

*Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*  
Vol. 5, No. 4, November 2009

## You Can Do It: A Conversation with Theatrical Artist Cynthia Hopkins

Jason Del Gandio



Cynthia Hopkins combines multi-media theater and innovative forms of musical storytelling to create her performance extravaganzas. Her work speaks to and/or incorporates Sufi mysticism, theoretical astrophysics, folk music, postmodern personal narrative, science fiction, memory, alcoholism, familial dynamics, sexual molestation, personal identity, depression, forgiveness, hope, death, loss of faith, rebirth, and the rewards and challenges of being an independent, noncommercial artist.

Hopkins' most recent work includes three shows entitled the *Accidental Trilogy*. It begins with *Accidental Nostalgia* (2004), an alt-country operetta about neurologist Cameron Seymour who suffers from psychogenetic amnesia. Ms. Seymour travels

---

**Jason Del Gandio** is an Assistant Professor of Public Communication at Temple University. He is author of *Rhetoric for Radicals: A Handbook for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Activists*. Photograph by Robin Hessman (courtesy of Cynthia Hopkins).

ISSN: 1557-2935 (online)

<<http://liminalities.net/5-4/hopkins.pdf>>

back to her hometown of Carlson, Georgia in attempt to uncover missing details of her life and is suddenly confronted by competing narratives about her father's whereabouts. Did he willingly disappear, did he commit suicide, or did she murder him? Ms. Seymour cannot remember which narrative is true and goes on the lam. *Must Don't Whip 'Um* (2007) is the prequel to *Accidental Nostalgia*. This show reveals that Cameron Seymour is really a forgotten 1970's musical pop star who fled to Morocco and lived under a different identity after suffering artistic failure and a nervous breakdown. Ms. Seymour's daughter goes looking for remnants of her mother and puts on a farewell concert as a way to document her mother's life—thus providing a celebratory exit for the previously famed artist. The third and final piece, *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)*, premiered in April, 2009. The show is set in the distant future of spaceships, intergalactic beings, and the collapse of the earth's sun. It follows the existential dilemmas of Ruom Yes Noremac, a chronically depressed, often inebriated science fiction anti-hero who realizes that only by failing to save the earth can she succeed in saving the universe. This last show is unique in that its two acts are aesthetic opposites. Act One is a spectacular audio-visual journey into deep space, complete with a thirty-foot movie screen, explosions, astronaut suits, mid-air suspension, action-hero fight scenes, and highly fictionalized storytelling. Act Two is a scaled-back, intimate, non-fictionalized confessional that deconstructs—or at the very least personalizes—the *Accidental Trilogy*. Together the two Acts provide a glimpse of Hopkins' unique style: an over-the-top artistic brilliance and a warm, down-to-earth, comical yet conflicted personality.

After the success of *Accidental Nostalgia*, the collaborators formed a performing arts collective appropriately entitled Accinosco (Accidental Nostalgia Company). They incorporated as a nonprofit in 2007 and collaborated in each of the other shows. Hopkins also runs her own band, Gloria Deluxe, which was formed in 1999 and combines elements of folk, rock, blues, cabaret, and alternative country. The band has put out seven albums, three of which are *Trilogy* compilations. Hopkins' influences include Laurie Anderson, Spalding Gray, Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group, Miranda July, Robert LePage, Agnes Varda, David Byrne, Tom Waits, Leonard Cohen, Nina Simone, and many strands of folk and classical music traditions.

I first came across Hopkins' work a few years ago when two friends recommended Hopkins' show and soundtrack. I saw *Must Don't Whip 'Um* at the 2007 Philadelphia Fringe Festival. The convoluted narrative, musical complexity, live and mediated bodies, and jam-packed set design were seamlessly interwoven. I then saw *The Success of Failure* this past summer. The artistic spectacle and personal introspection were entertaining and emotionally moving. I soon realized that I wanted to meet Cynthia Hopkins in an attempt to better understand her aestheticism and overall worldview.

In a few weeks time we were sitting outdoors at Marlow and Sons restaurant in the burgeoning art neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We met over dinner and talked for almost two hours. Other than the first few minutes of nervous awkwardness, our conversation felt very natural and was stimulating, inspiring, and

Jason Del Gandio

entertaining. Hopkins was contemplative, willing and wanting to think about questions before jumping into answers. She also displayed her penchant for storytelling, preferring narrative anecdotes over linear conclusions.

Hopkins's work succeeds because it speaks to a variety of issues that many folks can relate to—for example, the personal and logistical difficulties of being a noncommercial artist, a past that always seems to haunt the present, a longing to simultaneously shed *and* accept one's skin, an intellectual love affair with the mysteries of human life, the necessity and difficulty of balancing hope and despair, and the desire to express one's unique beauty and grace in a world that can often be cold and distant. I also think that Hopkins' work is very honest, allowing others to reflect upon their own lives and struggles. As she sings in "Amnesia is a Myth," a track from *The Success of Failure*, "These stories aren't pretty/but I'm going to tell them anyway." We all have stories we want and need to tell, but we don't always have the courage or wherewithal to tell them. Those untold stories can then bedevil us, negatively impacting our lives, relationships, vocations, and everyday realities. Finding a way to free those stories can change those demons into existential guides, helping us to reroute future horizons. That's the beauty of Hopkins' work—she addresses these very *human* difficulties with wonderful aestheticism. This is a marker of great art, and what makes Cynthia Hopkins one of the most extraordinary performers of our time.

### **July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009 (Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY)**

Jason: I guess I would like to begin with some basic information and try to clarify some of the conflicting answers I found online. So, for instance, I believe you were born in 1972, and you are from Massachusetts, correct?

Cynthia: Yeah. I was born in 1972 in Fitchburg, Massachusetts and raised in Andover, Massachusetts. Both are up north, close to the New Hampshire border.

Jason: And both your parents were high school English teachers, right?

Cynthia: Well . . . not quite. They met when they were both high school English teachers. But then by the time I was born and raised, I guess from the age of 3 on, my father was still an English teacher, but for junior high kids. And my mother had stopped teaching. I think she was haunted actually because her mother had been a teacher and had been a really, really miserable person. My grandmother was a chronically anxious and depressed person and she never really recovered from that. She was actually senile, and she would always think she had to go teach a class. She would be in this constant panic thinking she had to teach . . . My theory is that my mother was on a quest to discover what she might want to really do with her life. In any case, she had stopped teaching, and she was working at a herbs and dried-flower shop making flower arrangements.

Jason: And both your parents were amateur musicians as well?

Cynthia: Yeah, they were both amateur musicians. They both played the piano. My father played the accordion and the fiddle. My mom played the guitar, and they both sang. My father listened constantly, and still listens constantly, to classical music . . . to operas and symphonies, and sometimes to folk music as well. My mother was into folk music as well. She had all these Nina Simone and Leonard Cohen records that I discovered after she died. And I'm a really big fan of both those singers. But they both listened to Harry Belafonte, and Odetta, and Peter, Paul and Mary, and Pete Seeger. But my dad mostly listened to operas more than anything else. And symphonies.

Jason: I believe you graduated from Brown University in 1995 and majored in American Studies?

Cynthia: I think the title of the major is still called "American Civilization," which is sort of a bizarre, idiosyncratic major at that school. I don't know if it has much equivalence at other schools. But I chose it because it allowed me to take classes in a lot of different departments. It requires you to take courses in the history department and in the literature department and in other departments, but then you have a focus within it, and my focus was in theater. So it allowed me to take certain theater classes that would count.

Jason: What about your band and performance collective? Gloria Deluxe was formed in 1999 and Accinosco in 2004?

Cynthia: Well, we didn't incorporate [Accinosco] as a non-profit until 2007. That was only two years ago, but we decided to form the collective in 2004. We basically decided to form an ensemble company after the first run of *Accidental Nostalgia*, which was the spring of 2004.

Jason: Well, let's move on to a more complex question: How would you describe yourself or your work to folks who have not seen you before? I have obviously seen some of your work. But for folks who have never seen you. . .

Cynthia: I would say . . . that I make epic folkloric narrative pieces . . . that tend to be convoluted narratives. They include elements of autobiographical truth, scientific truth, and outlandish fiction that are interwoven into a complex tapestry. I guess the short answer is that it is an innovative form of storytelling . . . of musical storytelling, I guess.

Jason: And then, along the same lines, how would you explain your trilogy to folks?

*Jason Del Gandio*

Cynthia: Strangely enough, I've never been asked that particular question.

Jason: Really?

Cynthia: No, I guess not. . .

Jason: Alright. Well, let's start off easier then. Do you see the trilogy as one large piece shown in three different pieces, or does it just happened to be a trilogy because they are related?

Cynthia: They are three pieces that can exist independently of one another. You can see one without seeing the others and you'll get a full experience. But I would love to be able to do them all within a few days so that people could see them. I think that there are certain elements of them that resonate more if you've seen more than one of the pieces. But they weren't originally conceived as a trilogy. The origin of the whole thing was that I was disturbed by my experience of amnesia. So I was interested in researching it, and basically all of my work arises out of some sort of disturbance, whether it is positive or negative.

Jason: Why?

Cynthia: It starts with something I want to investigate . . . something I'm driven to research or investigate, and so in this case it was amnesia. And I just started learning about it and, you know, writing songs around it and inventing a character. I basically invented a character in order to transmit the information that I was learning about. So I decided that this character was going to be a neurologist studying amnesia and the piece *Accidental Nostalgia* evolved out of that. But it became a trilogy because after that had happened for the first time [after the first run of *Accidental Nostalgia*], I fell into a really dark, deep depression.

Jason: Afterwards? After the show?

Cynthia: After it closed.

Jason: Can you explain?

Cynthia: Because I felt like I had discovered what I wanted to do with my life [be a full-time independent artist]. But I felt that it was not going to be logistically possible for me to continue doing it.

Jason: I can completely relate. Believe me.

*(We both laugh.)*

Cynthia: Well, I'm sure a lot of people can relate to that! In that abyss of despair I thought, well, if I can't do what I really want to do, which is to continue to create these kind of extravagant, multi-media productions, then I want to do something totally different with my life. And I want to quit being a performer. And then I thought, well, if I'm going to quit, then I should really have a farewell concert. Then in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep, I thought if I'm going to have a farewell concert then I should do it in the persona of Cameron Seymour who's a very minor character in *Accidental Nostalgia*.<sup>1</sup> All you know about her in that show is that she was a pop star from the 1970's who disappeared after a nervous breakdown in public during a farewell concert.

Jason: How ironic!

Cynthia: She retreated to Morocco, took a male pseudonym, and joined the Sufi Brotherhood. Her whole biography is actually based on a real life person who lived at the turn of the century named Isabelle Eberhardt who was a writer and wrote autobiographical material and also a couple of short stories and a novella. So I had done a bunch of research about her and wanted to make a show about her. She was just a figure in my mind . . . in my psyche who represents a kind of potential for self-transformation because she transforms herself from the outside-in.

Jason: That makes a lot of sense now in the context of the second show, *Must Don't Whip 'Um*.

Cynthia: Right. So in this pit of despair that I was in, I thought, oh, I should make a farewell concert that's *her* farewell concert, and using her as my vehicle. And then I thought, well, if I do that then it should really be a kind of sequel or prequel to *Accidental Nostalgia* . . . which became *Must Don't Whip 'Um*. But if I'm going to make a second piece then I have to make a third piece because . . .

Jason: . . . because it always comes in threes, right? Everything comes in threes?

Cynthia: Yes, everything comes in threes! I mean, the universe divides things up into threes. It's why we divide things up into threes. Trinity is birth, life, and death. Or there's initiation, action, resolution . . . or Act One, Act Two, Act Three.

---

<sup>1</sup> This may be confusing given that Cameron Seymour is the main character of *Accidental Nostalgia*. In brief, Henrietta Bill is the "actual" main character of the show. Henrietta learns that she was adopted and that Cameron Seymour—the 1970s pop-star—is her biological mother. Henrietta then adopts Cameron Seymour's identity in attempt to outrun the present and commune with the past.

Jason Del Gandio

*(I laugh and Cynthia laughs in response.)*

Cynthia: So, I didn't know at that time what the third piece might be. I didn't start thinking about it until after *Must Don't Whip 'Um* was already done. But yeah, *Must Don't Whip 'Um* evolved in a similar way. It came out of this disturbance of wanting to be and live as an artist but also having to come to peace with the marriage of art and commerce. So . . . Cameron Seymour is sort of based on [Arthur] Rimbaud who decided it wasn't possible for him to be an artist because for him to be an artist he felt like he had to completely give himself over to his art. And he didn't want to make that sacrifice.

Jason: Do you feel that you have made that sacrifice or can make that sacrifice or will make it?

Cynthia: *(She pauses as she contemplates the question.)* I guess I've come to see it a little bit differently. I guess I'm trying to learn to think in less melodramatic terms. I've also been lucky to have enough success with the first piece [*Accidental Nostalgia*] so that we were actually able to fundraise in a more successful way with *Must Don't Whip 'Um*. And then with this last piece it's becoming more possible to do what I really want to do and also survive. It *is* a continual struggle, but . . . at the moment . . . I actually feel like I'm in a really privileged position of being able to do what I do and make what I want to make. I'm *not* a commercial artist. I'm a non-profit artist, so I do have to do *a lot* of administration work.

Jason: In what sense? What do you mean? Do you mean grants?

Cynthia: Yes, we get grants . . . we're a non-profit . . . I do all the fundraising . . . and it's a lot of work. And there's definitely moments when I feel like, you know, people are starving and suffering in all these horrible ways in the world, and what is the point of my little melodrama?

Jason: But it *does* matter. Obviously art matters, right? Every civilization that has ever existed had art.

Cynthia: Yeah, we need it. And yeah . . . when I see works that really move and inspire me, then that question evaporates.

Jason: I struggle with the same or at least similar issues in my own way—wanting to speak and write outside of an institution on my own. But of course, how am I going to pay my bills? I mean, it's hard enough being an artist. If you're a thinker or intellectual, then it's even harder . . .

*(Cynthia chuckles.)*

Jason: So watching you, watching you do what you do, watching your performances . . . I see honesty in your work . . . a lot of integrity, and it inspires me to do exactly what you're doing. So then I say, well, I *can* do this . . . *I can find a way to do it.*

Cynthia: Yeah, definitely.

Jason: Do you ever think about the relationship between honesty and performance or honesty and art? I know this is a loaded question, but do you think honesty is necessary for good art? Or speaking in terms of your own experience, have you ever thought of yourself as being an honest artist or an honest performer?

Cynthia: Well, it's funny you say that because I guess the short answer is no . . . because I feel like what I do . . . or what I have done in the past and what I claim to be putting to rest in these last pieces . . . is to take the honest truth and transform it into something else. It's usually been an attempt at alchemizing . . . to alchemize the truth into something more magical—to uplift that truth and change it. But in another way, I do think that I, as an observer or audience member or reader, am drawn to work that has at its core some kind of honesty. For example, I love documentary films. And I think I've loved every documentary film I've ever seen. I even like the ones I don't think are well-crafted because there's nothing stranger than truth. There really isn't anything more fascinating than actual people and their actual lives.

Jason: Well, in terms of the honesty question, one of the ways I could read your shows is that you are being honest about your own journey. So, for instance, in *Success of Failure* you stand up and say that throughout your adult life you have continuously “weaved fiction from truth”. . . and that you've done that to mask all the issues you're supposed to be dealing with but aren't—to me, *that's* a moment of honesty. Maybe you have not been honest up to that point, but that recognition—*that moment*—is pretty honest. It's like saying, yeah, I've been lying to myself all these years, but no more. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but that's one of the ways I read your last show and I think it's very honest.

Cynthia: *The Success of Failure*, like you mentioned in your email, has two halves. They're totally polar opposites from one another. And so one of the things I was trying to do—because it's a third and final piece of a trilogy—was to unravel the structure of the other two pieces. It was kind of. . .

Jason: . . . like a deconstruction?

Cynthia: Yeah, like a deconstruction. I was trying to pry apart the truth from the fiction. I also thought it would be interesting to have an evening where there were two completely different ways of telling what is the same or a similar story. It was two



*Jason Del Gandio*

opposite ways of narrating my confrontation with my own mortality. But it didn't start that way. When I was originally working with the material I tried to interweave them in the similar ways that they are intricately woven in the other two pieces. But it didn't really work. I was tormented by it for a while, but I got to the point of accepting what the material was already informing me to do. It's just a process . . . for me, it's a long, slow process.

Jason: So, how long would it take for you to create one of these installments?

Cynthia: They've been about two years in the making.

Jason: Each one?

Cynthia: Yeah.

Jason: That's a long time and a lot of dedication.

Cynthia: It's like growing plants. There's no substitute for time. Things evolve over time . . . and for me . . . it's really an organic process.

Jason: I definitely get the sense that it's an organic process from the shows that I've seen, and I guess there are two questions going through my mind right now. One, do you use your artistic work as a form of self-therapy—as a way to workout your own issues? We all have personal issues, there's no doubt about that, and do you believe that art can help us with those issues? And then, secondly, what is it like working with your designers, Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg? I'm interested in that as well because the set designs are so amazing, but yet your stories seem so personal. So when you work with other people, is it something like, "Here's the idea; I have it, let's put it on stage and get it done?" Or is it, "Here are some general ideas," and then you and the others start to collaborate and come up with more ideas?

Cynthia: I guess I'll answer the first part first, which is that my ultimate, primary purpose in life is to become the best, most enlightened being I can become. And so the work that I make, the art, is just part of the machinery to do that. Actually, somebody once accused me years ago of using art and the making of art as therapy. And he meant it in an accusatory way.

Jason: In a negative way?

Cynthia: Yes, in a negative way. And at the time I was ashamed because I felt like there was some truth to what he was saying. But then years later I realized, well, that's only if you put a negative connotation on the word "therapy."

Jason: Which our society does do.

Cynthia: Right. . . that it's self-indulgent.

Jason: Well, I do think it can be indulgent, too. I've definitely seen pieces that were all about the person and that was it. There was nothing else to it. And I have to say I was not necessarily pleased by seeing those pieces.

Cynthia: Right, but in another way, if you think of therapy as a means of understanding yourself and your society better. . . [then it takes away that critique]. And that's what the purpose of art has always been . . . which is for us to workout the personal and the social and political demons, whatever those might be, and just to reflect and observe and try to evolve. I think it's just a matter of perspective in terms of whether that's a lofty goal or a small, personal goal . . . whether it's a gain in integrity or a loss of integrity.

Jason: In other words, is the art too self-centered or does it have some grander purpose to it? Does it extend beyond yourself? The same thing can be said about poetry. All good poetry is personal, but the best poetry is not just personal but extends to the "universal." It moves through the personal to the universal—that's why people read it. That's the difference between, say, poetry and a personal diary.

Cynthia: But I also believe that for me as an audience member, that it doesn't really matter what process it [the final product] was made through. Now, back to the second part of that question, I would say, again, that it's been a super organic process of making these works . . . So the work of Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg—what they contribute is completely integral to these pieces. So, for example, *Accidental Nostalgia* was originally my attempt to break away from the collaborative companies I was involved with and make something on my own. I thought it was going to be a one-person show, and it was just going to be me on stage by myself. I didn't intend to make a collaborative piece. But I hired Jim and Jeff. I had worked with Jeff before, so I knew I liked working with him and that I admired him as an artist. I had never worked with Jim, but I had seen a piece where he and Jeff worked together to make the architecture of the piece—the lighting and the set. I liked how integrated the world of that piece was and so I hired them to do that. Things started to click once we got into the room together. The script and songs already existed, but there was one rehearsal where Jim asked me all these questions . . . he was trying to assess what I was thinking about and why I was making this show. We didn't really know each other very well. His mind started firing and he was inspired to make a little miniature town, which is something he had always wanted to do. Once he made this little town then it became clear that he and Jeff should be over by the town operating the cameras while moving through the town. So then they were there in the room [i.e., on stage] as performers. I then created this dance and I wanted men to dance with me. I

Jason Del Gandio

don't really know why. But I asked them if they'd be willing to learn to dance and they said yes. So it really just sort of came about over time through the process of working in the room together. Then for the next two pieces, we knew from the beginning that we wanted them [Jim and Jeff] to be integrated [into the shows]. But it was a similar process where I would just come in with my material and we would just work side-by-side. The things we were doing would then start to inform one another. Although there's a lot of preliminary work that I do to create the foundation—like who the characters are—the world of these pieces is really a process that happens through the making.

Jason: So it's definitely a collaborative effort?

Cynthia: It's *definitely* a collaborative effort—very collaborative. Also involved in that collaboration are the musicians and my band Gloria Deluxe. There's also the director—DJ Mendel. He is actually going to take over Jim's role in *Accidental Nostalgia* when we go to Edinburgh (August, 2009) because Jim got another job.

Jason: So in terms of Accinosco, your arts collective, were you all friends first and then became collaborators or did it come about some other way?

Cynthia: I guess there's really not that much distinction between professional connections and friendships because a lot of people who came on board were brought in by Jim or Jeff. For instance, Tara Webb, who does costumes, is a friend of both those guys. She was a friend of Jeff's from college, and because of that they ended up working together on some shows.

Jason: What about your interest in theoretical astrophysics [that is part of *The Success of Failure*]?

(Cynthia laughs out loud.)

Jason: Is that something you were interested in and already reading and just happen to bring into your performance or was it, "I'm doing this performance, I want it to be sci-fi so I have to read up on it?"

Cynthia: I was already interested . . . and I had already done a bunch of reading like Stephen Hawking's books and Buckminster Fuller. I and Jeff, my husband and collaborator, are just generally interested in Buckminster Fuller. Well, I guess I should first talk about the way the third piece ended up taking shape. When we were finished with *Must Don't Whip 'Um* I talked to my father on the phone. He asked me if I was working on the next piece, and I said not yet. He asked if it was going to be about the future. I said I didn't know yet. He pointed out that the first piece was about the past. I thought that that was a good point. The seed was planted in my mind and then that

seed got watered by me. I started to ponder about the future, which was interesting for me to think about at that time. So I started to do more reading of astrophysics because I started to think, oh, maybe the next piece *should* be about the future; maybe I should try to understand how the universe evolved the way it did in order to try to figure out what's going to happen to it in the future—to think about it from a larger perspective of, say, science fiction and envision the future. I didn't actually read very much science fiction for it . . . I am more interested in reading science than science fiction. Although, we did watch a bunch of science fiction films. One of my favorite films is *Solyaris* (1972), the Tarkovsky film. It was remade as an American film with George Clooney (*Solaris*, 2002), which I've never seen. The original Russian film is amazing. And then we watched *Blade Runner* (1982) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). We watched all of these movies over again . . . and of course the *Star Wars* movies (1977, 1980, 1983) we watched again.

Jason: I hadn't thought about that . . . about the parallels between the sci-fi action hero of *Star Wars* and that of *Success of Failure*!

Cynthia: I set out to read a lot of science fiction but I just got more and more interested in reading science. Then I discovered this TV series from the '70s. I think it is called "Cosmos" with Carl Sagan (first broadcast in 1980). I became kind of obsessed with that. It's about the history of mankind's understanding of our place in the universe. So it's both about the actual science of physics and astrophysics, but it's also about the history of that science developing over time. It's really fascinating and he's amazing. So I started reading a bunch of his books. One thing led to another and then the plotline started to form around some of the pieces of information that I was acquiring . . . like the fact that our sun is middle-aged. We're sort of at this perfect moment in time when our planet is habitable, which is really a miracle in and of itself. That started to lead to the fragility of our lives. Then I was dealing with the other end of the spectrum in terms of my own life . . . and my father's dying . . . and my mother died when I was young.

Jason: It's all part of the process, right? There's no way to overcome that. It's *gonna* happen . . .

*(We both giggle.)*

Cynthia: Yeah.

Jason: Okay. So what about the physical aspects of the show? It seems to be very physically demanding. When they pulled you up and you started singing in mid-air above the stage, I was like, how the hell are they doing that!?! I thought maybe it was recorded. But then I realized that, no, she is actually singing. So let's talk about the physical aspects of the shows. They all seem pretty rigorous. For instance, singing

*Jason Del Gandio*

while laying down, singing and moving while suspended in the air, a good hour and forty-five minute show with no intermission, etc.

Cynthia: They *are* rigorous and they're really difficult. At some point during the rehearsal process I always start joking around about how I just want to make a show where I sit in a chair with a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and talk into a microphone like a Spalding Gray monologue, and I don't do anything.

*(We both laugh out loud.)*

Cynthia: It's not like I set out to make these shows that are going to be super demanding. For example, with the flying, I've always wanted to fly.

Jason: Who doesn't want to fly, right?

Cynthia: Right, who doesn't want to fly? And I also thought, well, it's a science fiction piece—we need to have flying. When it came to that element of the plotline, I thought, “She needs to be lifted up off the ground.” So it was just a combination of different factors zooming in at once. On the other hand, I do love a challenge. I think it was Richard Foreman . . . Do you know Richard Foreman? I think it was him . . . well, I could be totally wrong on this . . . Anyway, some dramatist that I read said that it should be just as difficult for a performer to walk on stage as it would be for that performer to walk on his hands. Because there should be that level of attentiveness and that much energy and intensity. And for me as an audience member, I like to see a really high level of attention. Not necessarily physical, but craft . . . an elevated level of awareness is inspiring to see. I also like to experience that as a performer.

Jason: So you do enjoy it?

Cynthia: I enjoy it immensely . . . because it elevates me to a heightened state of existence.

Jason: It transports you?

Cynthia: It transports me; it's a transformation. I actually experience a lot of stage fright. It's not as bad as it used to be—I used to be *terrified* of going on that stage.

*(I chuckle under my breath.)*

Cynthia: I still sometimes get uncomfortably apprehensive, and in those moments I'll wonder why I do this. It's so difficult and so painful. But I have to remind myself that when I'm on stage and performing it's like total bliss. It's the best; it's my favorite thing to do in this lifetime.

Jason: Hence, being an artist. There is something about the *aesthetic moment* that is unlike the everyday life. It's transformative. It's addictive. It's like a drug.

Cynthia: It's a religious experience or a spiritual experience.

Jason: Can you see that "moment" in other performers when you're watching them? So, for instance, when you are watching a good performer, will you think that, oh yeah, he or she is *there*? They got *there*. . .the ultimate moment? Can you recognize that?

Cynthia: Yeah, I feel like I can. It may not be that it is necessarily happening, but I am electrified when I feel like it's happening. One of my favorite performers is Kate Valk from the Wooster Group. She always has that quality when she's on stage, which is a very heightened level of energy. I think that's why sports are so exciting to watch, too, because everybody is really paying attention to what they are doing at that moment. They're not thinking about anything else . . . they're not distracted . . . they're not worrying about paying bills or anything like that.

Jason: Right. Everything else fades away.

Cynthia: Right.

Jason: Was there a first time you experienced that, where you thought, wow, this is what it's all about? Or was it simply part of your life growing up? I ask that because I know you grew up with the arts.

Cynthia: I did. I remember going to see a children's summer theater up in New Hampshire where my father's parents lived. We would go up there and see shows. And one summer when I was *very* little I had poison ivy all over my face. My whole face was swollen; it was hot and it was just maddeningly maddening. I was miserable. The only relief was for me to sit in front of fans that were constantly blowing on my face. And my parents wanted to take me to see a musical production based on the book *Harriet the Spy* (Louise Fitzhugh, 1964). I kicked and screamed and cried and said that I didn't want to go because my face was hurting so badly. But my parents insisted that I go to the production. We brought ice packs for me to hold and put on my face so that I could kill or numb that itching for that period of time. And it was a transformative experience because the little girl playing Harriet was an incredible performer, and I got completely transported by this story of the show. I totally forgot about my physical discomfort—it completely disappeared, and I decided that's what I wanted to do with my life. I was so uplifted by it and it was so magical. But the first time I experienced it as a performer was probably the first time I performed.

Jason Del Gandio

Jason: Well, that will do it.

Cynthia: Yeah, that'll do it.

Jason: So shifting gears, I am also really curious about your politics. When I've seen your shows, there seems to be an implicit political critique—it's in the background somewhere. I don't read the shows as being overtly political. But in *The Success of Failure* you refer to the "oil wars that extinguished the human race." I read that as a commentary on what's happening *now* in our actual present day world, especially under the Bush Administration. And even in *Must Don't Whip 'Um*, with the song "Come On," there is the line "If you ain't singing it's your own damn fault." I read that as a political critique or a social critique—if you're not living the life you want to live, well, it's your own damn fault. That's especially the case with our society that is filled with so much consumerism, commercialism, and conformity. Do you see the connections I am making there?

Cynthia: I do.

Jason: That is not to say that those are *your* connections.

Cynthia: For me, it's not such a logical equation. It's more like the ingredients that end up being part of these pieces are whatever elements happen to be in my psyche. Some of those are absolutely reactions to the specific moment we're in politically and culturally. But some of them are personal. So when I wrote the lyric, "If you ain't singing it's your own damn fault," I had a feeling partially aimed at myself. I was trying to encourage myself not to give up. For me to fall into despair . . . I would be the one to blame. But definitely, the Bush years were just horrifying. I don't know that there has ever been that irresponsible of a leader in this country.

Jason: Well, you're not alone in that sentiment!

Cynthia: No, thank god! For a while there it felt like there weren't very many of us, but then gradually the truth came out. But actually, *Must Don't Whip 'Um* was partially fueled by my personal angst of whether or not I was going to continue doing what I was doing. But it wasn't that long after 9/11, and I wanted to understand how such an event could happen. Where was the Secret Service? How were their energies being diverted? So I did a lot of research on that, and I read this book called *Ghost Wars* (Steve Coll, 2004). It's about how the Mujahedin were armed by the C.I.A. to get the communists out of Afghanistan. So there are many elements and moments in that show that are direct responses to the research I was doing and to the moment we were in. There was another book written by someone who was in the Secret Service when Bush first came into office and, indeed, as soon as 9/11 happened the whole mechanism of intelligence was turned around—toward Iraq and trying to find a way

to go there. That's a travesty. So I am not making overt political work, but part of my consciousness is part of what is happening in the world today. And for *The Success of Failure*, I was also reading a lot of Carl Sagan and also Hawking. These people understand the kind of miracle it is that we are even here. So Carl Sagan was very much opposed to nuclear weapons being in existence, and I was reading a lot of his work. Hawking mentions this, too, that there is a really strong possibility that we will blow ourselves up. If you look at the state of the world, it's crazy.

Jason: Yeah, it's definitely crazy.

Cynthia: Eventually, we do need to get off the planet . . . if we live long enough . . . if we survive long enough.

Jason: I guess you can be the action hero if that happens, right?!?

Cynthia: Yeah, I hope so. (*Laughing.*)

Jason: Okay . . . and so you're doing a show next year, right?

Cynthia: Oh yeah. *The Truth: A One Woman Greek Tragedy*.

Jason: Will that be similar to what we've seen, or is it different, or is it related at all?

Cynthia: It is somewhat related just because it is coming from me. So, for example, I can tell you what I know about it right now. One of my intentions is to make a pretty drastic break from the trilogy pieces partly just to challenge myself. When I started making those pieces it was a big challenge for me to make these massive multi-media extravaganzas. But now that I've made three of those in a row, I feel like the bigger challenge for me is going to make something that doesn't have any kind of architecture at all in terms of the set—a bare set. Also, I am really burnt out and exhausted from having to transport enormous amounts of equipment and props. Although, friends of mine who also make work laugh at me when I say that. We'll see what happens. Certain rules that I make wind up informing everything else. For *The Success of Failure*, I started with the premise that it was going to be about the future—that it was going to take place in the future. And for a long time, that's all I knew. So for this next piece—and that doesn't mean that it won't change—it's an empty landscape. And then I am trying to stick to my pronouncement at the end of *The Success of Failure*. It's not that I'm not going to use autobiographical truth or fiction. But I am trying to *not* alchemize one into the other. There are a few elements of the piece, but I'm not sure yet if they will be separate or interwoven together. One is that I am trying to make a documentary about my father and his dying process. And the other, which is the initial impetus or disturbance for the piece, is my love/hate relationship with Greek drama.



*Jason Del Gandio*

Jason: So Greek drama is that traumatizing for you?

Cynthia: It's not traumatizing, but I have a *really* visceral reaction to it. I have two totally opposite but equally visceral reactions to it, and that's why it's interesting to me. Just the basic structural elements of Greek drama are appealing to me.

Jason: In what way?

Cynthia: So there's this form of performance that tends to be very philosophical, it's wildly dramatic, most of the action happens off stage and is reported by messengers who come on and say, "This just happened." Then there are blind people who can see the future, and there are oracles and questions about fate and whether or not fate is guiding people or whether it can be thwarted. And then there is a chorus that comments on the action, but they're not really involved or they are just observing and reflecting on things, and they sing and sometimes dance. I would say that all of that sounds amazing! But when I actually read these kinds of plays, I *hate* them. And this has become a disturbance because I have been asked to perform in or write music for Greek dramas almost every year of my adult life . . . When I say "disturbance" I mean something I cannot figure out. I borrowed that notion from a storytelling workshop I took with Mike Daisey. He is an autobiographical storyteller who I really respect. He has a list of rules that he uses to make a performance about a particular subject. One of those rules is that it has to be "broken." What he means is that it can't be something he totally understands—there has to be something that is disconcerting or something he hasn't yet figured out about it. Part of the reason for storytelling is to figure out something that is unsettled. That's what I mean by disturbance. It's not necessarily traumatic, but something I can't figure out. So with Greek drama, I have these really strong reactions that I don't really understand. I feel like it disturbs me for the same reason my brother gets on my nerves—because he reminds me of myself and things I don't like about myself. So I'm researching Greek drama and then I'm also researching the history of alcoholics anonymous because I'm fascinated with it as a society and how it has evolved.

Jason: Can you explain how those relate?

Cynthia: Originally I thought maybe it will be in a Greek dramatic form that tells the story of perhaps a fictionalized society. But then I don't even know if that will be a part of it. If it is, then maybe it will be the actual truth—the actual truth of that story *and* the actual truth of my father. I don't really know. But then meanwhile there is also a character that is evolving. I don't really understand who she is yet. She might be a dragon lady with an outfit, and she has a spirit. It will also have a heavy physical element. I am working with this choreographer Faye Driscoll who I like a lot. She has done some choreography for Young Jean Lee, a Korean-American playwright and

director. I really like Faye's work. It's super energetic and uplifting. So the show will be some combination of all that. It will be a departure . . . a departure from the trilogy.<sup>2</sup>

Jason: Wow. All of that sounds very interesting. Well, my last question is about self-reflection. I've heard you say in other interviews that one of your goals as a performer is to get people to question things they normally don't question. So, if you could get people to ask themselves one question—any question whatsoever—what would it be?

Cynthia: (*She takes a very long contemplative pause before responding.*) I guess that question would be: What am I doing with my life?

Jason: Sounds good to me! But why do you think that everyone—the grand *everyone*—should ask themselves that question?

Cynthia: I guess because I feel like I was given a gift at an early age. It was not entirely obvious at the time, but watching my mother suffer and die when I was so young made me realize that life really is a precious gift. I watched her try to figure out how she could live the most fulfilling life she could. She knew she did not have long to live, and she felt that was truly a gift. Although I was really crushed by the experience, I also feel like it was a big lesson for me. So I guess I want to give that awareness to others in some kind of evangelical way. If I could give that . . . if I could give one thing to people, that would be it. But of course there are times that I feel like what I do is frivolous.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia has since updated her description of the show, which she communicated to me via email. "The show is now entitled *The Truth: A Tragedy* and has been commissioned by Les Substances in Lyons, France (premiere scheduled for March 2010) and Soho Rep in NYC (premiere scheduled for May 2010). As of now, the show is conceived as a live black comedy documentary—loosely based on structural elements adapted from classical Greek drama—which chronicles my father's decline and fall from Parkinson's Disease. The structure is more akin to a cabinet of curiosities or dime museum (of the nascent, hybrid variety) than a traditional theater performance piece. The audience will move through a kind of gallery of 'objects,' including detritus culled from multiple relocations of my ailing father (from a house to an apartment to an assisted living facility to a nursing home); video footage of myself and my brother executing these moves; additional video footage of my father's morning exercise routine at the assisted living facility; live athletic dances based on this exercise routine; live performances of artfully wrought songs based on my father's favorite pieces of music (Verdi's Requiem and Mahler's 2nd Symphony); a turntable playing vinyl records of these pieces of music; a collection of Tennyson's poems opening with the poem 'Ulysses,' which is quoted multiple times by my father during video footage of him; and live semi-improvised stories of my struggle to reclaim faith in the face of adversity. The idea is to allow each audience member the freedom to navigate a serpentine narrative of his or her own, engendering a unique form of communication between myself and my audience that will simultaneously provoke emotion, stimulate the senses, and enliven the mind."

*Jason Del Gandio*

Jason: So why do you do what you do?

Cynthia: There are lots of reasons, but I guess I do it to get certain responses from people. I find it very fulfilling when people who see the show tell me they have been inspired to change their lives in ways they never thought possible. Or to create their own work. Or that they never had the courage to do that before. That for me is gratification, and it is a justification for what I am doing.

Jason: What about some of the possible negative consequences of using a word like “evangelicalism?”

Cynthia: It’s a positive spin. Say someone found this great thing, and they want to pass it on to other people. So that’s the sense that I meant it in—sharing with other people what you have learned.

Jason: Anything else you would like to add? Anything we haven’t discussed?

Cynthia: Well, just one thing in reference to the questions you emailed me about what advice I might give to young artists or independent artists. Before I set out to make *Accidental Nostalgia* I was working as a performer with all these companies and was working as a waitress trying to survive. Then a venue in Providence, Rhode Island where I went to school called me about a residency program they had just started. They asked if I would be interested in applying, and I said yeah, sure. I had been thinking about a possible show about amnesia, and so it seemed to make sense. I filled out an application and I got accepted. But I was really terrified to go and seriously considered not going. If I went then I would have to sacrifice the stability of working with this company.

Jason: Was that company in New York?

Cynthia: Yeah, here in New York. It was a job, it was income, and I had been frustrated for so long wanting to make my own work, but I was terrified to try and do it. I didn’t know if I could do it. So it was sacrificing something known and frustrating for something totally unknown and terrifying. My friends actually had to talk me into it and convince me. But it turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made in my life. I guess what I want to say is: *you can do it*. I think there are too many people who are silenced by fear, and that’s a tragic loss for the world. I actually heard Laurie Anderson answer a similar question during a Q&A session. It was her version of “just do it.” She said to write a letter saying that you have a European tour and send it to fifty presenters. It doesn’t matter that you don’t have a European tour or that maybe you don’t even have a show. Just say that you do, and then maybe *one person* will write back and offer you a show. You then go do a show in Europe. You don’t have to hire

anyone; just do everything yourself. She was basically saying to remove the obstacles. Remove the obstacles that are barring you from finding your own voice.

Jason: I totally agree, and I have actually been theorizing and writing about the idea that we create our own realities. That's basically what you're saying, right? Find a way to create the reality you desire?

Cynthia: Oh, yeah—we absolutely create our own realities. Absolutely.

## References

- Accinosco. Accessed September 1, 2009. <<http://accinosco.com>>
- Arts Presenters. "Cynthia Hopkins (Interview)." *The Kadmus Arts Blog*. Podcast. July 7, 2008. Accessed September 1, 2009. <<http://kadmusarts.com/blog/?p=592>>
- Colleary, Eric. "Must Don' Whip 'Um (Review)." *Theater Journal*. 59.3 (2007): 513-515.
- Gloria Deluxe. Accessed September 1, 2009. <<http://gloriadeluxe.com>>
- Hopkins, Cynthia. "New Story." In *Amplified: Fiction from Leading Alt-Country, Indy Rock, Blues and Folk Musicians*. New York: Melville House, 2009. 71-81.
- Hopkins, Cynthia, with Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg. "Accidental Nostalgia." 3 (2007): 263-322. *Play: A Journal of Plays*
- Isherwood, Charles. "Phasers Aimed at Life's Truths (Review of 'The Success of Failure')." *New York Times*. May 27, 2009. Accessed September 1, 2009. <[www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/theater/reviews/27succ.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/theater/reviews/27succ.html)>
- Plant Earth: Dreams*. Dir. D.J. Mendel. Screenplay by Richard Foreman. Perf. Cynthia Hopkins. Start Here Films, 2004. Accessed September 1, 2009. <[www.startherefilms.com/planetearthdreams.html](http://www.startherefilms.com/planetearthdreams.html)>
- Rodriguez, Bill. "Past Experience: Cynthia Hopkin's Meditations on Memory." *The Providence Phoenix*. April 5-11, 2002. Accessed September 1, 2009. <[www.providencephoenix.com/archive/theater/02/04/04/hopkins.html](http://www.providencephoenix.com/archive/theater/02/04/04/hopkins.html)>
- Thorn, Jesse. "Podcast: Cynthia Hopkins (Interview)." *The Sound of Young America*. Podcast. September 5, 2007. Accessed September 1, 2009. <[www.maximumfun.org/blog/2007/09/podcast-cynthia-hopkins.html](http://www.maximumfun.org/blog/2007/09/podcast-cynthia-hopkins.html)>



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, U.S.A.*