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●●● One has only to read, to look, to listen, to remember.

(Virginia Woolf)

Inside every good play lives a question. A great play asks big questions that endure through time. We enact plays in order to remember relevant questions; we remember these questions in our bodies and the perceptions take place in real time and space. For example, the issue of *hubris* is an issue that humanity is still working on, which is why certain ancient Greek plays feel completely fresh and current. When I reach for a play on the shelf, I know that inside the book is a spore: a sleeping question waiting for my attention. Reading the play, I touch the question with my own sensibilities. I know that it has touched me when the question responds and provokes thought and personal associations – when it haunts me. Presently, everything I experience in daily life is in *relation* to it. The question

has been unleashed upon my unconscious. In my sleep my dreams are imbued with the question. The disease of the question spreads out: to actors, designers, technicians and ultimately to the audience. In rehearsal we try to find shapes and forms to contain the living questions, in the present, on the stage. The act of remembering connects us with the past and alters time. We are living conduits of human memory.

The act of memory is a physical act and lies at the heart of the art of the theatre. If the theatre were a verb, it would be 'to remember'.

During the mid-1980s, the late Polish theatre director and philosopher Jerzy Grotowski accepted a position in the theatre department at the University of California at Irvine. The university agreed to build a studio to his specifications and to bring participants from around the world to work with him on what he called 'objective drama'. My friend, the actor Wendy Vanden Heuvel, travelled from New York to Irvine to participate in Grotowski's research and upon her return I asked about her experience. 'It was very frustrating at first,' she said. Asked to work intensively from sun-down until sun-up, she and participants from Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, South America and the Middle East persevered for many weeks. Wendy's initial frustration stemmed from her trouble locating a source of energy and physicality to get through the long hours. After extreme physical exhaustion, the other participants would access familiar patterns and codes from their respective indigenous backgrounds. This seemed to give them an endless reservoir

of energy as they began to dance and move in ways that were unique to their particular cultures, in ancient modes deeply imbedded in their corporeal memories. But for Wendy, nothing happened. As an American, she could find no deeply ingrained cultural resources that would help her to get through the endless nights. After a great deal of frustration and fatigue, and much to her relief, at last she touched upon her *Jewish* roots and from that source she unearthed familiar codes of sound and movement deeply rooted in the Jewish culture. Her body *remembered*.

Wendy's story worried me because I am not Jewish. Confronted with the same sleepless nights and physical exhaustion, how would *I* have moved? What are my codes? What would my body *remember*? I was also intrigued. What is culture? Where does theatre in the United States come from? Upon whose shoulders are we standing? What informs my artistic sensibilities? What is the role of memory?

I decided to conduct a roots search to find my place in the continuum of the history of the American theatre. I wanted to actively remember the past in order to use it. Whom and what could I channel? I wanted to feel the past and its people in the rehearsal room with me and allow them to influence my choices as a director. I started by attempting to identify dominant influences on my work.

The most immediate influences were easily accessible. During the late 1960s, theatre in the United States underwent an eruption, almost a revolution. I moved to New York City in 1974 and the atmosphere was still vertiginous. This cultural insurrection and its practitioners were a rich source

of ideas and passion: the Living Theater, the Open Theater, the Manhattan Theater Project, the Performance Group, the Bread and Puppet Theater, the dancers at the Judson Church and individuals such as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Meredith Monk. These artists felt almost present in my rehearsals. I was inspired and encouraged by their example and by their methods. They were the shoulders upon which I stood.

But it was the search beyond these immediate influences that became problematic. Much to my surprise and frustration, I discovered a serious blockage of information from earlier years. I could trace influences back to about 1968 and then everything stopped. I had difficulty channelling previous generations in any concrete way. I could not feel them 'in the room' with me. I wasn't using them in my rehearsals. I was not fed by them ideologically, technically, aesthetically or personally in a way that felt substantive or practical.

Certainly I was familiar with the prominent individuals and great companies from the first half of the century. I was aware of the political engagement and aesthetic breakthroughs of the Federal Theater Project, the Mercury Theater, the Group Theater, the Civic Theater, the Living Newspaper and individuals such as Eva Le Gallienne, Josh Logan, Hallie Flannagan, Orson Welles, Jose Ferrer, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets and so many others, but why did I have so much trouble accessing their wisdom? Why could I not use and own their manifest political engagement and passionate relationship to social issues that so clearly

influenced how they worked and what they accomplished? Other than the stale influence of a watered-down version of the Stanislavsky system, why could I not feel these people in the room with me? I felt cut off from their passion and commitment. I found it impossible to stand upon their values and ideals. Why could I not stand securely upon their shoulders? What happened?

I quickly ascertained that between the years 1949 and 1952, the theatre community in the United States was struck by a cataclysmic event: the McCarthy era. This political attack forced everyone to radically alter or adjust their lives and values. Some fled the country never to return, some were blacklisted and forced to stop working, and others just changed, recanted, disengaged and shut up. Today we barely remember the McCarthy era and most of us are not aware of the serious consequences of that forgotten catalyst. Through a brutally effective mechanism, artists were directed to disengage from issues facing the real world. Without this social link, many turned inward. What many of us don't realize is that this insipid political action has completely influenced the way we make work today. Like the consequences of Stalinism, the most effective political manoeuvre is one that is later forgotten. And we have forgotten because the actions of the McCarthy machine succeeded.

Born in 1951, I grew up with the notion that 'art and politics don't mix'. Now I had to ask myself, where did that maxim come from? Today we are largely oblivious to the repercussions of those dark years and unaware of the

radical changes undergone by the people who were most effected by them. Their passionate commitment to the world around them and the kind of theatre that was born out of that passion is what I wanted to learn from and use. But we missed out. The manipulations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities generally wiped out lifelines to following generations.

Artists, suddenly absolved from any personal responsibility to the world around them, altered their ways and means. Painters embraced Abstract Expressionism, a movement which glorifies personal expression removed from any outside context and appropriately born directly upon the heels of McCarthyism. Everybody looked inward. Playwrights bore the brunt of the new charge to avoid political engagement. Plays became increasingly about 'you, me, our apartment and our problems'. The scope kept narrowing.

Fortunately, big-spirited playwrights like Suzan-Lori Parks, Chuck Mee, Anna Deâvere Smith, Emily Mann and Tony Kushner have begun to reverse the trend with plays that do re-engage big social issues. Examples are *America Plays*, *Investigation of a Murder in El Salvador*, *Fires in the Mirror*, *Execution of Justice* and *Angels in America*. These plays are renewed attempts to reconnect with social issues. As evidenced by the success of Kushner's play on Broadway, an appetite abounds for socially relevant work. I would like to suggest that this reconnection with the world is an act of life. Herbert Muschamp, reviewing a book on the Bauhaus in *The New York Times*, wrote:

- Artists should not distance themselves from their times. They should leap into the fray and see what good they can accomplish there. Instead of keeping a safe distance from the smelly swamp of worldly values, they should dive right in and stir things up . . . Modern Apollos want to make it in the marketplace; an artist's integrity stands to be strengthened, not compromised, by reckoning with the social reality.

At the risk of vast over-generalization, Americans profess a lack of history. We are, as Gore Vidal designates us, the United States of Amnesia. And yet, we share an extraordinary history: rich, complex and productive. In an attempt to reconnect with sources earlier than 1968, I started to examine the genesis of the performing arts in the United States. My directing became an attempt to remember and to reconnect with an artistic heritage. I concentrated on plays by seminal American authors and new works about the history of such ultra-American phenomena as vaudeville, silent-film acting, and marathon dancing. I pursued my ancestors in order to be actively related to them.



- The Historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a

simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

(T. S. Eliot)

Memory plays a huge role in the artistic process. Every time you stage a play, you are embodying a memory. Human beings are stimulated to tell stories from the experience of remembering an incident or a person. The act of expressing what is remembered is actually, according to the philosopher Richard Rorty, an act of *re-description*. In re-describing something, new truths are created. Rorty suggests that there is no objective reality, no Platonic ideal. We create truths by describing, or re-describing, our beliefs and observations. Our task, and the task of every artist and scientist, is to re-describe our inherited assumptions and invented fictions in order to create new paradigms for the future.

- Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind . . . The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot.

(Richard Rorty)

If the McCarthy era dictated that art should have no connection to social and political systems, what remains is

narcissism; the cult of the individual, the arrogant culture of the self.

What is culture? I believe that culture is shared experience. And it is constantly shifting. Ideas, in fact, are among the most contagious aspects of human culture. Imagine a huge field on a cold winter night. Scattered around the field are blazing fires, each with a group of people huddled close to stay warm. The fires represent shared experience, or the culture, of each group gathered around each fire. Imagine that someone stands up and walks across the cold, dark, windy field towards a different group gathered around another fire. This act of strength represents cultural exchange. And this is how ideas scatter.

In our culture, which is rapidly spreading around the world, collective action is suspect. We have been discouraged to think that innovation can be a collaborative act. There has to be a star. Group effort is a sign of weakness. We revere the cowboy riding out alone across the prairie. We are brought up to make money and spend it on ourselves. People are considered successful if they get rich and appear on television. Commercial success is applauded.

I want something else. I looked for a connection to an earlier American culture in order to find an alternate route into the future.

The McCarthy era was not the genesis of American paranoia. The theatre in the United States was not born a commercial entity although it became, to a large extent, dependent upon its mercantile viability. Choices were made and adjustments followed. To remember the people and the

events and to *re-describe* them is to use them, to climb up on their shoulders and shout out loud.

Our cultural inclinations were forged by historical, social and political events and by people who had the courage to stand up and make their way across the cold field, to make choices: Rosa Parks, who wouldn't sit at the back of the bus, the factory workers who went on strike, Lillian Hellman, Martin Luther King, artists and scientists who broke classical rules. Our culture is contrived from social interactions and by the adjustments we make to change. When translated into different contexts, they have a chameleon capacity to change meaning – sometimes only slightly, sometimes radically.

The genesis of theatre in the United States makes a fascinating story. In order to sketch the landscape of our contemporary theatre scene, I will attempt to 're-describe' the history of performing arts in the United States. I will outline some events and jump from era to era to show that the shoulders upon which we stand are complex and diverse, driven by contradictory impulses and complicated agendas.

I decided to start from the very beginning. Chaos theory suggests that all phenomena are complexly connected and intertwined. A butterfly bats its wings in Honolulu and eventually engenders a typhoon in Japan. I wondered if I could locate the Big Bang in the theatre in the United States, for then I might be able to follow the repercussions and see if our experience today is the result of the fluttering of a butterfly's wings several hundred years ago. I wanted to see if the macrocosm contained the microcosm of the start.

The first play ever produced in the colonies was *Ye Bare and Ye Cubb*. It was performed in Fowkes' Tavern, a pub on the eastern shore of Virginia in 1665. After the initial performance, someone accused the play of blasphemy. The case was taken to court but the judge complained that he couldn't pass judgement on a play he hadn't seen. Therefore, the second performance of *Ye Bare and Ye Cubb* was performed in court! Afterwards, the judge ruled that the play was not blasphemous on the grounds that it was *entertaining*.

Is this event in 1665 a microcosm of the macrocosm of what the American theatre became? Is entertainment the bedrock of American theatre and the basis upon which all judgement of theatre originates? If the European humanist tradition perceives art as reflection, do we know it mainly as diversion?

The hard-working/hard-playing men who carved out the frontier craved live entertainment, the sleazier the better. Yet a puritanical ambivalence prevailed by marked resistance to theatrical presentations. Plays were denounced as snares of the devil by anti-theatre literature with titles like 'The Theater, the High Road to Hell'. The pioneers of the American theatre had to carve their stage out of a wilderness of bigotry and prejudice.

Another notable aspect of the growth of American theatre is the tremendous difficulty of its genesis. Population was sparse and it was extremely difficult to get from one place to another. The rigours of daily living in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are almost beyond our twenty-first-century comprehension.

Until 1775, Virginia and Maryland were the only two colonies which did not have anti-theatre laws at one time or another. Theatre's progress was impeded not only by moral prejudice, but by a rigid belief among the middle classes that stage productions were frivolous and wasteful of precious time. Even music confronted fervent religious resistance. In 1778, with the Colonial forces fighting for life and liberty, the Federal Congress adopted a law prohibiting theatre in any form.

Despite this resistance, a tremendous diversity of entertainment appeared in pre-Civil War America. The variety of ethnicities settling the colonies accounts for the heterogeneity: wagon shows, magic-lantern presentations, panoramas, circuses, minstrel shows, show boats or 'floating theatres', wild-west shows, melodramas, and travelling Shakespeare companies. Following the Civil War, literally hundreds of companies toured *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

A minstrel show was the first theatrical production *exported* from the United States. White men in blackface sang and danced parodies of slave plantation entertainment to the great amusement of the European theatre-goers. Vaudeville – the word stems from the French *voix de ville*, voice of the cities – managed to incorporate sketches from the diverse urban immigrant groups under a single roof. For the first time people from different ethnic neighbourhoods came together who, under other circumstances, couldn't understand one another's languages and customs. Vaudeville was a loud and lively environment where cultures got to know one another through entertaining

sketches and dramas. This highly popular phenomenon prevailed between 1865 and 1930. The genesis of film was partially responsible for its demise.

Despite the American Revolution and subsequent political independence, Americans felt culturally dependent on England and Western Europe for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before the twentieth century, there were very few American playwrights of consequence. The turn of the century changed all that. A sudden avalanche of activity galvanized the arts. By the end of the First World War, industrial America began to be a superpower and theatre artists, excited by new ideas from Europe and greatly influenced by psychoanalysis, feminism, progressive and radical politics, Post-impressionism, Expressionism and Symbolism, started to forge a modern American theatre. This new theatre favoured a rejection of verisimilitude, which had been a nineteenth-century preoccupation with photography. The pre-eminent designer Robert Edmund Jones advocated Expressionism over Realism:

- Realism is something we practice when we aren't feeling very well.
When we don't feel up to making the extra effort.

Expressionism, on the other hand, was concerned with the expression of the inner self, the subconscious and its tension with surface reality. American playwrights began to experiment to great effect with Expressionism which became, for a while, the dominant force in the American

theatre. Eugene O'Neill prescribed, 'Reject the banality of surfaces!' Expressionism was

- An intensity of vision which tries to catch the throb of life, necessarily doing violence to external facts to lay bare internal facts.

In addition to the early work of Eugene O'Neill, the Expressionist movement included American playwrights Elmer Rice, Susan Glaspell, John Howard Lawson and Sophie Treadwell. These artists rejected Realism and embraced theatricality and the poetry of the subjective experience. They supported native playwrights and were proponents of an American theatre inspired by but not emulating the newest art revolutions in Europe. Robert Edmund Jones declared, 'Think of it! No more tasteful, well furnished rooms with one wall missing.' Their strain of Expressionism can still be felt much later in Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

The dance world too, for the first time, produced radical alternatives to the pre-eminent world of ballet: Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Agnes DeMille and Martha Graham created companies and performances that seemed to spring from the American soil.

Perhaps the 1920s were a reflection of what Americans do best under pressure: a celebration of intensity, magnification, energy and industry; an ability to walk into the room bravely without knowing who or what is there. No

other era comes close to the inconceivable outpouring of magnificent music and vigour onstage: George S. Kaufman and his collaborators, Jelly Roll Morton, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Ma Rainey, the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Ethel Merman, Billy Rose, Irving Berlin, George M. Cohan, Jerome Kern, Fanny Brice, Bert Williams, Oscar Hammerstein II and a whole lot more. In one year, 1926, Rodgers and Hart had five shows running or opening on Broadway. In 1927 Broadway reached its all-time production peak as critics from the twenty-four city daily newspapers grappled with 268 offerings.

The end of the 1920s brought the Depression. Vaudeville, the crown jewel of American popular entertainment, died as talking pictures replaced the art of the silent film. The talent drain into film started to dilute the potency of the stage. A new method for actors based on the early theories of the Russian Konstantin Stanislavsky came to dominate our approach to acting for the rest of this century.

Stanislavsky and his company, the Moscow Art Theatre, performed plays by Chekhov and Gorky in the United States during 1923 and 1924. By the time they got to America, these productions were already almost twenty years old and only reflected Stanislavsky's very early experiments in 'memory of emotion' and 'inner concentration'. But to American sensibilities, this revolutionary approach to acting had a tremendous impact on young theatre people, including Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, Harold Clurman and many others who had never seen anything like this extraordinary acting company from Russia.

Greatly influenced by Pavlov's theories of conditioned reflexes and certain discoveries in the enticing, new frontier of the unconscious, Stanislavsky had developed methods of actor training that resulted in an arresting psychological realism and a remarkable acting ensemble able to portray human behaviour ultra-realistically. When Stanislavsky left America, Russian acting teachers connected to Stanislavsky's early research, including Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya who remained in New York, were besieged to teach these methods to the ravenously enthusiastic young Americans. Lee Strasberg, who had himself been strongly influenced by the recent and fashionable ideas of Sigmund Freud, married his understanding of Stanislavsky with his passion for Freud and came up with powerful approaches to emotion and the unconscious using what we now know as affective memory, emotional recall and sense memory. This approach to acting became the Bible for the Group Theater, the Actors Studio, the Neighborhood Playhouse and many offshoots.

The Americans embraced the Russian experiments passionately and misguidedly by overemphasizing personalized emotional circumstances. Stanislavsky's system, now watered down to a 'method', proved effective for film and television, but in the theatre created an unfortunate stranglehold of emotional indulgence. I believe that the great tragedy of the American stage is the actor who assumes, thanks to our gross misunderstanding of Stanislavsky, 'If I feel it, the audience will feel it'.

The techniques derived from the Moscow Art Theatre's visit to America were, in fact, a narrow aspect of Stanislavsky's lifetime of work in the theatre. He quickly abandoned his early experiments in affective recollection and went on to make groundbreaking work in opera and to conduct experiments in physical action and something he called the psycho-physical unity of experience. Late in life, he rejected his earlier psychological techniques, calling them 'misguided'. But it was too late. Americans had already grabbed on to a severely limited aspect of his 'system' and turned it into a religion. The Americanization, or miniaturization, of the Stanislavsky system has become the air we breathe and, like the air we breathe, we are rarely aware of its omnipresence.

Where would we be now if the Moscow Art Theatre had *not* visited our shores? Would the Expressionist movement of the teens and twenties have developed into something even more exciting; would it have inspired more Expressionist masterpieces than *Camino Real*, *Our Town* and *Death of a Salesman*? Who and what would have been the great influences on the theatre? What about Martha Graham? Was she on to something that might have had a substantially more profound impact on the art of the theatre?

Martha Graham was becoming a major force during the 1920s. Like artists in the other fields, she was influenced by the same ideas that created Expressionism. I look to her now for inspiration and guidance.

Although she taught with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, Martha Graham's Expressionist

approach to creating character has never really been translated for actors. For example, to create character in her dances, she would take the source and deconstruct the written text into a series of gestures that expressed the emotional life behind the words. According to her, a performer must search for the meanings behind gesture and expression and then reassemble them, working them into a pattern, a design, a purpose – into choreography. Martha Graham was a pioneer in our midst.

Today, much of our ‘highbrow’ mainstream theatre remains an imitation of the Western European tradition. Our native popular entertainments are considered ‘low-brow’. But this sense of inferiority and dependence belies the inherent difference between Europeans and Americans. Europeans are, generally speaking, a literary culture. Americans are an aural culture. Our dominant tradition is evangelical. For us, the *sound* of words takes precedent over their meaning. Although we pretend to be at ease with literature on stage like the Europeans are, in fact we are ill at ease. This pretence of ease makes for a false feel in the theatre.

In America we like to pretend that we have no history but, in fact, our history is rich and complex. I feel that we theatre practitioners today are too timid in our exploitation of the shoulders upon which we stand. Compared to the theatre’s rapid growth and complex adjustments to the innovations, events and movements of the past several centuries, our progress now seems fainthearted. Acting, for example, is the only artistic enterprise in America that has

not changed during the past three-quarters of a century. Most acting today looks pretty much the same as it did in the 1930s. Our work has not grown enough and our conventional goals seem too narrow.

I want an artistic explosion. Our present high-technology lifestyle demands a theatre experience that cannot be satisfied by video and movie screens. I want acting that is poetic and personal, intimate and colossal. I want to encourage the kind of humanity on the stage that demands attention and that expresses who we are and suggests that life is bigger. And it is for this reason that I’m trying to remember and study the past and combine it with the newest ideas in philosophy, science and art. In order to contribute to an artistic explosion I am researching new approaches to acting for the stage that combine vaudeville, operetta, Martha Graham and postmodern dance. I want to find resonant shapes for our present ambiguities. I want to contribute to a field that will engender moments on-stage that broaden the definitions of what it means to be human.

Theatre is *about* memory; it is an act of memory and description. There are plays and people and moments of history to revisit. Our cultural treasure trove is full to bursting. And the journeys will change us, make us better, bigger and more connected. We enjoy a rich, diverse and unique history and to celebrate it is to remember it. To remember it is to use it. To use it is to be true to who we are. A great deal of energy and imagination is demanded. And an *interest* in remembering and describing where we come from.

Robert Edmond Jones wrote this in *The Dramatic Imagination*:

- In all these dramas of the past there is a dream – an excitement, a high, rare mood, a conception of greatness. If we are to create in the theatre, we must bring back this mood, this excitement, this dream. The plain truth is that life has become so crowded, so hurried, so commonplace, so ordinary, that we have lost the artist's approach to art. Without this, we are nothing. With this, everything is possible. Here it is, in these old dramas. Let us see it. Let us learn it. Let us bring into the theatre a vision of what the theatre might be. There is no other way. Indeed, there is no other way.

If we can see ourselves in relation to our predecessors and the impulses behind their innovations, our own theatre will necessarily become more intense, poetic, metaphoric, humane and expressive. Our collective dreams will be bigger; the arenas will become more compelling. Perhaps as we remember the past we will find ourselves able to create with more energy and articulation.



- If I can see far, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants.
(Isaac Newton)

As a result of a partnership with memory and the consequent journeys through the past, I feel nourished, encouraged

and energized. I feel more profoundly connected to and inspired by those who came before. I feel the courage to articulate for my profession because the shoulders upon which I'm standing feel sturdy. The journeys through the past inspired and encouraged me to develop new productions about Americans and our history. And these encounters with remarkable men and women have made me feel these people are my colleagues. The research led me to new ways of thinking about acting, playwrighting and design. And I recognized that there is such a thing as an American sense of structure, an American sense of humour, and a way of listening and responding that is culturally rooted. Confronted with sleepless nights and physical exhaustion, I might even find some ancestral ways to move.