brave but not belligerent – and so in the advancing of my own specific, idiosyncratic perspective in this *life writing*, I hope I haven't undone my call for a multi-perspectival apprehension of the world. This writing has asked you to feel its shapes and textures, and I hope they haven't been *too* sharp; I hope I have not been polarizing and exclusive in unproductive and perhaps even destructive ways. Because, in the final analysis, what is most important is not the writing itself but the legacy it leaves behind: how its phrases and paragraphs become tangible and human, how it influences our interactions with ourselves and our world, how it inspires hope, as well as the changes in behavior, the transformations it breeds, reverberating like so many chords out into the infinite.

Suzuki has said: "We must struggle on with a clear vision of our situation as we find it; living in the world means joining in with the rest of its disillusioned, chilled humanity. No one merely lives in a private world of [her] own; [she] must look beyond [her] own

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<sup>16</sup> Ronald J. Pelias, *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher's Body* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Bogart, "Can We Practice Empathy Together?," Anne's Blog, entry posted July 1, 2009, <http://siti.groupsites.com/post/july-1-2009-can-we-practice-empathy-together> (accessed July 1, 2009).

individuality in order to comprehend the meaning of [her] existence in a larger universe.”<sup>18</sup> I am known to say: “The world is falling apart, and we have a lot of work to do.” Indeed, it *can* be awful out there, but I hope that this communal experience of rethinking the possibilities of our existence has shown all of us – you, dear reader, included – how precious this life truly is. And so thank you for reading – and becoming complicit in – this process, thank you for not being afraid of the dark. It has been my great privilege to spend this time with you, and I want to thank you for nurturing this story. Please take it with you, and so too the responsibility of caring for myself and especially my marvelous collaborators. And whenever you think on this experience, take care never to go through the motions, but to live your lives always alert and always alive.

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*You have reached your destination, and remain still in your statue for several scorching seconds as the music fades away. Silence envelopes the space, but is broken suddenly by the Teacher firmly grasping His staff and smacking it against the floor. “Extend into your image!” He thunders, and you deepen your stance and your focus. Your breathing becomes labored as you fight to maintain a centered, cool exterior and a passionate attention to image. You find yourself completely overwhelmed: your heart is pounding and your energies are coursing and your mind floods with vision and emotions. You want to collapse as much as you want to go racing through the streets, and the dueling sensations have a dizzying effect on you. You notice you have begun to weep softly and quietly again.*

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Suzuki/Viewpoints training with Maria always culminated in the public performance of a collaboratively devised piece – created via the Composition method – as a kind of rite of passage transitioning us from novices into more mature theatre artists harboring a greater command of our craft. At the end of our performance – as the proud crowd of family,

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<sup>18</sup> Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 104.

friends, and fellow company members cheered vociferously – Maria took to the stage, as she did every year, carrying an unwieldy pile of wooden dowels, much like the one she used to put us through our paces during training. She then proceeded to gift one to each of us as a kind of badge of honor, a trophy marking our new – and hard-won – faculties. Ours was a particularly emotional ceremony, especially for me, as I was set to graduate and leave the University in less than a week. Maria handed me my stick with a smile of recognition I will never forget. I grasped it hesitantly, reluctant to abandon the privilege of my position in her training space. But that is the same stick that several years later found its way into my life once again in yet another ramshackle little space – now in the middle of Missouri – endowing a new generation of artists with its exacting and revitalizing sensibilities. After the final performance of *Agnes of God*, Katie, Mallory, Ashley, Milbre and I shared a poignant celebration of our own, as I gave each one her own Suzuki staff. And now I want to do the same for you, dear reader. Please, take up the imposing wooden task-master with my deepest, most heartfelt gratitude. This was a lot; I know, I lived it. But now so have you, and indeed you must be very tired.

*Otsukare sama deshita.*

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*Finally, the Teacher calls “Release,” and you do so with great reluctance. Achingly, you relax the tension in your body and stand frozen in utter astonishment. You are not certain what to do or where to go, but you feel so thoroughly alive that you almost cannot bear the sensation. Suddenly, the Teacher puts down His staff and steps out of the horizontal lane at the front of the workspace. He scans the room reprovably for a moment before shocking you with a genuinely warm smile. He clasps His hands together at His chest and bows deeply. “Otsukare sama deshita,” He says. You bow in return and repeat the phrase. Saddened to have finished the session but grateful for the relief, you and your fellow neophytes retire to the front of room, each of you collapsing in and amongst the array of bags, towels and water bottles scattered there. Sorrowful but*

*stimulated, you partake of a generous sip of water and catch the Teacher's eye in your periphery. You turn to face Him, unafraid for the first time. He is still smiling, and so you smile back. He nods His head several times, and you summon the courage to speak with Him only to have one of your fellow neophytes distract you with some comment or other. When you finally turn your gaze back to the Teacher, He is gone.*

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Anne Bogart says that “speaking a story can be an act of letting in light,” and so each night as I set down at my computer, I write myself literally and figuratively into a new morning.<sup>19</sup> I want to sleep, but I can't. I am consumed by revisiting, revising, recollecting, remembering. This writing was one of the most painful and pleasurable experiences I suspect I will ever have: blood, sweat, and tears mixed with a sense of fulfillment I can only hope to feel again. The *Agnes* process profoundly altered me, crystallizing my personal aesthetic, pushing me over ledge after ledge, inspiring me to be less neurotic and tyrannical and more calm and compassionate, forcing me to make strong choices and to lay my most intimate self bare. Such rigor and vigor and vulnerability was sustained and *magnified* through writing about it, inciting me to wear my heart on the sleeve of experience. Actually, this writing has provided the sweetest value of this entire experience, not only because I have begun to fathom the consequentiality of the typographic vivification of history, but – for the first time, really – I am proud of my practice of the written word; I can sincerely call myself a writer because I have *earned* it. Ruth Behar says that “writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly,” adding: “I would say it takes yet greater skill ...

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<sup>19</sup> Anne Bogart, “Stories of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Anne’s Blog, entry posted May 1, 2010, <http://siti.groupsites.com/post/may-2010-stories-of-the-21st-century> (accessed May 1, 2010).

When an author has made herself or himself vulnerable, the stakes are higher.”<sup>20</sup> In an embodied way, I recognize the accuracy of Behar’s observation. And so this writing is *my* ultimate sacrifice, my ultimate offering of experience. This writing has devoured me and redefined me, and I am exhausted, and I am different. My heart and mind – and fingers! – are weary, but I am oddly charged. The current continues to flow; it propels me forward and I must leap again.

I had an idea in the shower this morning. But, dear reader, will it be miracle enough?

Will it?

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*Your and your fellow neophytes are scattered haphazardly about the space, each of your bodies sculpted into a different shape dictated by your visceral and physical response to the desires of the room. Suddenly, someone across the space begins to move on all fours in staccato fashion along a grid-like pattern. Just as abruptly, the person standing behind you swoops down in a tight huddle, hugging her knees with her right hand as her left hand floats about in midair. Before you know it, you are off, proceeding diagonally and rather slowly, exploring the space before you with the big toe of your left foot as your hands clap together at irregular intervals. Eventually, everyone in the space is involved in some sort of activity, including the vitality of stillness. You realize that you are not planning what you are doing, that everything is just happening. You are rooted in deep kinesthetic engagement; you are in conversation with these people – these strangers – but it is a more intimate and profound conversation than could ever be achieved with mere words. The work – dynamic and magical – grows in depth, audacity, and tenacity. You have never operated in relation to other people in this way before, and you are enjoying the collaboration and the fellowship – and the comfort of physical contact. The intensity of these ever-evolving and always surprising fresh new ways of being together overwhelm you, and you feel welcomed by these strangers. You are in an ecstatic state: constantly doing and*

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

*moving and swelling and transitioning in and out of stillness and physical contact with the others and with the space at various tempos and durations in different patterns and in different shapes. You can't imagine these things your body is doing, things you didn't know you were capable of doing. You are listening with your whole body: every organ, hair, nail, freckle, blemish, joint, tooth, and appendage is engaged in the activity. Unexpectedly, you find yourself in a tender moment of connection with one of your comrades. Your hands make contact but, more radically, so do your eyes. You realize in life you usually avoid such intimate associations with others, but this moment is stimulating and soothing. It says: "It will all be okay, we are in this together, you and I." Such physical and emotional compassion is the driving force that carries you through the work. You really are playing, and you could go at this forever. The work continues to evolve and you break with your new friend. Your left hand rises and leads you to ...*

“It’s hard enough to go through it once, isn’t it?”



Figure 10. *From left to right:* Milbre Burch as the Virgin/Mother and Ashley Hicks as Agnes.  
Photograph by Mallory Thomas-Taulbee.

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## VITA

Matthew Allan Saltzberg was born in Suffern, New York and raised in New Windsor, New York, graduating seventh in his class from Newburgh Free Academy in 1999. He graduated *cum laude* with a BA in Theatre Performance from Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. There he performed such roles as Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, Muley Graves in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the Male Greek Chorus in *How I Learned to Drive*, and directed Celeste Raspanti's *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. In 2005, he graduated with an MA in Theatre Arts from the C.W. Campus of Long Island University, where he served as a teaching assistant and as assistant to the Director of Theatre and Chair of Region II, Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. At LIU, he performed such roles as Flote in *Red Noses*, Collins/Sideway in *Our Country's Good*, and Richard in *A New Brain*. He directed August Stramm's *Sancta Susanna* and Christopher Durang's *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* in partial completion of his Master's thesis entitled "A Little Crucifixion." As a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Missouri-Columbia, he taught Acting for Non-Majors, Adaptation and Performance of Literature, Solo Performance, Introduction to Performance Studies, and Script Analysis. At MU, Saltzberg performed such roles as Major Petkoff in *Arms and the Man* and Thurston Wheelis, et al. in *Greater Tuna*. Other directing credits include *The Glass Menagerie* (Shaw Performing Arts Festival, St. Louis, Missouri), *Sleuth* (Thespian Hall, Boonville, Missouri), Edward Albee's *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (Independent Actors Theatre, Columbia, Missouri), and *Love Kills: The New Rock Musical* (Assistant Director, New Line Theatre, St. Louis, Missouri). Saltzberg has presented his creative and scholastic work at various regional and national conferences, including the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, the National Communication Association, Central States Communication Association, and the

Mid America Theatre Conference. His publications include book and performance reviews in *Ecumenica* and *Theatre Research International*, an article on the *Agnes of God* process in the Fall 2009 issue of *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, and “Staging Humanity in Cranberry: The Human Revelation of Joan Crawford,” his article in *Platform: Postgraduate eJournal of Theatre & Performing Arts* regarding his non-drag, gender-confounding solo performance of Academy Award-winning actress Joan Crawford from his own adaptation of archival materials.