

TCR

THE CAPILANO REVIEW

Mary
Victor
How old are you?
Fourty three.
Do you remember me?
Do you remmeber me?
Yes, you worked for my father.
I haven't seen him in a long time.
I 't seene him in a lng time, too.
Do you love your wife?
How'd you know I was married?
I guessed.
you saw the pictures.
I'm sorry.
I dont much mind, anyone can look.
I remember you,
I know, you said.
No, I've been remembering.
I see,
do you remember what I look like.
You were young.
I look the same.
I want to know.

POETS THEATRE

how can a page become a
stage for words?

—a.rawlings

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The Capilano Review is published by The Capilano Press Society. Canadian subscription rates for one year are \$25 GST included for individuals. Institutional rates are \$30 plus GST. Outside Canada, add \$5 and pay in U.S. funds. Address correspondence to *The Capilano Review*, 2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver, BC V7J 3H5. Subscribe online at www.thecapilanoreview.ca

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The Capilano Review gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the British Columbia Arts Council, Capilano University, and the Canada Council for the Arts. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Magazines Fund toward our editorial and production costs.

The Capilano Review is a member of Magazines Canada (formerly CMPA), the BC Association of Magazine Publishers, and the Alliance for Arts and Culture (Vancouver).

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NUMBER 40063611. RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO CIRCULATION—TCR, 2055 PURCELL WAY, NORTH VANCOUVER, BC V7J 3H5

ISSN 0315 3754 | (Published May 2010)

Printed in Vancouver, BC, by Hemlock Printers.



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3.11 / SPRING 2010

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JONATHAN BALL / from **Clockfire**

The Play Begins

The play begins. And then the play begins. And then the play begins. And then the play begins.

And the play begins. And the play begins. And then the play begins. And the play begins.

But then. The play begins. The play begins. The play begins.

They Come Back

The actors take the stage, bow to the audience, then slit their own throats.

The audience is horrified. They shriek, call ambulances, flee. But they come back the next night. They come back.

The Future

The actors reveal, for a small audience, the significant world events of the next fifty years. The audience listens, absorbs everything. When the play ends, they return home, silent still. And now it is their turn to act.

ROGER FARR / from *Radio/Texts*

Somatic Marker

*Their faces swell, their veins grow black with
rage, and their eyes sparkle with Gorgonian fire.*

—Ovid, *De Arte Amandi*, iii. 503

FX: Electrical noise, interference, fade under and repeat
periodically for duration

WORLEY (sings): They took all the footage off my T.V.
Said it's too disturbing for you and me
It'll just breed anger that's what the experts say
If it was up to me I'd show it everyday.¹

OPERATOR: This is operator 1246, and we are going into the borough of
Manhattan, and the caller is on the line at this time.²

BUSH: Coming here makes me sad on the one hand...

FX: Plane taking off

¹ Darryl Worley. "Have You Forgotten?" This song was performed at the Pentagon on April 16, 2003, where "a red-eyed Rumsfeld twice took off his glasses to wipe away tears." See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djqhibAiqb0>>.

² "911 Calls from September 11, 2001." *Washingtonpost.com*. 31 March, 2006.

BUSH: ... but it also makes me angry.³

FX: Plane, louder

POLLSTER: How worried are you...

VOICE: When I think about my future, I feel angry.⁴

POLLSTER: ... very worried, fairly worried, only somewhat worried, or not very worried?⁵

FX: World Trade Centre Tower One collapsing

BUSH: Our grief has turned to anger...⁶

FX: Missile, fade under

³ “‘190 dead’ in Pentagon attack.” *BBC News*. 13 Sept., 2001.

⁴ Dan Farrell. “Avail.” *Last Instance*. San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2000. All subsequent lines for VOICE are from this text.

⁵ *NBC News / Wall Street Journal Poll*. Sept. 15-16, 2001. <<http://www.pollingreport.com/terror10.htm>>.

⁶ “Transcript of President Bush’s address, September 21, 2001.” *CNN.com*. <<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>>.

BIXBY: Mr. McGee, don't make me angry.
You wouldn't like me when I'm angry.⁷

WORLEY (fade): Have you forgotten how it felt that day...

POLLSTER: People across the country have been affected by Tuesday's attacks in many different ways. Which of the following statements comes closest to describing how you personally were affected by the attacks?⁸

FX: Applause

DOCTOR: There are two kinds of angry people in this world...⁹

BUSH: ...and our anger to resolution.¹⁰

FX: Explosion

WORLEY (up): Have you forgotten when those towers fell?
We had neighbors still inside going thru a living hell

⁷ Opening Narration. *The Incredible Hulk*. CBS. 4 Nov. 1977.

⁸ *NBC News / Wall Street Journal Poll*, *ibid*.

⁹ *Anger Management*. Dir. Peter Segal. Perf. Jack Nicholson, Adam Sandler. Revolution Studios. 2003.

¹⁰ Transcript, *ibid*.

FX: World Trade Center Tower Two collapsing

POLLSTER: Do you or any of your friends or relatives know someone who is missing, hurt or killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, or the plane crash outside of Pittsburgh?¹¹

BUSH: Freedom and fear are at war.¹²

DOCTOR: Explosive is the type of individual you see screaming at a grocery store cashier for not taking his coupon.

FX: Man whimpering, fade under

CRO: Hello, caller.¹³

VOICE: I feel sad when I think about my present physical health.

CRO: Is the patient breathing?

FX (crowd): USA! USA! USA!

¹¹ NBC News / Wall Street Journal Poll, *ibid*.

¹² Transcript, *ibid*.

¹³ “911 Calls from September 11, 2001.” *Washingtonpost.com*. 31 March, 2006. <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/911/EMS1.pdf>. All subsequent lines for CRO are from this text.

VOICE: I am not particularly angry about my future.

CRO: Okay, he's awake?

POLLSTER: Which one of the following emotions do you feel the most strongly in response to these terrorist attacks?¹⁴

FX: Crowd cheering

VOICE: I am becoming more hostile about things than I used to be.

CRO: Okay. What's the matter with him?

FX: Man whimpering, cut

VOICE: I feel angry.

DOCTOR: Implosive, the least common, is the cashier at the store who remains quiet at his job day after day until he then finally loses it and just shoots everyone in the store.

FX: Machine gun, screaming

VOICE: I am pretty angry about things these days.

DOCTOR: You're the cashier.

¹⁴ *NBC News / Wall Street Journal Poll*. 12 Sept., 2001. <<http://www.pollingreport.com/terror11.htm>>. The results were as follows: Anger (37); Sadness (24); Disbelief (21); Vulnerability (11); Fear (6); Not sure (1).

BUSH: In our grief and anger . . .¹⁵

VOICE: I'm so angry that I would like to hurt someone.

FX (crowd): USA! USA! USA!

CRO: I can hear you.

FX: Machine gun, screaming

OPERATOR: I'm sorry, there's a lot of noise going on in the back here.

BUSH: I can hear you . . .¹⁶

FX: Man whimpering louder

BUSH: The rest of the world hears you.

OPERATOR: I'm sorry, what is wrong with the patient?

VOICE (louder): I feel angry about myself a good deal of the time.

FX: Man whimpering cut

CRO: Okay.

¹⁵ Transcript, *ibid.*

¹⁶ "The rest of the world hears you." *Telegraph.co.uk*. 15 Sept., 2001.

THE INSTITUTE FOR DOMESTIC RESEARCH / Domestic Research

Umgebung

the objective space in which we see a living being moving.

Umwelt

the environment world that is constituted by a more or less broad series of elements
... carriers of significance (*Bedeutungsträger*)... or marks (*Merkmalträger*)...
the only things that interest the animal (40)

The first task of the researcher observing the animal is to recognize the carriers of significance which constitute its environment. These are not, however, objectively or factually isolated, but rather constitute a close functional—or... musical—unity with the animals receptive organs that are assigned to receive the mark (*Merkorgan*) and react to it (*Wirkorgan*).

AUDIO 1		Strolling through the garden: strolling by lilacs, picking peachy freesias, making a bouquet, beside the honey-suckle, among the roses.		Shades of vanilla: creamy vanilla, vanilla nut cake, French vanilla, vanilla nectar, vanilla taffy.	
AUDIO 2	A new Christmas cookie-scented deodorizer from Febreze for those who don't have time to fill their kitchen with the smell of home-baked treats.		Wandering barefoot on the shore: walking in the soft sand, under the swaying palms, wading along the shore, splashing in the waves, sailing in the bay.		
AUDIO 3				Relaxing in a hammock: soothing tea, dew drops on petals, comforted with lavender, meditating with incense, tranquil vanilla.	
AUDIO 4					nice, nice.
AUDIO 5					Never mind that most of us have never given profound consideration to what a snow angel smells like.
AUDIO 6				I'm always looking for ways to keep my house and my clothes smelling fresh.	
2' 57"	3' 05"	3' 13"	3' 21"	3' 29"	3' 37"
					3' 45"

Reactors twitch lips.
Smell fish down there? There is
nothing way with the wrong your body smells

that a distinction of franchised vernaculars
beautifying & significant: won't fix. Spray it on 10-15 minutes.

a vaginae vector stunt pounce

baskets us ur

as lilac—qua fleur

for a market's mint stiff
for a pleasant control stroll border
for home land security
for your ultra eve whiff kit
with esters like babies plus cherry (percent/ages)

Your two great wills well eyed, slay me. Suddenly.
Their product beauty slakes weight through me
My heart's herd quick with markets & means.

By your own hand heal injury
Liability clean
Your two great wells eye me suddenly
Their lips shake two faith twix luscious and cleanly.

Zum Planetarium

Echinus esculentus

what spider's will is tied to a fly's blindness?

what love codes prod with seemly pink spines in our deep scented liberty?

•

clean to keen

as in

scene- distinct

wall-eyed welling

suddenly betwixt

or clean

summer's lolling

lulled hang-

ups and down

wavers mustered

looping a wedger's

wet-wax

carriers of significance and soft plastic waxes
(what would we muster?)
in lubricant: a lulled pig
ments to

clickbank your ditch is my
dictionary: for free un-furred
idioms

fetch smooth:
by fee:
a hip point—off sack, into sack (dispersant)

•

Suck-up, or out-sacked
odour's signification
a fetching signals'
hip-drift
or split-squirt billow

cerulean or squid inky
—I filch up

Amoeba terricola,

fetches for a basic cause—plants a stake-out

Discount is instant: 800 million pounds:
gouge down groin to a deep fee green:
smells like fish tastes like chicken.

•

As usual, Fee's in net.
Hopping, or dahlia-driven,
a cut-weather communal
fuck-up. You bet
I'm chicken.

bitten at an arm's length (iambic)
meaning smacks its orbit

Rhizostoma plumo

a planktonic swarm
plus a chronic scientific proof rifter

I had 3 days to ask metafilter
why my girlfriend is dusty?

but I got bored in the mobility of Dubai
bored in the slack stuff of this feminine molt

BROOK HOUGLUM / “grace or fervour”: a conversation with a.rawlings

The following exchange takes as its point of departure rawlings’ questions: how can a text stage language and what methods (improvisatory, sounded, gestural) help facilitate “movement” between text and stage? What emerges is a dynamic, sustained exploration, a poetics of “near-constant workshop.”

•

*Your book *Wide slumber for lepidopterists* was staged by Theatre Commutiny at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre in 2006, but this is only one example of the wide range of performance projects you’ve been involved with. Could you say a bit about what you find vital about these projects that investigate relationships between text, sound, and movement: what has drawn you to them, or what have you drawn from them?*

Thank you for identifying right away the three categories or interior geographies that I currently visit/inhabit: sound, text, movement. Why these three categories? When I sense that my interests, passions, endeavours, tangents, and fixations cohere and coalesce, then I feel purposeful within a pursuit. These particular categories (sound, text, movement) stretch to childhood obsessions for me. My primary language I learned as a youngster was English; my secondary language was dance (specifically ballet prescribed to treat an in-toe gait, tap, and jazz). As a youngster, my parents’ sensitivity to early-body “dysfunction” (I was diagnosed 80% deaf and with the aforementioned in-toe gait) taught me a heightened appreciation of body-oriented activities that were dance and music-based. Raised in an arts-supportive environment, I gravitated towards activities that continued to challenge my body. As a high-school student, I was deeply committed to extracurricular activities that combined sound, text, and movement (theatre, choir, cheerleading). It was my intention to major in theatre with a focus on directing as an undergrad student, though that shifted when I fell in love with my first-year electives of creative writing (a course taught by Chris Dewdney and Bruce Powe) and dance (where

I was first exposed to modern techniques and contact improv). I went on to major in creative writing, with a minor in fine arts cultural studies and nearly enough credits for a second minor in theatre.

During and after my undergraduate stint at York University, I was involved in organizing numerous public readings (Writers at York, Lexiconjury Reading Series, The Scream Literary Festival, and events for The Mercury Press and Sumach Press), where I witnessed a plethora of reading styles and experiments. At readings, I am often drawn to a performer's cadence and I tend to "dance" with the syllables as they wave rapid-fire within the soundscape. I'm also fascinated by extraliterary position and movement of a reader—the stance, flip of a page, adjustment of the mic or sip of a beverage, paper tremble, the grace or fervour of hand gestures, weight shifted from leg to leg, the lunge or lurch or nod or lean—and how these often subconscious acts and postures punctuate or enhance the vocalized text. These cumulative experiences have surely shaped my interest in exploring the visual, sonic, and kinetic materiality and performance of languages, as well as the creative projects in which I've been involved the last decade.

As my first long-term page-based poetic project, *Wide slumber for lepidopterists* gave me the opportunity to pose the questions, "How can the page of a book act as a stage for words?" and, later, "How can a live performance of this page-based text translate the visual, aural, and kinetic qualities of the poetry?" Theatre Commutiny was an ad-hoc group co-organized by director Conor Green and me to explore poetic material in embodied performance. In 2006, we staged *Wide slumber* as a way to consider the page-based long poem's physical manifestation in a three-dimensional environment. The group was organized in a traditionally theatrical sense, including performers Amanda Brugel and Mika Collins, light designer Geoff Bouckley, sound designer Richard Windeyer, prop/set consultant Matt Ceolin, and choreographic consultant Susanna Hood. Earlier performances of *Wide slumber* in a non-theatre environment included actors, musicians, dancers, poets, and pedagogues (Ciara Adams, Jason Christie, Conor Green, Lori Nancy Kalamanski, Alexis Milligan, Katherine Parrish). This move from page to stage was a formative marker of my interest in a holistic exploration of language for its sensual materiality (sound-play, visual impact, and kinaesthesia), and the input and generosity of my many friends and collaborators facilitated the directions in which I've now headed.

After *Wide slumber*, I sought to both deepen and focus my experiences with sound, text, and movement via study with practitioners and experimenters interested in these fields.

From 2006 to present, I've taken workshops in breath, extended vocal technique, non-traditional conduction, Bel canto, authentic movement, contact improvisation, action theatre, open-source forms, and more, taught by a range of interdisciplinaryists, musicians, dancers, and theatre practitioners including Burnt Sugar, Katherine Duncanson, Misha Glouberman, Susanna Hood, Sarah Janssens, Karen and Allen Kaeja, Fides Krucker, Phil Minton, and Tena Palmer. Exposure to structured improvisation and body-awareness practices resonates strongly with my creative impulses, and I feel constantly renewed and awed as I wind my way through interconnection between sound, text, and movement.

I'm fortunate that opportunities cross my path that I may try out, and that like-minded people seek me out to workshop ideas they have. In some respects, I feel at this moment very much on a learning journey, as though I'm in a near-constant workshop.

In thinking about relationships between textual performance and movement or gesture, it seems that there is a continuum between one reader voicing a set of poems in front of a microphone and a collaborative and choreographed staging of/with text. Would you agree? How would you describe the work of gesture in poetic performance?

I am intrigued by your posit that choreographed staging of a text offers a continuum of the solo reading. It is possible; I'd like to know more how you come to this suggestion.

I'm thinking of gestures that accompany voicing and choreographed gestures both functioning as physically-enacted elements in performance, as time-based iterations of a text by a body. I guess I think of gesture as movement that could potentially be spontaneous or marked and repeated (intentionally or by habit).

Personally, gesture strikes me as a largely intuited or subconscious embellishment of verbal speech. Gesture accompanies, emphasizes, visualizes, moves. Gesture alludes, suggests, points. Gesture energizes, enervates. Gesture is improvised. Choreography

houses intentionality and conscious decision in my experience, whereas gesture is less planned, plotted, explicitly crafted. Choreography is a base line; choreography is set. Text on a page is set. And yet these set forms enliven through the experience of each witness. Gesture is more in alignment with that moment of enlivening for me; gesture is the immediacy of the witness. Gesture erupts from engagement with the set and improvises its immediate reaction as a performative manifestation.

This is, perhaps, a narrow way to define gesture. And so, another offer Lately, structured sonic improvisation prompted through gestural conduction cues piques my interest; there is opportunity to communicate through gesture and to incite sonic response in participants. In 2007, I took a renegade vocal workshop series in John Zorn's "Cobra" conduction method, facilitated in Toronto by Misha Glouberman. Later, New York City's Burnt Sugar led a workshop and performance in Lawrence "Butch" Morris' conduction techniques. And then I've been involved with The Element Choir for a few years, an all vocal, *a capella*, improvising choir of seventy-plus performers conducted by Christine Duncan in Toronto; Duncan draws on conduction methods from a variety of sources as well as creates her own in order to structure choral mayhem. Here, gesture is intrinsic to communication; it directs, demands, prompts, compels. The breathing, seething expectant mass howls after the wrist flicks. And so it is with the physical act of writing, too, yes?

It strikes me that part of the work of articulating text via movement or vice versa might be coming up with a lexicon to account for the intersections. The term "phrase," for example, could be both a group of words and a segment of a dance. What terms, methods, manoeuvres, manipulations have been useful to your thinking and practices of (textual / performed) choreography?

Body.

How does a reader engage physiologically with a text when she reads? How does reading enact a choreography on the body?

Phrase. Figure. Mark.

What encourages a body to move? How does my vocal apparatus enact a dance in how it moves as it pronounces? How do I engage my diaphragm and breathing apparatus in order to facilitate speaking? Is this not movement, and is it not structured physical improvisation? Is a poem written, edited, rehearsed, repeated not an act of verbal choreography, the body learning how to engage physically to produce a series of movements that result in sound?

Block. Notate. Set.

How can a poem act as choreographic notation? How can a page become a stage for words?

Isolate. Pattern. Compose.

What parts of the body do I use when I write? How is my entire body engaged as I write?

Repeat. Shape. Transition.

What is my path through the text? What do I first notice on a page? How does what I notice first influence or impact how I read a text? How conscious am I of my path through a text and how my path informs my interpretation of a text? How could a choreographer enact the reading and interpretation process in physical, 3D space?

Vocabulary. Musicality. Rhythm.

Building on these questions and vocabularies, how do you sense your current work unfolding; or, what are you interested in exploring further in the future?

I hope that my many projects, most of which include some combination of sound, text, movement, collaboration, and/or improvisation, have an opportunity to develop, since I sense they aid my understanding of body and the interconnection between sound, text, and movement. The projects:

- Develop in-progress manuscripts (*EFHILMNORSTUVWY*, *Rule of Three*, *Cochlea*, *Vessel*), choreographing each page with care. *EFHILMNORSTUVWY* explores

English-language pronoun usage, the book object as a closed ecosystem where letters are species inhabiting the page as field, and the constraint that limited resources and habitat loss imposes on alphabetic species. *Rule of Three* is a two-sided Tarot deck that blends rhapsodomancy, visual poetry, and valves. *Cochlea* combines snails with acoustic ecology and sustainable energy production. *Vessel* deals with acoustic ecology, travel, truth in the guise of fiction, human anatomy, motility and mobility, intimacy, and Iceland.

- “drift” with Toronto musician and composer Nilan Perera, a reading-for-performance strategy developed by Nilan where he and I improvise syntax via repetition of a pre-determined, borrowed paragraph, embellished by full-body gesture of dancer. We’ve had the good fortune to experiment with Sarah Janssens and Julie Lassonde so far.
- “Rule of Three” (working title), a structured improvisation with Belgian interdisciplinaryist Maja Jantar, founded on divinatory practices, the sibyls, Tarot reading, sound poetry, and extended vocal technique.



a.rawlings and Maja Jantar
Videographer: TVF, Belgium

- Vocal and movement improvisation performed with Belgian composer and instrument creator Godfried-Willem Raes' robotic orchestra and motion-sensor system through the Logos Foundation.
- Continue instrument-voice improv collaborations, specifically with musician-composers with a special interest in language/text/poetry such as Toronto percussionist Joe Sorbara, Vancouver saxophonist and poet Jonathon Wilcke, composers Valgeir Sigurðsson (Iceland) and Sebastian Bradt (Belgium), Christine Duncan's Element Choir, and post-punk/indie rock band Reykjavík!.

Improvisation seems crucial to many of these projects; could you say more about how improv or spontaneous interaction factor into your practices?

Sound and movement improvisations have given me peculiar notions of late. How would it be to shrug off and replace our social greeting scripts of "Hello; how are you?" and accepted contact of hug, handshake, kiss with non-semantic vocal improvisation and/or contact improv as an alternative way to greet and depart?

In my conscious brain, I forget what I know. But it is somewhere inside me, buried, this memory of learning about dance and sound poetry and extended vocal technique and improvisation and theatre performance. And when I find myself in moments of conversation and/or creation, somehow my subconscious brain calls up these past experiences to inform what I do.

I don't yet know how all of this interconnects. I haven't yet developed steadfast theories. There's so much more to read, to experience, to witness—always. But I feel blessed to attempt and encounter and learn and transform in the now and now and now.

February 2010

JOSEPH SHRAGGE / from **Knot of Nots**

ACT I

3. Mary Meets Victor - Skype 1

Mary sings “Delta Dawn” during movement opening.

The text is projected SL on the scrim, which divides the actors from the audience.

Mary

Victor

How old are you?

Fourty three.

Do you remember me?

Do you remmeber me?

Yes, you worked for my father.

I haven't seene him in a lng time.

I haven't seen him in a long time, too.

Do you love your wife?

How'd you know I was married?

I guessed.

you saw the pictures.

I'm sorry.

Anyone can look.

I remember you,

I know, you said.

No, I've been remembering.

I see,

Do you remember

what I look like.

You were young.

I look the same

I want to know

What?

ACT II

9. Mary & Victor: Internet Lovers – Skype 3: Web Cam

MARY speaks into a webcam. Her face is projected. Following Victor text is sung like ELVIS.

MARY: Last night they went cow tipping, then watched a chicken fight in the neighbour's basement. Someone played a fiddle. I don't mind that, it's the rudeness that gets me, the remarks about the weaker chickens. Last night they named one of them Mary. She lost; then they ate her; they ate Mary.

VICTOR: I never talk about these things. It's funny, you're the only one I complain to about it... Don't be angry with me. You're absolutely all I've got.

The sound of a chimney.

MARY: O-oo. Did you hear that? Sometimes their chimney makes these creepy noises.

VICTOR: You're a strange, wonderful woman. Strange and wonderful. I can see your eyes shining in the dark.

MARY: Can you see me better now? There's more light over here. I only have a second before they get back.

VICTOR: I love you, I love you, I love your eyes, the way you move, I dream about you ... You strange, wonderful woman!

MARY: Don't say that again. Okay, say it, say it. They're here. I really have to go.

13. Andy Party Pooper

A phone is thrown on stage.

HELGA: Hello.

IRENE: Is it Henry?

MARY: Who is it? Is it... for me?

HELGA: Hold on, I can't hear. Yes, oh, I see. But tonight's—I know you're excited. No, we want to meet you, too. I'm sure your wife is very nice, it is a legitimate request, but... no I would never say that about you. I wouldn't say that about anyone. *(beat)* Please come tonight... we want to meet you. *(she hangs up)* Andy's coming. He wants to meet us and look at our house, tonight.

IRENE: What about the jiggers from the Sucker Fish Festival? They're coming here for the square dance.

HELGA: He thought I called him illegitimate.

IRENE: He is though, isn't he?

HELGA: It's not right to call someone that. We'll have to tell the jiggers to come back next year.

IRENE: But we're not going to be here next year.

ADAM SEELIG / EMERGE/SEE: GET HEAD OUT OF ASS: “Charactor” and Poetic Theatre

It's time to break character. Character, as we know it, has become just another mask, concealing the person who performs. The *play of our selves, by and through our selves* (but not necessarily *about*), is the drama we need. Theatre may be a great art form, but it couldn't be more abused, with acting reduced to an habitual bag of tricks yielding vacuous entertainment in lieu of serious pleasure, love . . .

It's time to break character so the actor can break through. Or if we bury character at least a little, the performer can surface, freeing her from the tacit obligation to imitate society and enabling her to radiate more of her actual self. Those who perform are never what they perform about. In fact, they are often more interesting and dynamic than the subjects they portray. Actors are highly sensitive, acute people, and, in being right before us, in the flesh, are always more present than what they represent. So why hide them? Their inalienable nature, as opposed to assigned character, should be the origin of their performance. As Noh suggests, “Each pupil has his own voice; it cannot be made to imitate” (Fenollosa and Pound 30). Yet most of our actors (as directed by most of our directors, written by most of our writers, and created by most of our collectives) have been playing like Bottom with head all too much in ass—the mask that is their character consumes them entirely. This is our emergency: the actor must reemerge. So let's stop braying antics, awaken from the spell, and pick up where Shakespeare left *The Tempest*, forswearing illusion, book of tricks buried:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown
And what strength I have's mine own (Epilogue, 1-2)

This is where a new kind of character, the *charactor*, can begin.

If Bottom transformed so entirely into a donkey that we couldn't recognize him at all, the comedy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would be lost. What amuses the audience is the tension between who Bottom is and what he's become; in short, his AssBottom *charactor*. We see an actor (Bottom is part of a ragtag troupe) in his new if unexpected role, and laugh. Actually, we see more: we see an actor (let's call him Joe) playing

Bottom in the donkey mask. Go one step further and we see ourselves watching Joe playing Bottom being an ass, because Joe is ultimately a person, like us and *for* us—he has gone on stage for us, in our place, and we therefore identify with him. Our essential link to the play is the person on stage. That is why we watch in the first place, and we keep watching because we are fascinated by the tensions between who he is (person) and what he's not (character) and by how he negotiates such tensions (acting). What I'm proposing in conceptualizing *character*—and in staging such *characters* with my theatre company, One Little Goat—is that just as we see much of Bottom in the mask, so we should see more of the actor in his character. The actor, then, can be a person performing as opposed to a tool of the theatre, a mere Rude Mechanical. A theatre of *characters* is a theatre of people.

In such theatre, there is little need for the audience's suspension of disbelief. Because *characters* are just as much us as other—because, in short, they are fellow human beings—the stage becomes less foreign to the viewers, requiring less of a shift in our mentality. We are closer to the performers because they are less concealed from us. The choruses of Sophocles were comprised of civilians. Those civilians acted, but they were not “actors.” Acting and performing in the theatre is far more important than being an actor or performer. The perpetuation of star actors is fundamentally detrimental to drama. When a famous actor is promoted, the audience comes for the star, not for the so-called supporting performers. Sophocles's audience, by contrast, came foremost to see the chorus, which included their brothers (regrettably not sisters) and colleagues and friends—fellow citizens of Athens playing citizens of Thebes. Thus the chorus's bond with the audience was strong. Brecht's *Antigone* is brilliant not for recasting Creon vs. Antigone as fascist vs. freedom fighter,¹ but in tilting the tragedy toward the chorus, and therefore society, who witness but do not intervene in the fatal chain of events. They do not act—that is the tragedy. And in being personally associated with their fellow audience, these non-acting citizens bring the tragedy closer to home. It bleeds into society.

Brecht's “alienation effect” is uninviting in its nomenclature.² It has become associated with cold rationality—a stylistic choice that distances the play from the audience so that the latter may consider the former analytically. But after years of audiences losing themselves in spectacles (Richard Wagner), Brecht was helping us find ourselves again by appealing to our intellect *in conjunction with* our emotions—our full range of human faculties. Why must reason be cold? And why dissociate intellect

from feeling when the two are ultimately intertwined? It is calculation that is cold, like conventional theatre that depends on such calculation—effects—to work on the audience. Hard to believe, but many theatre practitioners are still committing the aesthetic crime of “background music” (an insult to both music and theatre) for purposes of heightening key moments and manipulating the viewer emotionally. A theatre of *characters*, by contrast, is more generous toward the audience, accommodating thought in addition to feeling.

Such generosity, though, shouldn't be confused with loving the audience or wanting the audience to love the play. If theatre-makers want to love the audience, it's just as important to loathe—anything else would be dishonest. A relationship with an audience, as between people, is always contradictory, and must contain contradictions to be dynamic, progressive and human. As Blake propounds in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (250). This humanity of contradiction is also something to be learned, albeit less lyrically, from the “Fuck You Man” in California, a Berkeley street person who enjoys engaging in warm and lively conversation so long as a mutual “fuck you” is first exchanged. In a state (California) full of lobotomized smiles—much like the smiling entertainers in our very nice theatres—“fuck you” is his effective way of breaking his audience from its sunshiny pleasantness and borderline indifference. It is his way of awakening us to a more intimate conversation with a broader range of possibility. The “fuck you,” in other words, is *for* you, not *against*, just as alienation can be *for* the audience, bringing us paradoxically closer to the performers and the play.

Wagner involved an entire town, Bayreuth, in his extraordinary productions. Townspeople schlepped carpentry, built sets, banged drums, etc., all in service to the Maestro's megalomaniacal enterprise—and they still do to this day. Those individual labourers, as we know, are supposed to disappear into the larger spectacle, just as Wagner's orchestra should be heard but not seen.³ Similarly, Wagner's singers are caked in enough makeup and masked by enough costume to transform them into superhumans, raising them above humanity, including the lowly audience sitting in the dark theatre, from which Wagner must show us the light.⁴ The field of vision is glaringly uneven: we are invisible to the actors, but they are spectacular to us. A Wagner opera, then, requires us to diminish our presence and submit to something that is both rapturously and rapaciously overwhelming. How fitting that Wagner begins *The*

Ring of the Nibelung with the siren-like Rhinemaidens—it's hard not to fall under the visual and sonorous spell. The audience members serve as passive receptors, just as the actors are wholly in Wagner's service as they erase themselves in the embrace of their character to enter The Myth. The less we see of the actors' nature, the more they are praised for embodying their part. They themselves are clearly *not* the message, but its vessel as Wagner's vassals.

The barrier between actors and audience in most conventional theatre is a kind of wall by which a “king of the castle” vs. “dirty rascal” dynamic plays out. When actors are on top, they condescend; when the positions are reversed, the actors grovel (an act which is sometimes sublimated into self sacrifice). In either case, the wall must be surmounted. Someone has to climb over it, forcing us, the audience, to suspend our disbelief about how differently these strange actors behave from us, and at how implausible their circumstances are, with all the twists in the “plots” of their lives.

With *charactors*, by contrast, the gap becomes a medium not to bypass, but through which performance communicates. It is neither a wall nor a pane of glass, but a prism dispersing the focused light of the performers into a spectrum as it travels toward the audience. The gap, then, does not result in power differences, nor is it bridged and overcome; rather, it is welcomed and exploited for ambiguity, achieving a broad clarity that reveals possibilities. This may not be the purpose of the gap. In fact its allure is its very purposelessness, which, like a blank page, generates potential. But in exploiting the gap I am using its uselessness, and in the process enabling the audience to see multiple possibilities in a single action, more than one aspect of a *charactor's* face.

“Let me see your face.”

This is the stunning opening line of Sophocles's *Antigone* in Richard Emil Braun's translation (consider the Greeks in actual mask).⁵ It is an opening that calls for mutual, collective openness initiated by the players. In my reinterpretation of the tragedy, *Antigone:Insurgency*, three performers cover the full range of *charactor*. The nameless “chorus leader,” played by Richard Harte, performs in two contexts, at times relating to the audience as an actor (and therefore fellow citizen), while at others as a character taking on the role of the Guard or Teiresias. Earl Pastko as Creon, on the other hand, is Creon through and through, with no diversions from the role: 100% character. Perhaps

most intriguing is Cara Ricketts's transition from one end of the *character* continuum to the other, beginning on stage as an actor (person, citizen) before descending into the depths of Antigone's character, where she continues to be, inexorably, for the remainder of the play. And it's from within these rigid confines of character that Antigone and Creon lock horns. The play's tragedy of mutual righteousness and single-mindedness, in this way, is reflected in the two actors' uncompromising commitment to their characters, making them intractable on two levels: Antigone and Creon cannot alter their fateful actions, just as Ricketts and Pastko cannot escape being Antigone and Creon. So the inevitability of the tragedy is also the tragedy of inevitability. Possibilities disappear, leaving blackout or death as the only ways out.

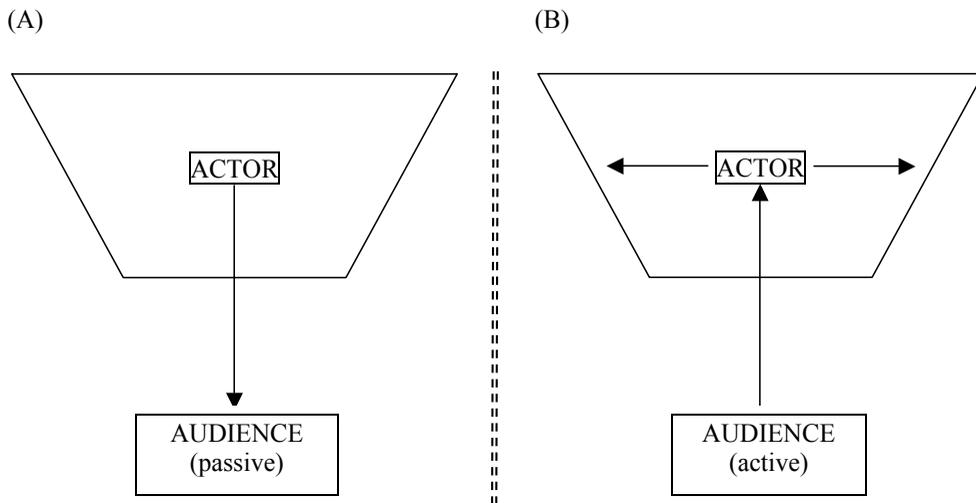
Only Richard Harte, as "chorus leader," and therefore more actor/person/civilian than character, remains directly connected to us, bridging the gap between the audience and the ancient personae inhabited by Cara and Earl. With the exception of two excursions into character (first as Guard, then as Teiresias), Richard remains with us throughout the play as a fellow citizen navigating his way through our shared situation in the theatre. But of course this fellowship wouldn't be possible without Richard's remarkable performance—remarkable precisely in its *lack* of show, allowing for some show of his being. When Richard is on stage in *Antigone: Insurgency*, Richard is on stage. His performance, especially his opening, single-sentence, 30-minute monologue, is dramatic precisely in its untheatricality, energized by the conspicuous absence of the "energy" conventional theatre requires of actors in order to command the audience's attention—the same hyperactivity Beckett rebuffs with the opening line of *Godot*: "Nothing to be done." Zeami, in one of his treatises on Noh, perfectly articulates the importance and impact of such "non-doing":

It is often commented on by audiences that "many times a performance is effective when the actor does nothing." Such an accomplishment results from the actor's greatest, most secret skill When one examines why this interval "when nothing happens" may seem so fascinating, it is surely because of the fact that, at the bottom, the artist never relaxes his inner tension

The actor must rise to a selfless level of art, imbued with a concentration that transcends his own consciousness, so that he can bind together the moments before and after that instant when "nothing happens." Such a process constitutes that inner force that can be termed "connecting all the arts [i.e. possibilities] through one intensity of mind." (97)

Beginning the play seated, listening to several bars of music, “doing nothing” as it were, allows Richard to open with a passive activity⁶—conscious and intensely focused, to be sure, but passive all the same, and thereby disarmingly unmasked.

In that spirit, Richard calls for lights up on the audience near the beginning of *Antigone:Insurgency*, allowing him to return our gaze. The result is a shift from the usual relationship between actor and audience, in which *actor-as-character* either begs or condescends to the audience (relating purely vertically), to one in which *actor-as-person* is open to the audience (relating more laterally), allowing us to lean in, listen, attend, rather than mindlessly “sit back.” Thus the vertical dynamic of aggression/submission by the actor toward a passive audience (A) is replaced with a lateral openness by the former that activates the latter (B):



We, the audience, as more active participants in the play’s dynamics (B), have been elevated, so to speak, above our usual position, and consequently the playing field is less uneven than in (A). Now we can see the actor somewhat more on the same level. That’s not to say that we are seeing the actor’s “true nature,” no matter how much he is stripped of his mask, his character-function. At the same time, it would be impossible in this era of “reality shows” for us to believe we are seeing a human being sans artifice, even if we were. But the suspension of our suspension of disbelief in *Antigone:Insurgency* makes for less disparity between actor and audience, and thus a more open play. If Richard Harte is a person, we may all be actors.

Furthermore, if an actor comes at us too directly or forcefully (A), we tend to disengage. Some actors believe that the stage is their place to emote, always gunning for a “big moment.” When actors push too hard, though, they are doing all the work for us, leaving the audience no opportunity to connect actively with the play. An actor’s emotions on stage should be revelations that open up to us, opening us up in return. If a play is going to capture our imagination then it must unfold on stage like an alluring net rather than be thrown at us like an arrow. The arrow (A) may inflict, but the net (B) invites and enthralls.

The Prism/Gap

The dynamics of (B) are actually more nuanced than the model above, realizing a broader kind of clarity-through-ambiguity. When a play is poetic—meaning the text achieves ambiguity to create multiple possibilities for the actor and director—a few performance directions tend to emerge.

1. Presented with two choices, between, say, “yellow” and “blue,” the actor can choose “green,” thus combining the two or splitting the difference. Between being overjoyed and simply pleased, the actor can be happy; between fear and comfort there’s wariness; or say an actor has the choice of approaching someone confidently or cautiously, they may choose to approach with interest, not sure of which way to be. And that uncertainty is key to energizing the moment. It’s not purely the action itself that’s intriguing, but the possibility that other actions could occur, could be chosen, might play out at any moment. This explains why Beckett claimed that “perhaps” is the most important word in (his) theatre. Anything can happen, especially when nothing does. Similarly, for Stanislavski the key word to opening doors is “if” (46).

Sometimes, however, the two choices are too concrete to combine or divide: e.g., sitting down or standing; walking left or right. In such cases, consider one and choose the other, or choose one while considering the other: i.e., don’t sit down, stand; walk to the left while considering the right. The chosen action will contain its alternative, its negative, its trace. Brecht put it well:

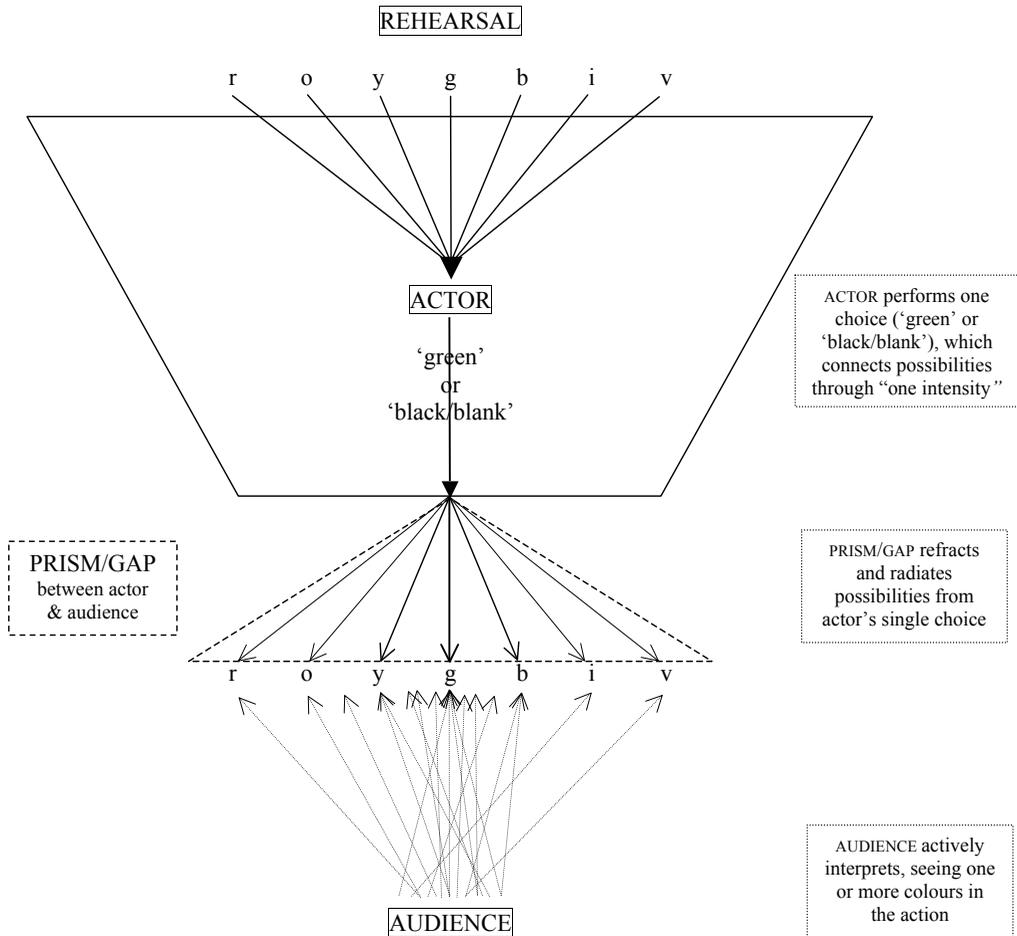
When he appears on the stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants. He will say for instance “You’ll pay for that,” and not say “I forgive you.” He detests his children; it is not the case that he loves them. He moves down stage left and not up stage right. Whatever he doesn’t do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is “fixing the ‘not...but.’” (137)⁷

Zen priest Shunryu Suzuki has described the same phenomenon in different terms, going even further than Brecht’s “not...but” by revealing how freedom and concentration are closely tied to the preservation of possibilities.

Our way is not always to go in one direction... If it is possible to go one mile to the east, that means it is possible to go one mile to the west. This is freedom. Without this freedom you cannot be concentrated on what you do. (112)

2. If three choices are available, say yellow, green and blue, the actor may choose green, the middle one, since it contains elements of the other two.
3. And presented with a multitude of red-orange-yellow-green-blue-indigo-violet, the actor again may choose the middle one (green); or go neutral (black or blank) to capture all of the above (black) or none (blank), allowing the audience to choose which colours we see.

Above all and in every case, instead of showing external *intentions*, the actor should generate internal *intensity*. “Such a process,” to reiterate Zeami, “constitutes that inner force that can be termed ‘connecting all the [possibilities] through one intensity of mind.’” Here’s how the model now looks, drawing on (3) above, since it contains elements of (1) and (2):



Everything in rehearsal is absorbed by the actor, concentrating in the “one intensity” that generates a focused, singular performance for the audience to interpret actively. The actor’s *action*, in this way, is a *contraction* upon which the audience expands. The prism/gap further activates the actor’s single choice (or “intensity”), allowing possibilities to open up (to) the audience’s intuition. This space between is vital. And it is volatile, uncertain, open—a zone where “green” from the stage can be seen as a spectrum by the audience—or where “black” might be read as “blank,” and vice versa, each

carrying the possibility of the other, with both emanating the kind of glow you find in a Rothko. The canvas of poetic theatre is this space between. It radiates (coming from the stage) and is prismatic (seen by the audience). Another word for this zone of the prism/gap is “style,” the medium through which actors emit and audiences receive.⁸

Both “black” and “blank” draw us in, encouraging us to interpret—the former by layering, the latter by stripping away and eliciting our natural tendency to fill in the blanks. A temporal prism/gap can be generated the “black way,” through repetition and variation, the words and actions gaining definition with each accumulation; and it can be generated the “blank way,” with a pause in theatre, or through white space and line-breaks in a text.

Textually, black/blank is the sort of possibility that could occur in my new book, *Every Day in the Morning (slow)*, which is a kind of page-oriented performance activated by the reader. The spatial possibilities of the text, the expectations they arouse, and the “mistakes” they may cause the reader to make in confusing some words, all serve as the volatile, prismatic gap between emission from page and reception of eye. Again, the space between—what is vs. what could be, what’s written vs. what’s seen and interpreted—is critical to the textual tension.

Dramatically, Jon Fosse’s *Someone is Going to Come* exemplifies the prism/gap. The play’s title does not mislead—someone does come, namely The Man (played by Michael Blake in the recent *One Little Goat* production), who disrupts the attempted solitude of She and He (Stacie Steadman and Dwight McFee). It’s not merely The Man’s arrival that unsettles the couple, but the intentions behind his arrival, which remain highly questionable for both the audience and the couple throughout the performance. Consequently, when Michael offers Stacie a drink, the audience can interpret his action as anything from a kind neighbour’s gesture to the insidious prelude of a predator. It’s a wide range, to be sure!, but the ambiguity allows Michael’s one choice in that moment (“green” or “black/blank”) to engender a full continuum.

Even as a director, I believe that *not knowing* an actor’s intentions is often essential. Since I observe rehearsal from the audience’s side of the equation, I don’t necessarily know the actor’s “green” or “black/blank” until I see the spectrum it has produced. At that exhilarating moment when a spectrum of possibilities radiates from the actor, I am careful not to “put words on it.” It’s not that the actor’s intensity is ineffable, but analyzing it could translate that intensity into intention. Too much understanding jeopardizes being (much as, for Hamlet, over-calculation thwarts action). Identify the

moment, yes, and articulate it through multiple repetitions, but don't describe it. It is crucial for a director to know when *not* to speak.⁹

Even something as concrete as the actor's body yields multiple interpretations when seen by the audience. We can't help but read into what is presented, making the stage a version of Cage's famous frame.¹⁰ But it's more, because the actor feels the audience receiving and returning her presence—the energy flows both ways. Cage's frame has the quality of something aestheticized by distance, captured and beheld as a fixed picture, whereas the stage unfolds in time.

Music and Poetic Theatre

The ambiguity of poetic theatre is a form of music.¹¹ In Hermann Broch's terms, "the transformation of sequential to simultaneous perceived spatially: This is the essence of music" (12). Repetition, from Stein to Fosse and onward, is a way for words and actions to condense time: they traverse horizontally across the play (sequential), thereby accumulating vertically in our minds (simultaneous). Words, phrases and actions, then, are tectonic plates whose potential collision could erupt within the viewer, or gradually rise to form a mountain in mind. And when the Brechtian "not...but" is involved, its negative space carries a series of choices that "could have been" within each moment, making the sequential virtually simultaneous—an array of possibilities radiating from each action. Ambiguity distills these sequential possibilities, enabling us to see the play in a single moment, and as a single moment—Blake's "world in a grain of sand." The "big moment" of conventional theatre is no longer distinct but infused throughout the performance, the "big moment" being the entire play itself.

There is one more level at which the sequential can be perceived simultaneously, and that is through *character*. Conventional productions present a character, followed by a curtain call during which, however briefly, we glimpse the actor. And for those of us who already know the actor, we experience a sequence of actor before the performance, followed by character during the "show," concluding with actor at curtain call. *Character*, as we've seen, conflates these "real" and "staged" identities, thereby endowing poetic theatre with another music-like quality of simultaneity.

If character and actor merge in poetic theatre, so too do characters and authors. With authorial energy pervading the work, differentiation between the writer and

what's written, as between the *charactors* themselves, is not essential, eschewing the conventional requirement of externally defined *dramatis personae*. As *Flaubert's Parrot* reveals, the same author who famously claimed "Madame Bovary, c'est moi!" also confused his protagonist's eye-colour (Barnes 74).¹² The author's imagination is not one state, but rather a broad, shifting, evolving context that consequently undermines the specious autonomy of character.¹³

The imagination is the author's mind. As Anne Carson suggests, Aeschylus distills into his characters "his own method of work, his own way of using his mind, his way of using the theater as a mind" (4). Theatre as mind, or head, or *tête*, or *Teste!* Here is Paul Valéry on his own *charactor*, Monsieur Teste:

I am quite astonished at the inventive powers of anyone who finds subjects for stories or plays, and very effective ones, it seems to me

But I notice that the characters in all these productions have no existence beyond the affair or the anecdote or the action in which they figure. They are created by these, as necessary parts of a mechanism.

This is general in our time. Not one (literary) being is distinct from its local function, or becomes known as a type or possible living man outside the story of the moment.

On the contrary, in the few instances where I have personified—as in Monsieur and Madame Teste . . . —I have tried to invent synthetic human beings. (142)

Just as Monsieur Teste is the synthesis of Valéry and a fictional personality, and just as *charactor* combines actor and character, so we experience poetic theatre in merging layers (simultaneously) rather than in discrete segments from one plot point to the next (sequentially). The audience's concern, then, is no longer "What are the next 3+ things that are going to happen?" (plot) but rather "What 3+ things are happening in this moment?" (experience); no longer "What will happen to her?" but "How is she now and how will she be?"

Finally, poetic theatre is reminiscent of music in its non-representational approach. As Leonard Bernstein asserts in his inaugural Young People's Concert, music does not *mean* anything, it simply *is*. Similarly, poetic theatre, through *charactor*, encourages actors to *be* more and *portray* less; to be present in lieu of pretending; to stop pointing

and start being the point, not by being pointless or aimless, but in *doing nothing* with a singular intensity. In other words, to be keenly primitive. Shunryu Suzuki puts it thus: “if it comes out of nothingness, whatever you do is natural, and that is true activity” (109). The result may be a far cry from Naturalism and Realism, but it is certainly natural and real in staging the actor’s *real nature*. I say *real nature*, not *true*, since artifice is inevitably involved. Poetic theatre, regardless of its inclination toward presenting in lieu of representing, is still a kind of fiction. Imitation makes for lousy art, while escapism tries in vain to defy the gravity of reality. The fiction of poetic theatre, by contrast, presents an escape *into* reality, not the carnivalesque escape *from* or superficial imitation *of*. It goes beyond “aspiring towards the condition of music” (Pater 140) in favour of being music in its very structure and essence. And in drawing on the nature of the performers themselves, it is music not *about*, but *by, of and for* people.¹⁴

Endnotes

¹ This leftist conceptualization, though understandable in Brecht’s post-WWII context, unfortunately nullifies the *mutual* righteousness at the play’s core: that Antigone *and* Creon “both are talking sense” (Fagles line 812).

² Fredric Jameson points out that “alienation effect” is a far from perfect translation of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, but in English, it’s the term that has stuck (85-86).

³ The orchestra pit is Wagner’s invention, after all.

⁴ Seating the audience in the dark: another of Wagner’s theatrical innovations.

⁵ For variations in translating this first line, see William Blake Tyrell and Larry J. Bennett’s introduction to their *Antigone*: <<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/ant/antigstruct.htm>>.

⁶ Montreal’s PME-ART (Jacob Wren, Caroline Dubois, Claudia Fancello) achieve a similarly active passivity by sitting and listening to records for much of their *Hospitality 3: Individualism was a Mistake*, recently performed at Toronto’s Enwave Theatre, 19-22 November 2008.

⁷ This “not...but” sheds light on a moment in *Talking Masks* when ‘Mother 1’ and ‘Mother 2’ cre-

ate various permutations and a broad soundscape out of only two words each: Mother 1 uttering “yes...and...” interspersed with Mother 2 saying “no...but...” (Seelig 36).

⁸ In terms of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poetics, the prism/gap is the space where the ‘inscape’ of the stage meets the ‘instress’ of the audience.

⁹ By the later rehearsals of a production, the director and the actors have ideally been in the zone of the play so consistently that they need not exchange many words to find the most resonant intensity. Earlier in the rehearsal process, when all are still searching for the right wavelength, much discussion is likely, yet even then it’s often best for the director to say no more than “try something else” to the actor. The director may *know* the play, with a strong sense for how it passes through the prism/gap, but the actors *are* the play, living it from inside. That is why the most important part of directing, by far, is casting. The common notion that a director has a preconceived “vision” is reductive. Any so-called “vision” should emerge from the process of not merely leading the actors, but following them first. Observe how they are and listen to their nature, because actions that emerge from the actors themselves usually trump those suggested by the director. A recent comment from a very good actor and well-respected director illuminates the frustration that can occur when a director imposes her vision on the actor. As she disclosed in her recent production blog, “I felt that uselessness of a director when confronted with that divide between what is so clear in my mind and what is unclear in the actor’s mind.” In poetic theatre, by contrast, it is this very divide that is most fruitful, with the actor’s mind often being “clearer,” as it were, than the director’s. This director, however, is working with theatre as narrative, in which actors serve a story: “I believe my job as a director is to facilitate the creative process of telling a story.” And telling such a story, according to her, is best done boldly: “the core of the imaginative process of acting [is] making choices, bold choices, trying them on and discarding them if need be, but above all committing.” The result of such an approach is a theatre of primary colours—blue or yellow, say, but rarely green—a theatre where ambiguity is tacitly taboo.

¹⁰ “I was with de Kooning once in a restaurant and he said, “if I put a frame around these bread crumbs, that isn’t art.” And what I’m saying is that it is. He was saying it wasn’t because he connects art with his activity—he connects with himself as an artist whereas I would want art to slip out of us into the world in which we live” (Cage).

¹¹ “One must read or ‘examine’ these texts ‘as if one were listening to music” (Fenollosa and Pound 37).

¹² “Flaubert does not build up his characters, as did Balzac, by objective, external description; in fact, so careless is he of their outward appearance that on one occasion he gives Emma brown eyes (14); on another deep black eyes (15); and on another blue eyes (16)” (Barnes 74).

¹³ In my play *All Is Almost Still*, performed by One Little Goat at New York's 78th Street Theatre Lab in 2004, the play's young couple essentially switch identities in the second act, as if He is now She, and vice versa. The play's setting, however, does not change between acts. Steinbeck's *Burning Bright* is the inverse: the characters remain entirely consistent despite the four radical scenic changes in the play, from Circus to Farm to Sea to Hospital Room.

¹⁴ An extended version of this essay can be found at www.capilanoreview.ca.

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Richard Harte, Cara Ricketts, and Earl Pastko
in One Little Goat's *Antigone: Insurgency*, written and directed by Adam Seelig
Walmer Centre Theatre, Toronto, 2007
Photographer: Michelle Bailey



Cara Ricketts, Earl Pastko, and Richard Harte

Photographer: Michelle Bailey



Richard Harte in One Little Goat's *Talking Masks*, written and directed by Adam Seelig
Walmer Centre Theatre, Toronto, 2009

Photographer: Sai Sivanesan



Richard Harte

Photographer: Sai Sivanesan

PAOLO JAVIER / from **FYEO**

Characters: NURY VITTACHI
TONYBOY

Projections: “PINOY SIGNS”*
“FUNNY LOVE”**

**Read out loud some signs for audience recognition, as these may remain unclear onscreen. Be sure to scroll/reveal both images, if more than one exists on the page.*

***Allow for images to linger as you skip/scroll between them.*

Projection 1: “PINOY SIGNS”*

NURY VITTACHI: This week, we shall take a “reading tour” of one of the most spirited communities in Asia. The Philippines is full of word play. The local accent among many Filipinos, in which English words with *F* are spelled and pronounced with the sound of *P* and *V* is pronounced as *B* (because the Philippine alphabet has no letters *F* or *V*), is often used very cleverly, such as the sign in a flower shop in Dilliman called *Petal Attraction*.

Much of the word play in the Philippines is deliberate with retailers and various businesses favoring a play on names of Western establishments and celebrities (Americans, in particular; movie stars and entertainment personalities, especially).

For example, there is a bread shop in Manila called *Anita Bakery*, a 24-hour restaurant called *Doris Day and Night*, a garment shop called *Elizabeth Tailoring*, and a barbershop called *Felix The Cut*.

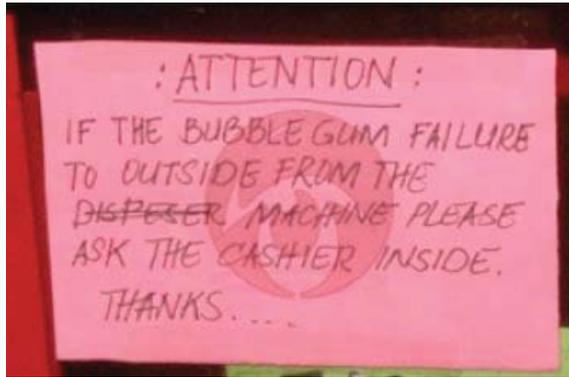


Reader Robert Harland also spotted a bakery named *Bread Pitt*, and a Makati fast-food place selling *maruya* (banana fritters) called *Maruya Carey*. Then, there is *Christopher Plumbing*; a boutique called *The Way We Wear*; a video rental shop called *Leon King Video Rental*; a restaurant in the Cainta district of Rizal called *Caintacky Fried Chicken*; a local burger restaurant called *Mang Donald's*; a doughnut shop called *MacDonuts*; a shop selling *lumpia* (egg roll) in Makati called *Wrap and Roll*; and two butcher shops called *Meating Place* and *Meatropolis*.



Smart travelers can decipher what may look like baffling signs to unaccustomed foreigners by simply sounding out the Taglish (the Philippine version of English words spelled and pronounced with a heavy Filipino accent), such as, at a restaurant menu in Cebu: “*We hab sopdrink in can an in batol*” [translation: We have soft drinks in can and in bottle]. Then, there is a sewing accessories shop called *Bids and Pises* [translation: Beads and pieces—or—Bits and Pieces].

There are also many signs with either badly chosen or misspelled words, but they are usually so entertaining that it would be a mistake to “correct” them. A reader named Antonio ‘Tonyboy’ Ramon T. Ongsiako (now there’s a truly Filipino name) contributed the following interesting Phillipine signs and advertisements: in a restaurant in Baguio

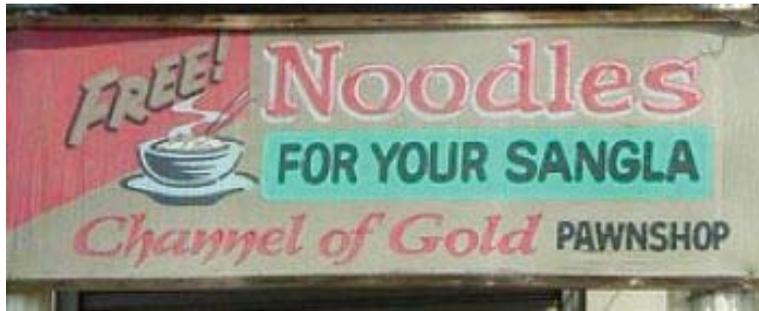


City (the “summer capital” of the Philippines), “Wanted: Boy Waitress”; on a highway in Pampanga, “We Make Modern Antique Furniture”; on the window of a photography show in Cabanatuan, “We Shoot While You Wait”; and on the glass front of a cafe on Panay Avenue in Manila, “Wanted: Waiter, Cashier, Washier.”



Some of the notices can even give a wrong impression, such as a shoe store in Pangasinan which has a sign saying: “We Sell Imported Robber Shoes” (these could be the sneakiest sneakers) and a rental property in Jaro, Iloilo reads: “House For Rent Fully Furnaced” (it must be really hot inside)!

Occasionally, one could come across signs that are truly unique, if not altogether odd. Reader Gunilla Edlund submitted a sign that she saw at the ticket booth in the ferry pier in Davao City in southern Philippines, which announced: “Adults: 1 peso; Child: 50 centavos; Cadavers: fare subject to negotiation.”



“SANGLA” means “GOLD.”.

European tourists may also be intrigued to discover two competing shops selling hopia (a Chinese pastry) called *Holland Hopia* and *Poland Hopia*, which are owned and operated by two local Chinese entrepreneurs, Mr. Ho and Mr. Po, respectively.



“BAWAL UMIHI DITO PAG WALANG NAKATINGIN” means “IT IS FORBIDDEN TO PEE HERE WHILE NOONE’S LOOKING.”

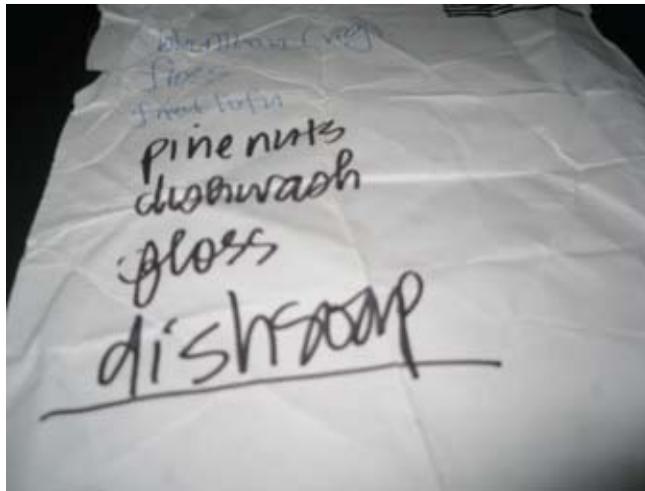


According to Manila businessman Tonyboy Ongsiako there is so much wit in the Philippines because "...we are a country where a good sense of humor is needed to survive. We have a 24-hour comedy show here called the government, and a huge reserve of comedians made up mostly of politicians and retiring actors."



Projection 2: "FUNNY LOVE".

TONYBOY: *(clears throat)* Your laugh is an infection
You are a blessing in the sky
You cut to the cheese
You bake your cake and lie in it
in the wink of an eye



It was a no-win-win situation
It was as brand as new
It was clean as a daylight
for me



“Hi, I’m Paolo,” I said. “What’s yours?”



I couldn't help myself to it
you rip what you saw
the sky's the langit, &
I am only human nature

CHRISTINE LECLERC / G20 2009

Ambient sound of white noise throughout.

0:00

Sound of a helicopter overhead.

The screen reads:

G20 2009
September 24

Democracy 101:
Riot Police Attack
Students at the
University of Pittsburgh.¹

•

A partially lit tower.

•

Sound like synth-vultures.

A student walks through the night as police arrive on campus in black pickup trucks.

•

A black truck with SWAT written on it enters left. Blinding lights.

A cyclist pedals past.

The truck plays the synth-vulture sound as it drives past a rowdy

¹ Works well as scansion exercise.

looking group of troublemakers with POLICE written across their chests.

Red light streams from the truck's open back door and someone with a black helmet on is inside.

•

A searchlight, and not the moon, is seen through the branches of a large tree.

0:30

AUTOMATED POLICE CHIEF
Those who remain by order of the city of
Pittsburg Chief of Police I hereby
declare this to be an unlawful assembly I
order all those assembled to immediately
disperse you must leave the immediate
vicinity—

•

People in riot gear.

—if you do not disperse you may be
arrested and subject to other police
action.

•

People in t-shirts stand under trees.

A grenade lands nearby.

PEOPLE

Oh!

The light is blinding and there is a lens flare.

Someone in a t-shirt is filmed filming something.

•

People in black helmets advance through a cloud of smoke.
Someone in a white t-shirt walks past.

A grenade lands

•

and people scatter.

People run across the lawn.

A grenade is launched.

A PERSON

Oh my—

PERSONS

Oh, god—

Fug—

•

A young man in a t-shirt holds an old man in a suit and glasses. Other students standby.

YOUNG MAN

(lets go a little) Are you okay?

The old man begins to fall.

YOUNG MAN

(catches old man) Actually not okay—

YOUNG WOMAN
(runs up) I'm speechless, I am—

•

There are large white trucks parked across the street and the students in the foreground leave coughing.

•

A police lightbar flashes. Windshield and other indeterminate objects suffer the blue-red glow.

Students mill about.

PERSON
Yo, I got the grenade! Grenade! This is the grenade they were throwing at us, says—

A SECOND PERSON
What is that?

A THIRD PERSON
Fuck.

PERSON
Six two four dee ay oh see oh see be aerosol grenade.

1:30

SOMEONE ELSE
Ah, we weren't rioting. We were just sitting there in the William Pitt Union Lawn—our own, our own union. That's where they take us down, our own union, just sittin there, doin nothin wrong.

•

FROM CROWD

Shit!

People run.

People freak out.

SOMEONE

Get the fuck—

Screams.

•

Witnesses witness the scene with cameras as the witness witnesses people run past. Some cameras are news cameras.

SOMEONE

Holy shit! They were spraying pepper spray at us. They were—I'm just a student!

•

Helicopter gets louder as it hovers above the tower like a not-moon in the night sky.

Students mill about amid towers. Lamplight lights the scene. There is a lens flare.

•

Two women walk past as agitated students mill about in the background. One woman walks with her phone flipped open. The other puts an arm around her.

•

About seventy people in white, black, red, yellow, green, blue, and striped t-shirts occupy the street.

2:00

Halogen lamplight glints off the visors of those who wear helmets. They walk down the street shoulder to shoulder.

The crowd emits the sound of garbled voices.

SOMEONE
—photographer—yeah—

CHANTERS
(shout) Let's go Pitt! Let's go Pitt! Let's
go Pitt!

•

The helmet-wearers also wear gas masks. Zip ties hang from their fanny packs.

TARZAN VOCAL IMPRESSIONIST
(hollers) FREEDOM!

Someone holds a sign above their head. It reads:

1
AMENDMENT

Their thumbs touch the A and T.

•

Woman in a sweat suit waits for a friend as people run from the crack of a new grenade.

•

A big black truck.

Muffled voice. A person dressed as G.I. Joe presses someone's head into a low rock wall.

2:30

People run past hand in hand.

SOMEONE

(to someone) Hey! What's your name, dude? What's your name?

SOMEONE

Hhhkhhoh.

G.I. Joes swoop in.

G.I. JOE

Get back!

SOMEONE

(to someone) Hey, dude, shout out your name. What's your name?

•

G.I. JOE

(comes at witness, shouts) Get back!
Move! Get back!

•

Three POLICE on the back of a pick up.

•

A pick up stops at South Bouquet Street.

The people in the crosswalk cover their ears.

AUTOMATED POLICE CHIEF
The use of riot control agents and or less
lethal munitions which could cause risk
of injury to those who, *synth-vulture.*

SOMEONE

Ow!

Witness' camera jerks about.

AUTOMATED POLICE CHIEF
Injury, *synth-vulture.*

SOMEONE ELSE

Assholes!

AUTOMATED POLICE CHIEF
Injury to those who remain

•

no matter what your purpose is you must
leave if you do not disperse you may be
arrested and or subject to other police
action.

Slow-moving people in t-shirts, some with cameras, walk along sidewalk.

•

People in POLICE vests advance to the words of the automated police
chief.

AUTOMATED POLICE CHIEF
—emissions which could cause risk of
injury to those who remain by order of

the city of Pittsburgh Chief of Police I
hereby declare this to be an unlawful
assembly I order all those assembled to
immediately disperse.

3:30

A sign in the background reads:

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURG²

•

SOMEONE

—the fucking people on top of Forbes.

A parked car. A line of POLICE. Wagon behind them.

They're macing the people on top of
Forbes.

SOMEONE

Where the fuck are we supposed to go?

•

Police advance, zip straps on fanny packs.

Two people do not leave street. The helmet-wearers plow them along.

CHANTERS

(shout) Beat 'em! Beat 'em! Beat 'em!

Several POLICE break away, tackle the pair.

² Trochaic tetrameter.

White truck enters left.

•

There is a parking garage in the background and a gas station nearby.

WITNESS

Excuse me. Could, could you explain the reasons for all of this? Sir? What, what's happening? Sir?

Man with badge stares at You.

Another officer appears.

ANOTHER OFFICER

(waves his left hand) You gotta clear out. You gotta, clear out.

WITNESS

Could you explain, could you explain what's happening? Why, why we have to disperse.

MAN WITH BADGE

Get that camera out of my face.

Man with badge looks away.

Witness continues.

**KATHLEEN BROWN / On the mountain our trespass
snows**

On the mountain
our trespass snows.

MATEO:

Where are we?

What is this place?

What do you see?

MATEO:

Where are we?

We are climbing a mountain on Ellesmere.

I am watching a tern skirting the drafts:
a darkness caps her head.

From the tern's distance, we are two moving
exclamation points ascending the face.

The long thin lines of our ropes draw
our escalating distance from the base.

Above the tern scrawls in
a lineless spiral across the frozen eye.

Her wingbeats blink
in the iris of the Arctic sun.

What is this place?

The side of the mountain:

The crampons on our boots dig
into the ice-caked rock.

Our hands numb, gloved.

What do you see?

Your body leaning out from the ice. Your arm
whack!

the motion of setting
another screw in the ice for our line.

NIELS:

What time of day is it?

I think it could be 2:16 in the afternoon.
I can't push back my sleeve to see my watch.

We begin to approximate.

What is the weather like?

It is blue, the horizon a clean line
where I look straight out behind me.

But to the left
the sky is an eggshell inside out,
a filmy cover, impenetrable whiteness.

Nothing falls.

How cold is it?

Our breath leaves our mouths like one frozen horse galloping
after another, grappling with the updraft
into oblivion at the peak.
No skin is exposed except for the fingers
when absolutely necessary.

When I am still I can feel two lines clawed in my cheekbones
where my muffler meets my snowgoggles
and I have been gouged by the wind.

*What is
happening?*

You are leading us up the mountain.

I am climbing below you.

Are you cold?

No.

Como vai?

Hoe gaat het met je?

The mountain is still hooves.

*We are kneed by horses,
heaved into the atmosphere.*

What do you see as you climb?

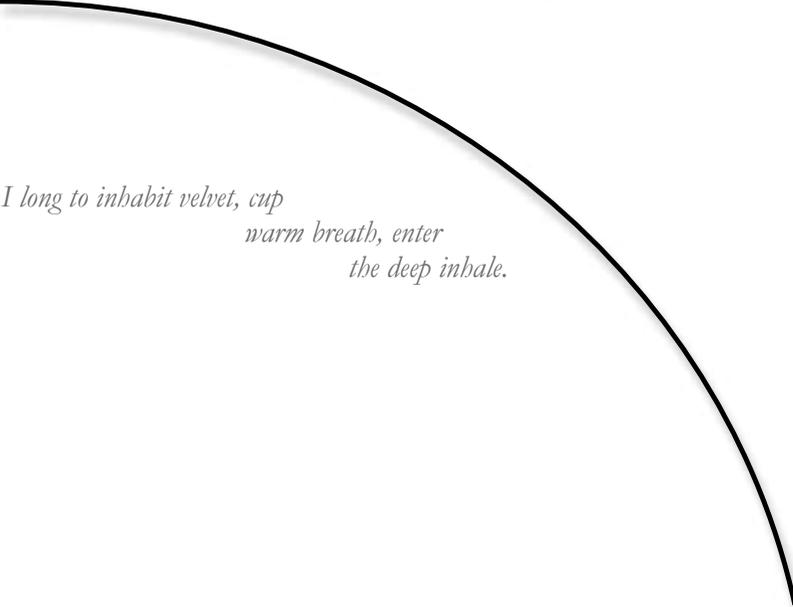
I look up, and see your jaw - the line of your jaw - anchoring us
firmly to this: our grip
on the metamorphic cliff a tenuous pact between ascent,
and loss. To possess the mountain:

not this emptying.

The body cannot fail. Break and rest. Begin again.
You haul the past of yourself into the future
of what you are becoming.

In Mongolia our guide brought horses,
he met us at the base of our descent, remember?
I pressed my nose against the mare's moist muzzle as
she huffed honeyed exhalations: Gobi grass.

What are you looking out at there for so long?



*I long to inhabit velvet, cup
warm breath, enter
the deep inhale.*

Can you know in the beginning how the climb will end?

Held in place by the mountain, standing
on air, our toes clamped into a sheer wall of ice.
We are building this architecture of collapse
over the backdrop of finespun blossoms of snow.

look:

in my hand,
the snow punctuates what is not

I reach out,

there.

It is all I can handle,
not your rope

which tears

through my grip.

I see the snow on the tundra
gather the lines of the wind.

*The
body
cannot
fail,
Niels.*

The mountain does not move.

What are the dismaying signs?

The tern.

Her wings in the last shreds of sunlight are shards of ice
she spins and plummets down the mountain, premonitory.

What do you remember?

We are climbing north of Ausuittuq on Ellesmere Island.

I am looking southeast at the horizon, the distant line
where sky lies as land.

The blank page of the tundra: outer space below us.

We ascend, cradled in azure.

The soft eggshell cover unwraps in the south,
and the sky turns coat: is a sudden ursine malice,

churning, whipping grey snowpatter,
a dark bell ringing lightning.

Oh breathless lullabye to the pinnacle –
there is fear and
then there is

what it feels like to climb.

What does it feel like to climb?

above me
Your body lifts and m
off the side of the mountain.
t
i
b
e
r
s

Mateo, where are you going?

Your face falling beside and
then
below
me.

Our weight on the anchor securing us to the mountain and now
your body is a drowning horse,
thrashing.

The knife in my hand.
And now

the cut line

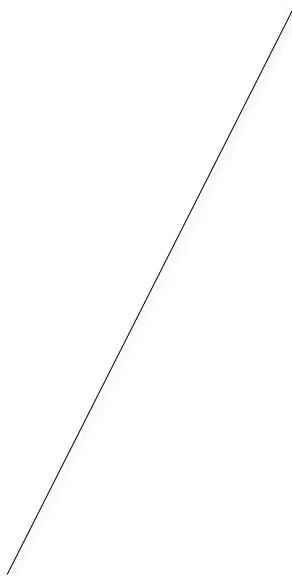
You
empty form.
But you will not disappear.

My anchor thrown to air.

The long thin lines of our ropes



cracks in the shell, the ice shelf.



What events tell you this moment is irreversible?

Your mother is embracing me,
her brittle arms the weather around me, but I cannot
feel her there.

I am remembering the beads of ice in the hair above your lip,
flask of water in your mouth as you stand
on a ledge - cheers to the summit: *we will achieve this.*

The snow falling, the ice melting, the land moving, the mountain.
My knife cut a hole in the shell of the world.

Our bodies blossom
and tumble.

PATRICK FRIESEN / A Forgotten Thing (A Monologue)

(Crazy Bone, a woman around fifty, sits on a tree stump near a phone booth. This is in the country, not a city.)

One of them might call. Or... someone who can tell me... I could use some luck.

(She rummages in her purse, pulls out a coin, and flips it.)

Heads, they call.

(She slaps the coin on her forearm and gazes at it for a while, then looks up abruptly.)

Two things that summer. A face at the window. And the thunder, waiting for the thunder. Lightning on the horizon, night after night, but no thunder.

I'm talking about time on my hands, and the feeling of time. Silky, almost. I mean time passing and time as "the time", that time, and everything gathered within that time. The lie of time, that word, the doom of everything flowing out of it, all the ideas and books and agonies. The steel of memory bending in the heat.

(Pause.)

And I am a forgotten thing, a walking grave. Where the seed of death is planted, in a woman's womb, and from there death. Do you know what I mean?

Barefoot in the garden. The heat, the thick smell of it, and a bowl in my hands. A rose painted in the bottom, vines along the lip, my green thumbnail on the cool enamel.

My grandmother's. I don't know how I came to have it, but I do remember her sitting on a stool with that bowl in her lap, her knees apart, her dress scrunched between them. Her old fingers, working hands... the ping of peas on the enamel...

I inherited it the way we inherit so much, not even knowing. It just came to me. Some of her did too. We both liked barefoot for one thing and didn't always walk the straight road.

But I'm not talking that far back; I'm talking that summer. The heat and the humidity ...

(Pause.)

The summer dress...it was stained...

There's much I've forgotten, have had to forget. The gift of forgetting. Forgetting, sometimes, is just making room for something else. Or, for nothing.

I wanted...

(She begins picking flowers nearby.)

My heart was going crazy. It went on for days. I couldn't do anything, I couldn't think, couldn't take care of the little ones, nothing. Just that racing, that pounding. Imagine it, imagine if you were completely aware of your heartbeat, days even weeks, just that constant awareness of your heart beating hard and fast. Imagine how close to dying you'd feel, that heart racing, and you're thinking it can't take anymore, it has to explode, or just skip, lose its rhythm and collapse.

My heart trying to leave me, ready to burst out of my chest, but I had to do what I had to do. I knew that. It had finally come to knowing that.

I couldn't bear it any longer, couldn't bear the walls, the dirty windows. The sound of water dripping from the faucet, the taste, all of it. The smell of that house...

I made it through the first years. It wasn't too bad, but then duty, or something like that, a rigor that wasn't mine, chopped the room in half. I came into this world clean, but somehow I ended up in debt, you know? Just by living.... It was harder to be

going somewhere, the air grew stale and the windows yellow, and I was sick to my stomach. My belly swelled up, poof, with nothing in it, though the doctor wondered if I had a tumor. But to me it wasn't empty, it was a stone where nothing would ever grow again, and I wanted nothing to ever grow again.

And the steady wind, the hot wind, all summer, and that wind got into my blood, I could feel it there. The crazy-making wind at me all my waking hours, and then I dreamed it.

(Pause.)

It wasn't the man, that wasn't it. No, it was those I can't speak of, they had me by my hands, by my knees, my breasts. They had me. The man disappeared, at least most of the time. I felt no hate, not even bitterness. I felt an unbelievable desire, and I had to get out. I didn't know what the desire was for. That nagging voice didn't tell me, just kept quietly saying, "world, world."

The man snored, and he wouldn't change. He woke up early, and went to work still asleep. I could see it in his eyes. Eyes soft with dreaming, and then going hard as the dream vanished into work. And still, with his hard eyes, he was sleeping a dreamless death. The others, the little ones, I could see the dream in their eyes too; they were dreaming the first and only dream, a life before birth and, in their dreaming they were not here.

I don't just mean the dream inside the womb, I mean before that, the dream that is given to each child, a dream for someone's womb on earth. Like a bee to its hive. I still don't understand how that works, the choices, how they're made, by whom...

These are dreams I'm talking, not memories. These are dreams which have nothing to do with time. They are cars, or rather parade floats drifting through fantasy streets. You could see God on a float, or your dead grandfather, or people, people like who? Well, it could be Mozart or the Czarina Catherine. Dead ones, the ghosts of their ghosts.

And we know these ghosts. We know the death born in the womb, we know the death in the child and the death of the woman who bears the child. Her days riven with an anxious longing, and a need. It's no one's fault, there is no blame.

Like with grandmother and her bastard son, how they left when they had to, there was no fault, and still there must have been a guilt, at first anyway. Though I didn't see it on her face, ever, right to death. I was sitting with her.

Anna lived off her hands, sewing, laundry, washing floors. All over town. She gave, saw her once, when a neighbor who was over for coffee praised her dress, get up, go into the bedroom and come back with the dress folded up, and give it to that woman. A smile on her face. People began to be careful in what they said to her. She had no debt, didn't owe anyone anything. No money, no guilt, no long goodbyes.

I saw the O of her mouth as she lay dying, not a round O, but long. That O going longer by the hours. Gravity, and something else. It made a space for death to enter. At the same time, not yet dead, and her mouth opening slowly, what was it? Her leaving herself.

It was a terrible O. Such a horrible entry and sly escape. I thought I saw death crawling across her dry lips. Her hands and feet going cold and blue. I didn't see her escape, but I heard a sigh. She was still alive, breathing, but I knew she had gotten out. And I forgot time, I forgot the word. I had to bury my wrist watch, anywhere, beneath a tree, a willow with its endurance, and its bending... I had to bury the watch. Somewhere along that road, the road away, I had to bury the watch.

(She draws photographs from her purse. She looks at one photo after the other, lays them on her lap. She stops with one and gazes.)

Yes, that was the summer.

(Her hands vaguely, almost unnoticeably, touch near her breasts for just a moment, then drop.)

I never washed out the stains...

(She gazes at another photo.)

Such a strange thing, to live in a house. Walls and windows and doors.

(Pause.)

The back porch.

(She looks at another photo, touches it gently. She lays the photo down, stands up and slowly, gracefully, removes her dress, letting it slip easily down to her feet where it lays in a pool around her. She moves over to the clothes line and pulls down a white dress. She puts it on, letting it slide from her head down over her, like water. She picks up the red flowers she has been picking, and holds them in a bouquet. She turns slowly around completely, three times, and she speaks as she turns.)

I shall marry...no one...and no one marry me...

(Pause, as she gazes into middle distance.)

My one true wedding. Me, Crazy Bone, marry me, me the body in the white dress becoming ghost...

Do you, Crazy Bone, take Crazy Bone to be...

(Her words fade away. After a brief pause, she goes to her knees and digs a hole with her hands. She places the photos in the hole and pushes the dirt back over them. She lays the flowers on top. She gets up.)

I walked away, slowly. When I got to the end of the long driveway, I turned to look.

(She suddenly walks over to the phone booth, steps in and picks up the phone, which has not rung.)

This is Crazy Bone.

(A long pause.)

Yes, those are their names.

Nowhere? You tried everything?

Well... call when you find out.

(She hangs up the phone, comes out, pauses to think of what she was saying.)

When I turned, there was a face at an upstairs window.

I raised my hand to wave.

(Pause.)

Then the window blazed yellow. I saw nothing.

(She motions at the sun with her hands and motions in the direction of an imagined window. She stops, thinking, then re-enters the phone booth, finds a quarter in her purse and dials a number.)

Police? "Let whoever seeks not cease from seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will be troubled. When he is troubled, he will marvel and reign over all."

Are you a religious man?

You are? Well, I'd like to report an absence.

Yes, this is she.

Where? Right here, of course.

(She turns around in the booth, craning her neck, looking all around.)

There is an absence, and I'm coming to an end of words. I'm not myself.

No, I don't need a minister, thank-you very much.

(She hangs up the phone and emerges.)

I have to find them. I need to explain...

(Pause.)

The heat of that wind blowing low and steady. It didn't shift all those days. It can make a person crazy. It's happened. Frosty, I forget his name, Frosty died. He was in the bush for days, lost most likely. When they found him he'd opened up his wrists but was still alive. When he could talk in the hospital, he said he was trying to leech the heat from his veins. It was making him mad. And he sure seemed mad, the way he talked in bursts of half-sentences, never finishing. Or the words came out strange like he couldn't quite shape them. I heard you could see the fear in his eyes. And a few days later, at night, he finished the job with a shard of glass from a mirror he broke. I heard a nurse found him in the mirror. I mean his shape was there, his features, his eyes looking back at her and, what was stranger, was that she couldn't see herself in the mirror. But I wouldn't be believing that story real quick. Rosa was a bit cracked herself; she'd been baptized into the Pentecostals outside of town, talking in tongues, and all that.

It's the wind some summers. And it was there that summer. The wind, the radio on static, and me riddled with anxiety. That's how it went.

Waiting for thunder on the horizon, it might bring rain. All day, and waiting for an answer, not knowing what to do. Either way wasn't any good. And no answer coming. Till I understood there wasn't going to be one, but a decision had to be made. I couldn't stay in that place. No way out. And there was just me, no one else, mulling it out, only me needing to decide. And, I guess, finally I realized if it was

all up to me, it was only me there, thinking it through, then I had to decide for me.
That's what I came to.

And want was so strong, stronger than need. Want...wanted...

(Pause; she laughs.)

Dead or alive.

(The phone rings, and keeps ringing. Crazy Bone, half-rises, puts her hand to her breast.)

There it goes, my heart. There it goes again.

(Crazy Bone sits back, touches lightly at her breasts for a moment.)

Getting away.

It'll stain me. Those mouths...

(She rises and walks away. The phone stops ringing.)

ALFRED NOYES / The Theatre of Criticism: An Adaptation of Ramon Fernandez's *Quixote Variations*

Introduction

It is a seemingly off-hand comment—a brief jotting in the Spanish poet Ramon Fernandez's slight and fragmentary archive:

“In the theatre of criticism [el teatro de critica] we mistake a theatre of war.”

The comment would seem to be a pronouncement on the state of criticism, ironically comparing critical debates to the far more dramatic and disastrous “theatre of war.” And it may indeed be so. But another possibility arises when we refer to a little-known notice in *Ambos* (April 1926), the journal edited by Fernandez's friend Manuel Altolaguirre, which announces the printing of a pamphlet by Imprenta Sur entitled “El teatro de critica,” authored by none-other than Ramon Fernandez. The notice calls the work a “stunning new manifesto” and includes a brief quotation:

“The theatre of criticism is the dromenon of social life; why be surprised if we find in it expressions of affinity alongside critical discriminations?”

My searches to locate this obscure item have been entirely fruitless; after months combing various databases I can only conclude that the pamphlet was never actually printed. It could even be a joke (Altolaguirre was not above such pranks—announcing at one point, in *Poesia* (1932) a “new novel by Federico Garcia Lorca”). It is also worth noting that Fernandez, by all accounts, had ceased writing by 1925, after which point his whereabouts are little known (until his reappearance in Barcelona in the mid-1930s).

But there is one other only recently-unearthed piece of evidence: a small packet of letters, written by Altolaguirre to his future wife Concha Mendez when he was living in Paris (1930-32). One of these letters mentions a visit by a “Ramon” with whom Altolaguirre discusses “the theatre.” They visit the critic Pierre Menard and Altolaguirre records “Ramon” telling Menard that “poets are simply becoming charac-

ters in a fiction.” What of critics, Menard asks? Ramon responds: “Actors. Actors who want to play the characters poets have become.”

If we are to entertain the idea (as I wish to do here) that “the theatre of criticism” was more than an off-hand comment; if, in fact, I am to entertain this phrase conceptually, even theoretically, I am up against a blank wall of historical silence. If Fernandez developed a theory of the theatre (or a theory of criticism—it is a little unclear), why does no one else from that era mention it? Fernandez himself comes up, and his work receives comment in a number of journals. He was friends, in the early 1920s at least, with a wide circle of leading Spanish literati, including Lorca, Altolaguirre, Buñuel. Lorca, especially, had an interest in the theatre; why would Fernandez’s interest in, or ideas about, the theatre never have surfaced?

The wise decision here, the circumspect decision, would be to walk away from the theatre of criticism as a topic about which anything else could be said. However, though I am usually just such a circumspect person, I will allow myself to pursue the subject, taking the licence poets have so often relied upon when crossing imaginary frontiers. I quote the physicist Niels Bohr for further permission:

“An independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can neither be ascribed to the phenomena observed nor the agencies of observation.”

One postulate, then, of the theatre of criticism, is that we too often delude ourselves with the idea that criticism is real, factual, disinterested, objective, empirical, material, and that the objects studied by criticism are in turn also real, material, empirical, etc. We make up what we say, and we make up the objects we discuss as we say what we are saying about them.

The only thing less relevant than poetry today is literary criticism. The theatre of criticism must begin with this postulate above all else. It must embrace its own irrelevance. As it falls *out of the world* we recognize, it must grasp that outside fiercely, and not let go. Its irrelevance is its relevance.

The theatre of criticism is entirely fraudulent. It commits crimes against property and veracity. But the gestures it makes, between one fraud and another, are entirely *sincere*. Really. Its claims about the unreal are—strangely *real*.

The theatre of criticism occurs outside institutional spaces and parameters. If the work you observe displays institutional credentials, or is institutionally sanctioned, it

is not the theatre. The theatre is entirely unsanctioned. It occurs in gutters and cafes, blogs and comments streams. It is “public”; thus, it is very nearly invisible, rapidly disappearing.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the theatre of criticism without recognizing it. We call this “networking,” or “making contacts.” Let’s pretend: you review me, I’ll review you. We read each other’s poems (barely) and whisper sweet nothings, banal praise. We attend “events” to “see” others and “be seen.” This is all the theatre of criticism. Who do you pretend to be today? What writer did you pretend to read?

If poetry has nowhere “real” to be anymore—no space or place of action—and if criticism is just as “displaced”—then the fictive is the only option left. Let’s pretend there’s a place for this, OK? You go stage left, I’ll go stage right. I wrote a book. You wrote about the book I wrote. Now—action.

In the theatre of criticism we face the pointlessness of our literary activities and efforts. We exist, there, in pure anxiety, writing with no net (no poet, no critic—no subject, no object—just writing). Doubt is everything in the theatre of criticism. In it all the negative affects of our literary lives are given free reign. We howl the unalloyed howl of our raw marginality. The theatre of criticism is petty, childish, aggrieved—slighted, jealous, egotistical. Turning on itself, its only hope is that “I is another.” I is. Theatrically thrown.

The theatre of criticism brays from the margin not because poetry (and criticism) makes nothing happen. In fact, it makes pretend things happen. But it’s difficult to separate the pretend from the uselessly “real,” and the margin only ever expands. The margin is, in fact, huge now, vast, very nearly the entire world. We’re all on the edges. Looking in at what?

The theatre of criticism believes in bogus theories. Because *it is* a bogus theory.

Or—all theories are bogus by definition (and in the theatre revealed as such—in character)—a supposing to know by subjects supposed to know.

Now—let’s suppose there’s such a theatre.

I have found Ramon Fernandez’s *Quixote Variations* to be one of the most fascinating and impossible, fraudulent and complicit poems I have ever read. I have pursued its various editions and versions. I have translated it. I have hoarded and protected it. I have lived with it. I have crushed it under my pillow and woken drooling on its scattered pages. Now, I subject it to its only possible fate—the theatre of criticism. It’s yours now. Open the doors.

Characters:

Pierre Menard—a French literary critic

Ramon Fernandez—the dead Spanish poet

Helen Vendler—an American literary critic

Setting:

Possibly an apartment in Paris (or New York), anywhere from 1938 to 2008. There are three objects on the stage: a bookshelf, a wing-back chair in front of the bookshelf, and, lying on the floor a few feet in front of the chair, an open pine coffin. Pierre Menard sits in the chair, hands folded in his lap, legs crossed, studying the audience. It is clear that there is a body in the coffin (this is Ramon Fernandez). Helen Vendler remains off-stage throughout

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MENARD: Good evening. My name is Pierre Menard, and I will be speaking tonight about the poetry of Ramon Fernandez—in particular, his acknowledged master work, the “Quixote Variations.” As a long-time student of Cervantes’s great work, I am perhaps better situated to understand Fernandez’s undertaking than many others, despite the fact that I am French, not Spanish. It also helps that I met Fernandez, in Paris in 1930, and was able to ascertain certain aspects of his intentions and beliefs that remain beneath the surface of his work and have been a cause of confusion for many of his readers.

One obvious reading of Fernandez’s “Quixote” is to read it as an attack upon, or deconstruction of, Cervantes’s masterpiece. Indeed, one could consider it an attack on the very notion of “masterpieces,” with the hierarchies they connote and the scarcity they imply. Masterpieces would be impossible in a world without property (they are wholly dependent upon the concept of private property), so if we are to read Fernandez as a radical poet, even as an anarchist poet (though it is somewhat difficult to clarify the relationship between his literary activities in the early 1920s and his later political activities in the 1930s), we must suppose him to be one opposed to the hierarchical and exclusive notion of the masterpiece. Though he says so nowhere, we must see him as opposed to the very privileged position of the *Quixote* in Spanish literature and culture.

FERNANDEZ (from the coffin):

Through crushed Saturdays
And broken Mays

Never with three soft days
Overwhelming us

Having neither marginal
Nor critical remarks

Nothing to register
Delight

That expression
Is eloquence's reason

Thus I agree to fill
Your margin

And offer a few pages
At the end of your book

Sublime stars and
Aristotle raised

From the dead
For that very purpose

MENARD: The opening lines here can indeed be read as the words of a radical working class poet bemoaning the lot of an underclass which has all sense of leisure ("Saturdays") and hope ("May" with its invocation of rebirth) "crushed" and "broken." The context, however, immediately shifts and beginning with the words "Having neither marginal / Nor critical remarks" we are thrown into the Preface of *Don Quixote* and Cervantes's lament for his "bare words." Much of the rest of this poem is comprised

of language stripped from Cervantes's great work—and indeed such literary pilfering and plagiarism might in fact be read as a critique of property and the exclusions and privileges assigned to certain texts in the canon.

VENDLER (interrupting from off-stage): You are basing your comments on an ideological *a priori* that has nothing whatsoever to do with criticism, the task of which is simply to *describe* the work of art.

MENARD (looking angrily off stage): Vendler—I'm getting there. Please bear with me. (Faces the audience again.) Where was I? Oh yes—

Fernandez hand has arisen from his coffin, holding an unlit cigarette aloft. As Menard continues talking, he gets up, pulls a lighter from his jacket, lights Fernandez's cigarette, and returns to his seat. Fernandez smokes in the coffin.

I am offering the hypothetical and perhaps expected reading: finding evidence of the later political “radical” in the earlier aesthetically “radical” work of his bohemian youth. But the tricky part here is that there is no way of knowing exactly what Fernandez's attitude to Cervantes's work—as canonical text or cultural icon—was. Many lesser writers might borrow from a great writer's masterpiece; why should we read Fernandez's borrowings—raw, bald, and blunt as they are—any differently? In fact, in invoking the “friend” from Cervantes's Preface, who offers to assist the author by “agree[ing] to fill / Your margin” and “a few pages / At the end of your book,” isn't Fernandez fulfilling a supportive and ultimately dedicatory function with regard to the prior work? Isn't he, in fact, not “critiquing” Cervantes's *Quixote* at all, but rather, acknowledging its priority and declaring a sort of aesthetic affinity?

VENDLER: What do you mean by “aesthetic affinity”?

MENARD (again looking annoyed): That the artistic choices a poet makes can be as much about identifying with a particular source as they can be . . . distantiations from or critiques of a predecessor.

VENDLER: You're trying to invoke old weird Harold Bloom.

MENARD: Not at all. But now that you've called him to mind, certainly. Yes. Most of our models of critique and argument are based upon competition over scarce resources, privacy and individuation, distinguishing the unique, original. These are inflected with capitalist epistemology. But what I'm interested in, and what I think you can see in Fernandez's work, is an expression of authorial or aesthetic affinity. One responds to Cervantes by writing Cervantes—re-creating him anew, in a new historical context. And that's what Fernandez was doing. He was *being Cervantes*, if Cervantes were an anarchist poet working in a Barcelona book factory in the twentieth century. What then would he write?

FERNANDEZ:

Beyond
Water
Bodies
Flutter
Sleeves
Cry
Oceans
Masks
Heard
Grinding
Phrases
Songs
Tragic
Spirit
Spain
Sunken
Summer
Vanished
Artificer
Myself
Out of
Order

VENDLER: I am curious, Menard, about the fact that Fernandez is such a marginal, minor, even forgettable figure—what is your attraction to his work? Isn't this just the case of a lesser figure who tried—unsuccessfully—to attach his wagon to a star?

MENARD (Indignant): Are you calling *me* a “lesser figure”?

VENDLER: No, you idiot—Fernandez.

MENARD (Self-importantly): We are all “lesser figures” until someone makes masterpieces of us.

VENDLER: Good luck then. As for myself, I like to pick the winners.

MENARD: The losers are infinitely more interesting. Anyway, I thought Marjorie Perloff said that?

VENDLER: Misattribution is everything.

MENARD: I must get on with my talk—

FERNANDEZ:

Born free
I retired
So I might continue
To these solitary hills
Where only companions
And sources are ours
And the clear trees
Seem of crystal

With wind
I communicate
Cunning
And my thoughts

Go towards absence
I am a distant flame
And a sword far off
Having attacked seeing
They now deceive
Words demanding
The impossible
Speech of windmills

MENARD: Fernandez here appropriates the voice of Marcela from Chapter 14 of the first part of the *Quixote*. Blamed for the death of the shepherd-poet Grisóstomo whose love she rejected, Marcela comes to defend herself. In doing so, she lays claim to a particular autonomy, and to the “voluntary” nature of love. In Fernandez’s hands, Marcela’s words become the words of Spain’s defeated anarchists whose “demand” for the “impossible” echoes out of the grave—just as the pathetic poet Grisóstomo’s words do when his poem is snatched from his funeral pyre.

VENDLER: Couldn’t we also read this as the lament of the unread poet? Fernandez, more Grisóstomo than Marcela, has his poems snatched from history’s silent grave by you, Menard. Otherwise, we’d never have heard him.

While Vendler speaks, Fernandez’s hand once again rises from the coffin, this time holding an empty wine glass aloft. Menard sighs and, while responding to Vendler, he reaches behind his chair for a wine bottle, approaches the coffin, and begins to fill the dead poet’s glass. However, looking off stage at Vendler the entire time, he does not pay attention to the glass, and continues to fill it. Wine overflows all over Fernandez, who keeps his glass aloft until the bottle is empty. His hand and the glass then descend into the coffin.

MENARD (Dumbfounded): You . . . no one can . . . you can’t . . . Look. (Long pause. Then, thoughtful.) “Poetry is a womb of souls which we as poets attend.” That’s what I’m doing here—attending to poetry. It involves an intimate and unbreakable link between reading and writing, watching and acting. That’s what Fernandez did too. It’s all we can do as critics (and poets). *Pay attention.*

Menard notices the bottle is empty, looks at it, looks down at Fernandez, shrugs and returns to his seat before continuing.

MENARD: Thinking, analysing, inventing are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, to recall with incredulous stupor what the *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our laziness or our barbarity. Everyone should be capable of all ideas and in some utopian future this will be the case. (Pause.) I simply want to enrich the halting and rudimentary art of reading—as Fernandez did too.

FERNANDEZ:

I tell it you as all tales are told
To wrest fiction from the dead hands of prose

From dense histories
Feeble cries

Apparatuses for
Forging chains

To think of situations
From books I have read

Nothing but fire
Steel pounding into shape

Just as if it belonged
To heretics

The perverse and complicated
Language of their authors

Contributors

JONATHAN BALL is the author of *Ex Machina* (BookThug 2009) and the forthcoming *Clockfire* (Coach House 2010). He lives online at <www.jonathanball.com>.

KATHLEEN BROWN's short fiction and poetry has been published in *CV2*, *dandelion*, *The Fiddlehead*, *QWERTY* and the *GULCH* anthology (Tightrope Books). Her most recent play, "our mouths are filters," received a workshop production in the NB Acts Theatre Festival in Fredericton. "Road Story," a storytelling/performance collaboration, was presented in the 2009 Summerworks Performance Gallery. Kathleen is co-Artistic Director of the Toronto chapter of The Vagabond Trust. "On the mountain" is part of a multi-genre manuscript, "our mouths are filters: DOCUMENTING IN THE BRINK."

ROGER FARR is the author *SURPLUS*; two new books, *MEANS* and *IKMQ*, are forthcoming. Recent creative and critical writing appears in *Anarchist Studies*, *Canadian Literature*, *dandelion*, *Islands of Resistance: Pirate Radio in Canada*, *The Poetic Front*, *Politics is Not a Banana*, *The Postanarchism Reader*, *PRECIPICE*, *Rad Dad*, and *Social Anarchism*. In February 2010 he co-hosted (with Stephen Collis) the anti-Olympics web-radio project, *Short Range Poetic Device*. He teaches in the Creative Writing and Culture and Technology Programs and edits CUE Books at Capilano University.

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BROOK HOUGLUM teaches at Capilano University and is currently researching North American poets theatre.

THE INSTITUTE FOR DOMESTIC RESEARCH is a shifting collective of writers, musicians, visual artists and composers. This IDR includes writers Catriona Strang and Christine Stewart and composer Jacqueline Leggatt. The Institute performed most recently at the In(ter)ventions Conference, Banff Center for the Arts (Feb. 2010) and the Belladonna "Advancing Feminist Poetics & Activism" Conference, New York (Sept. 2009). The IDR also performed for the KSW "Positions" Colloquium in Vancouver (August 2008), where it included Leggatt, Strang, and clarinetist François Houle.

PAOLO JAVIER's *The Feeling Is Actual* (creature press) and *Megton Gasgan Krakoom* (Cy Gist Press) are forthcoming in 2010. He has written a full-length play, *Lunatic*, and his theater and movietelling pieces have been performed at La Mama Experimental Theatre, Small Press Traffic, Performance Space 122, Galapagos Art Space, and Powerhouse Arena. He publishes a tiny press, 2nd Ave Poetry (2ndavepoetry.com), and lives with his partner, Serena, in New York.

CHRISTIN LECLERC lives in Vancouver. She is the author of *Counterfeit*, a book of poetry published by CUE. Her work has also appeared in the anthology *Open Text* (Vol II), *The Apocalypse Anthology*, *dandelion*, *FRONT*, *Interim*, *memewar*, and *OCHO*.

ALFRED NOYES is the author of *Compression Sonnets* (BookThug 2007). He has translated Ramon Fernandez's *Quixote Variations* (BookThug 2008) and published work in *Front* magazine and *Dear Sir*. Currently, he is editing Gloria Personne's *Autobiography* (an excerpt of which appeared in a recent issue of *memewar*). He lives near Vancouver with his dog Lorca.

a.rawlings is a Canadian poet and interdisciplinary artist. Her first book, *Wide slumber for lepidopterists* (Coach House 2006), received an Alcuin Award for Design and was nominated for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award; the book is currently being translated into French. As the recipient of a Chalmers Arts Fellowship, angela spends 2009 and 2010 in Belgium, Canada, and Iceland working on her next manuscripts, researching sound / text / movement with special emphasis on vocal and contact improvisation, and collaborating with local artists.

ADAM SEELIG is the author of *Every Day in the Morning (slow)* (New Star Books 2010) and *Talking Masks* (BookThug 2009). Seelig is a poet, playwright, stage director, and the founder of One Little Goat Theatre Company in Toronto, with which he has premiered works by Yehuda Amichai, Thomas Bernhard, Jon Fosse, and himself. His plays include *All Is Almost Still* (New York 2004), *Antigone:Insurgency* (Toronto 2007), and *Talking Masks* (Toronto 2009). <www.OneLittleGoat.org>.

JOSEPH SHRAGGE has been working in theatre and publishing for the last six years in Montreal. Recent productions include *Knot of Nots*, conceived and directed by Leslie Baker and performed at Tangente, and *The Works*, performed at the Montreal Fringe Festival. His translation of *Medea* with Andreas Apergis will be performed at the Centaur Theatre Company in fall 2010. He is a co-founder and co-artistic director of Scapegoat Carnivale Theatre with Alison Darcy.

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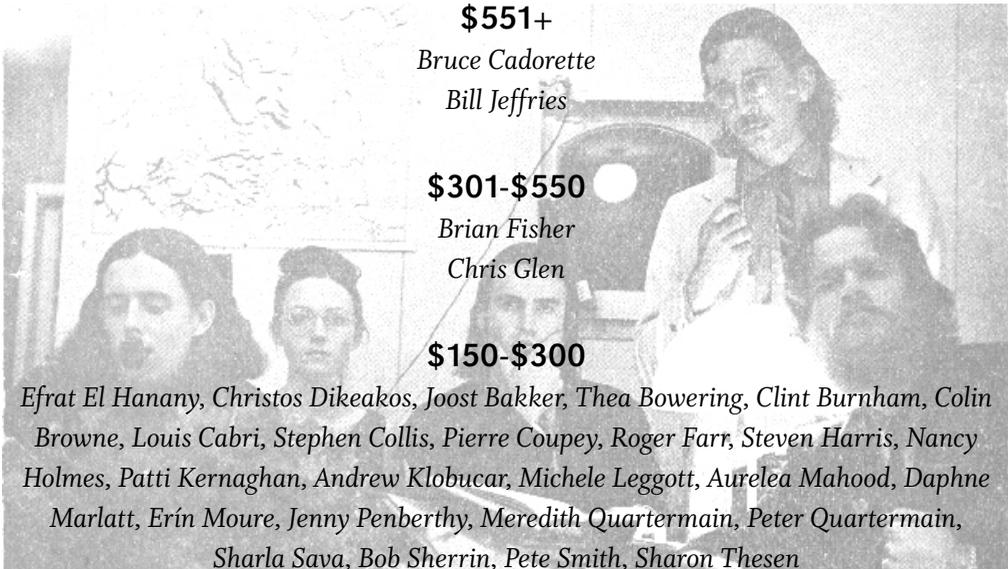
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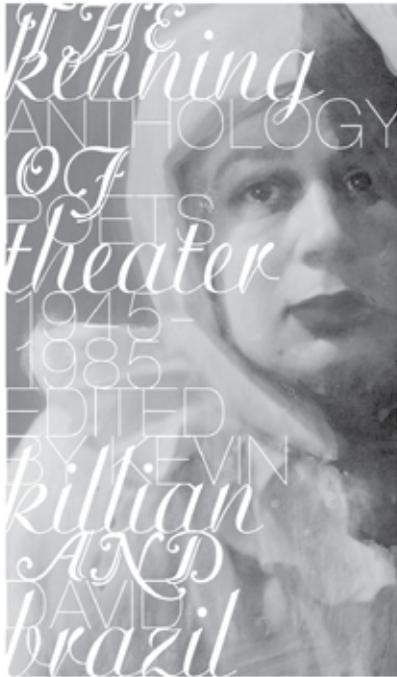
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