

Tempting the Sacred: Happy Accidents and the Unpredictability of the Moment

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ENTERING. TEMPTING.

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

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

To commemorate its fiftieth anniversary, the Theatre Communications Group produced a series of brief YouTube video testimonials – entitled “I Am Theatre” – championing the diverse group of individuals who create, support, and engage in and with performance. In a recent entry, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz describes writing as a spiritual endeavor in which the characters he creates “lead [him] on a journey,” a journey in which he allows himself to “be taken – *and be surprised*,” he says with singular inflection, “by their journey and the world they live in. You sort of make a connection,” he continues searchingly, “with another dimension that is not terrestrial at all ... The best way to describe it is like a little miracle.”¹ Cruz is, of course, speaking of character in terms of the creatures that populate dramatic literature and in whom, at their most luminescent, the deepest parts of ourselves are revealed. Yet, for our purposes I suggest we render ‘character’ with more breadth, with more expansiveness than that. Etymologically speaking, character derives from the Greek word *kharakter*, meaning a tool for stamping or engraving. The recognition of this origin endows ‘character’ anew with its ancient sense as a distinctive mark, a distinct *impression*. What happens, then, if we allow these impressions to run rampant, as Cruz does? What happens if we allow them to transport us by piercing the wealth of our intuition and therefore exploding the density of the possibilities of performance, and, in turn, the performance of possibilities? And what happens, then, when we open ourselves up to the surprises, accidents, and unpredictabilities that render the performance-making process so wonder-full? What happens when we embrace these ‘happy accidents,’ the seemingly miraculous moments when a particular

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¹ I AM THEATRE, “Nilo Cruz,” YouTube.com, YouTube video, 1:42, http://youtu.be/5B_HY0EixrE (accessed November 30, 2011).

occurrence or happening is not at all what we desire or anticipate but is in fact a richer, far more fulfilling experience than we might ever have imagined? Director Anne Bogart, remembering Freud's speculation that there is no such thing as an accident, believes we *should* celebrate the unexpected because it contains an energy that allows us to look at the elements we are working with in an entirely new way.² Can the acceptance of the generous gesture of the accidental write (right?) us into a more empathetic, a more compassionate conception of the world?

The cover of Bogart's *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* depicts a young man engaged in a difficult high dive maneuver, immediately beckoning the reader to 'take the plunge' into Bogart's elegant and provocative sea of theorizing of and about performance as civic engagement. Once the reader has taken the dive, she is met with Bogart's belief that, to begin, we must *try*: "In the *trying*," she says, "we attempt a miracle."³ Later, Bogart admits that she prefers the word 'tempt' over 'attempt,' as the former term embodies risk and daring. "A risk is a leap in the dark," she says, "a jump off a high diving board ... With no risk or leap, the available energy deflates rather than multiplies. It takes energy and courage ... to tempt a miracle. When our intention is 'to try,' we are required to awaken sleeping parts of ourselves and to tempt in more extremes."⁴ Let us enter the dark; we are in this together. Though a safe space is not necessarily a comfortable one, we can allow our energies to multiply and our courage to fortify in traversing the difficult terrain of the frightening and exhilarating uncharted territory that lay before us.

Imagine you are standing on the edge of that high diving board, your toes curled around the sides, made white from the tightness of their grip. Forgive me a moment's impropriety as I push you over the edge.

The exercise has already begun ...

SACRED ENERGIES. SACRED ACCIDENTS.

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

- Virginie Magnat, "Theatricality from the Performative Perspective"

My own peculiar acceptance of the accidental crystallized around my revisionist production of John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* at the University of Missouri. *Agnes* is a

² Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 48, 131-2.

³ Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

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haunting tale of mystery and miracles surrounding a young Catholic nun accused of murdering her own child. As director, I sought a corporeal method of performance-making, a profoundly unsettling process we called the “theatreing of the sacred,”⁵ a phrase appropriated from Ralph Yarrow’s *Sacred Theatre*. Yarrow’s focus is not on sacred drama – “dramatic texts within or on the edges of a doctrinally prescribed definition of what the sacred is” – but rather

to see what, in the event-structure called theatre, may generate or open up to something which isn’t definable within conventional categories, maybe not within any kind of category; moments when you fall through the interstices of categories and into a kind of amazement. Sacred theatre may be searching for the generators or equivalents of the condition of being ‘beyond’, ‘between’, ‘outside’ or ‘before’.⁶

With his “may”s and “maybe”s, Yarrow signaled to me not only a sense of the sacred as an opening to the accidents that occur when treading along the cracks of the unknown, but he also signaled a praxis of conjuration that requires painstaking application. Rather than enduring inherently somewhere out in the yonder and waiting for our contact, we must work for the accident.

In the *Agnes* process, physically rigorous performance-making functioned as a fecund site for such diligence, as I sought to cultivate an *extra*-ordinary ensemble that would transcend the habitual and the mundane. The theatreing of the sacred, as my collaborators and I came to understand it, is the radical and revitalizing practice of the conjuration of extra-ordinary energies that lead to new ways of perceiving self and world. And inasmuch as sacred praxes materialize such energies, they render these ordinarily imperceptible energies palpable; that is: *through the body* the invisible is made visible. Eugenio Barba writes, “for the performer, energy is a *how*. Not a *what* ... *How* to make her/his own physical presence visible and *how* to transform it into scenic presence, and thus expression. *How* to make the invisible visible...”⁷ And it is *via the body* – “a denser, brighter and more incandescent body than the bodies we possess” in everyday life – that we “make incursions into zones of the world that [seem] out of [our] reach.”⁸ Therefore, I employed my own idiosyncratic interpretation of Anne Bogart’s method of Composition as our sacred praxis of performance-making.⁹

⁵ Ralph Yarrow, “What is the Sacred?,” in *Sacred Theatre*, ed. Ralph Yarrow (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, trans. Richard Fowler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

⁸ Eugenio Barba, quoted in Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 20.

⁹ Bogart’s work with Composition derived from her time spent as an undergraduate student of choreographer, dancer, and director Aileen Passloff at Bard College. For further information, see Scott T. Cummings, *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125-29.

GETTING READY. BEING SURPRISED.

What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and invisible?

- Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

Preparing for performance is a joyous but often disorienting experience. As a director who engages in significant research in the time preceding the charged experience with actresses, I plow insatiably through all manner of materials: one thing leading me to another, and another and another until my walls are peppered with post-it notes and my desk nearly buckles under piles of books, papers, and images; until my brain overflows with details both intimate and fragmented and my heart throbs with emotions disorienting but welcomed, welcomed because I understand that in order to be truly touched, I “have to be willing not to know what the touch is going to feel like.”¹⁰

In actuality, my best ideas come when I am doing anything but thinking about the work at hand. Therefore my work space is continuously littered with piles of recklessly-organized and hopelessly mismatched scraps of paper, each bearing a hastily written and supposedly brilliant idea. Yet I relish the time spent coaxing and cajoling the thoughts in my head into workable, tangible form. Molding, forming, making, forging: that is what I do. This seduction of the pulse of my intuition into concrete, corporeal form is central to the theatreing of the sacred: as an *entrée* into “a dimension of experience of intelligence and feeling beyond the limitations of normal activity,” the act of embodying “becomes the window out of which we fly.”¹¹ In the case of *Agnes of God*, there was one crucial activity that laid the groundwork for all that was to follow, the domino that set off the long, circuitous and not wholly visible series of events culminating in the somatic explosion of performance.

Late one night, months and months before rehearsals were to begin, I was poking around on YouTube.com. Without much forethought, I searched “Agnes of God.” Most of the results were clips from the Academy Award-nominated film starring Jane Fonda, along with a few live recordings of unintentionally amusing amateur high school productions of the play. However, about half-way down the page was – and still is, at this writing – a curious inclusion: a happy accident. It is a brief recording of actress Teresa Ruiz rehearsing the title role in a 2004 production produced by the Promenade Playhouse and Conservatory in Santa Monica, California.¹² The particular scene captured on the almost six-minute video is Agnes’s first hypnosis session, a powerful and charged scene played between Doctor and Agnes. In the video, the

¹⁰ Bogart, *Director Prepares*, 70.

¹¹ Yarrow, “Overture,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 17, 18.

¹² Promenadeplayhouse, “*Agnes of God*,” YouTube.com, YouTube video, 5:44, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtbV7x59h_E (accessed April 16, 2008).

camera focuses squarely on Ms. Ruiz, with the unnamed actress playing Doctor off-camera. Ruiz is not wearing a habit, as one might expect, but a white, flowing peasant dress held up by thin straps gently caressing the curvature of her shoulders. Her long black hair hangs casually about, sticking to her face in places by the tears she is crying. She sits on the floor, her legs angled to the side, her dress pooled around her exposed flesh. Blanketed in white, she glows in the black rehearsal space. Mirroring the depth of Doctor's interrogation, the camera, at first set in wide shot, closes in on Ruiz by degrees until only her face is in view. She adopts a detached, trance-like delivery in her responses to Doctor's relentless questioning. Ruiz is, in effect, naked in the video: raw emotion and bare skin reveal a vulnerability that chilled me to the bone; in communicating the incommunicable, Ruiz exposed for me the spiritual essence driving the play. Her bare performance renders not an eating, sleeping, living, breathing Agnes but rather operates as a jump through that psychologically-based being, engendering a visioning of Agnes's deep, poetic significance.

My late-night viewing was a fluke, an accident born of impulse. But Ruiz's virtuosity planted a seed; Ruiz's performance worked at my psyche until literally waking me up in the middle of the night with a revelation, a conversion experience of great impact: *What if I Composed Agnes as a kind of sacred performance?* But, significantly, I would not have this epiphany until the instance of yet another happy accident: my discovery of Yarrow's *Sacred Theatre*, which found *me* by crashing to the library floor when I reached up to a too-high shelf to retrieve some other tome. It was only after reading *Sacred Theatre* that my ruminations on Ruiz's performance began to take tangible shape. As Peter Brook puts it, "When I begin to work on a play, I start with a deep, formless hunch, which is a smell, a color, a shadow ... It's my conviction that this play must be done today, and without conviction I can't do it."¹³ My dreamy premonition became *my* conviction: it showed me that a more conventional handling of *Agnes* would not be acceptable, that the performance needn't shroud itself in nun's habits and be burdened with quotidian movement and sentimental delivery to be effective. My accidental discovery of Ruiz's performance and Yarrow's text led me to the conception of a whole process of sacred theatre-making and accident-welcoming, a process of "entering a dramatic text [that] exceeds the text, adding, as we shall we, the presence of a new life that the text does not exhaust."¹⁴

COMPOSING. EXPOSING.

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

- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

¹³ Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 3.

¹⁴ William S. Haney II, "Between the Opposites: Gender Games," in *Sacred Theatre*, 95.

Composition – the same technique choreographers, painters, writers, orators, composers, and filmmakers use in their respective disciplines – is a process of “*writing on your feet*, with others, in space and time, using the language of theater”; it is a method for “revealing to ourselves our hidden thoughts and feelings about the material.”¹⁵ In my own practice and teaching, the Composition method encourages expressive (or abstract) movement, rather than descriptive (or behavioral) movement, and functions as a non-hierarchical practice of working from impulse and intuition that encourages collaboration and physical intelligence, situating the body as a living, moving sculpture.¹⁶ What occurs in performance is the tangible evocation and articulation of the – yes – accidental discoveries made during the rehearsal process. The Composition process is an evocative one, as there is no telling to what degree the actress might expose herself.

To begin, the actress divides her script into units and then abstracts the text by assigning each unit a label, a metaphorically descriptive phrase based on the essence of a particular unit: “The Interrogation,” or “The Voice of the Goddess,” for example. Then, *based on her labels* and without any further consideration for the text whatsoever, the actress works individually to develop what we call the physical score. She is charged with creating at least five expressive actions for each labeled unit, and the overall score of each particular scene – or group of units – must include a series of compositional ingredients. In the *Agnes* process, such ingredients included fifteen seconds of stillness, three uses of sound, three changes of level, a sequence of extreme contrast, a sustain moment of looking at another character, one repeated gesture (five times), sound from an unexpected source, the revelation of an object, three changes of direction, one miracle, and one transformation; each element is interpreted as each individual actress sees fit. The actress is coached to avoid thinking about her lines while developing the movement score; she is reminded that the text itself should not determine physical discovery. Within this manner of working, movement and text are not mapped onto one another. Rather, the physical score and the spoken text exist as separate layers: the actress’s instinctual movement excavates and communicates the

¹⁵ Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 12.

¹⁶ Composition was taught to me by Maria Porter, Professor of Theatre at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University. Maria’s personal method of Composition is influenced heavily by the work of Grotowski pupil Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark, a company preoccupied with psychophysical actor training methods and deeply influenced by traditional Eastern forms of dance and drama. There Maria met Argentinian director Cristina Castrillo, and has worked with her extensively over the last ten years at Teatro delle Radici in Lugano, Switzerland, a company dedicated to research in actor training that places the actor at the center of the creative process. Maria has said that the Composition method I was taught comes from a process used extensively at the Odin and by Castrillo, and, in the end, is the manifestation of a marriage of disciplines (Bogart, Odin, Castrillo) within Maria’s personal aesthetic. Thus, *my* teaching of Composition is yet another permutation of the form, owing to my experiences with Maria and my individual study of Bogart’s methods.

essence – or fundamental significance – of the written text. This privileging of movement is fortified with the conviction that the actress could enact her score silently and those witnessing the act would receive the same, if not, perhaps, a more vital experience than if she were merely speaking and moving in a more quotidian manner. For *Agnes*, the physical score for each particular scene was first worked silently and then, without much fanfare, the text was added, and not much more was – dare I say – *said* about it. After the actresses work in isolation, they come together with their scene partner(s) to tango – as we call it – their individually created movement scores in an holistic effort to craft and shape – with the director’s guidance – a comprehensive scene score. Composition demands actresses work as much as possible on their feet, creating as they go rather than predetermining the work beforehand. In this way, Composition thrusts the actress into ecstatic state, a kind of “Exquisite Pressure,” in Bogart’s conception, in which a lot of work is done in little time: “When we are not given the time to think or talk too much,” says Bogart, “wonderful work emerges; what surfaces does not come from analysis or ideas, but from our impulses, our dreams, our emotions ... forces lean on the participants in a way that enables more, not less creativity,” ultimately asking “someone to unveil herself/himself as an artist, to stand behind what s/he makes, and to learn from what s/he and others see.”¹⁷

Such work emphasizes the importance of visual composition and allows the director to function as a painter with bodies in time and space on a three-dimensional canvas. Composition disallows directors to treat actresses as pawns on a chess board, compelling a process in which each member of the ensemble has equal input in and responsibility to the work and its inevitable outcome. And so the *Agnes* actresses pushed me, as director, “to be better, to be more in the moment, to be more awake, to be more responsible for the choices I’m making,” allowing “me to see from an angle I’ve never looked at before ... to experience life from an angle I’ve never look at before.”¹⁸ I always come to the first rehearsal with a strong, thoroughly-crafted vision for the production. Yet my vision is not an immutable one; rehearsals are not about forcing things to happen. Precursory preparations are, of course, absolutely necessary to be able to enter a process fully: physical and intellectual research remains in the muscle memory, and enables us performance-makers to act on instinct because we trust those intuitive choices are based on something real. But rehearsal is a *process*, after all, and once entered – and *embodied* – there is no telling where the body will take you. Rather, the process of rehearsal is the active “process of subtracting, of taking away whatever is in the way of seeing and hearing ... clearly and feeling the heart of

¹⁷ Bogart and Landau, *Vienpoints Book*, 140.

¹⁸ Anne Bogart, quoted in *Voices of the American Theatre: Preserving the Legacy Volume Three*, DVD, Theatre Communications Group Oral History Project, produced by The Ford Foundation, The Allen Foundation for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2003).

the issue that the play is animating. A key ingredient in any rehearsal process is, precisely, to not know the answers in advance.”¹⁹

LOGIC. FAITH.

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

- Mother Superior, in John Pielmeier’s *Agnes of God*

There is something you should know: *Agnes of God* was not my first choice, the text itself another happy accident.

I proposed to the MU Department of Theatre two plays: Michel Tremblay’s *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* as my primary interest, and, of course, *Agnes of God* as a sort of back-up plan, my desire to direct overriding my principles regarding script choice. Michel Tremblay is one of Canada’s leading – and most controversial – living playwrights. *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* explores explicitly the relationship between religion and sex: the play unravels as its two characters engage in separate but parallel monologues on religion and sex. Manon, the spinster, seeks religious ecstasy through mystical union; Sandra, the transvestite, seeks sexual ecstasy through physical union. But this was apparently too controversial and too obscure – and so too *risky* – a play to produce. And so I was granted *Agnes*, which, on paper, is clearly the safer of my two propositions.

Indeed, *Agnes* was full of surprise in becoming a vehicle for the process of theatreing the sacred. *Agnes* is, at its heart, a meditation on the nature of miracles that unravels as a debate of logic versus faith regarding the identity of the father – and the murder – of Agnes’s child. Accidents, surprises, and miracles make an admittedly odd triptych, but these occurrences coalesced and cooperated in our sacred and rather physical rendering of *Agnes*. The term ‘accident’ bears notions of the tragic and catastrophic, and indeed accidents in Composed performance can seem calamitous for being so unsettling and, yes, surprising. ‘Surprise’ – harboring a more positive connotation in the sense of the unexpected – can be taken to mean that which one has *not* worked for, although as this essay suggests a surprise in performance must be *earned*. The idea of the miraculous, with its supernatural connotation, may seem like not much more than a impotent hope that relieves a performer of her agency. Yet, faith requires action; miracles are evoked. Accident *are* surprises and, as our *Agnes* experience shows, can also be miracles. A miracle – as an inexplicable phenomenon of wonder – problematizes the very notion of the accident in performance: can every

¹⁹ Anne Bogart, “When Does Art Begin?,” Anne’s Blog, entry posted September 1, 2009, <http://siti.groupsite.com/post/september-1-2009-when-does-art-begin> (accessed September 1, 2009).

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moment be chartered after the fact, or are certain happenings beyond explanation and simply ‘meant to be’?

Toward the end of *Agnes*, the Mother Superior says:

But a miracle is an event *without* explanation ... I believe that it is also the nature of science to wonder, and we can only wonder if we are willing to question *without* finding all the answers ... The wonder of science is not in the answers it provides but in the questions it uncovers. For every miracle it finally explains, ten thousand more miracles come into being.²⁰

I hear Pielmeier’s voice loudest always in Mother’s dialogue. This is not so surprising, I should think, especially when considering his Catholic upbringing and that he is “a very spiritually minded person ... fascinated by religion.”²¹ Pielmeier has spoken openly about the context out of which the play was born, a process itself brimming with the embrace of accident:

I had been struggling for several years personally with religious questions, spiritual questions. I’d been raised a Catholic, and I was thinking through all of that. A lot of these questions were about spirituality in the twentieth century ... I wanted to find a way of asking these questions, a play or story on which I could hang them ... Nothing had come along, and one day I was down in the 42nd Street subway station and saw a headline in the [*New York*] *Post* that said, “Nun kills baby.”²² I thought, Oh, that’s interesting, but I didn’t really think that much about it until, literally nine months later, when I work up in the middle of the night and said, Aha! That’s it. Again I was interested in it only as a clothesline on which I could hang the questions I wanted to ask. Ultimately, in writing it, I decided that it was the asking that was important; it was not a matter of finding answers in this play, or maybe at any time. So the play became a play about question asking.²³

The struggle of logic and faith for Pielmeier became *our* exploratory vehicle as well, a sort of meta-commentary for elemental, subjective, sensuous and spiritual experiences in the theatre. Pielmeier conceives of his characters as metaphors; they function as instruments of the author used to fantasize his questions regarding spirituality, current conceptions of science and religion, and whether a belief in miracles is possible in today’s digital climate. In our Compositional rendering of the text, the characters

²⁰ Pielmeier, *Agnes of God*, 60.

²¹ John Pielmeier, quoted in Trevor Thomas, “The Headline that Became a Play,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1984.

²² Pielmeier is referring to the real-life case of Sister Maureen Murphy in Brighton, New York in 1976. At the age of thirty-five, Sister Maureen secretly bore a child in Our Lady of Lourdes Convent. Sister Maureen was found unconscious on the floor of her room, suffering from an immense loss of blood. She was whisked away to the local hospital, after which the other nuns discovered her newborn baby boy in a wastepaper basket, asphyxiated by the blue nightgown wrapped around his neck. Sister Maureen was charged with manslaughter, waived her right to a jury trial, and was eventually acquitted of all criminal charges.

²³ John Pielmeier, quoted in Barbara Carlisle Bigelow and Jean W. Ross, “John Pielmeier,” in *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1981) 132: 329.

became archetypal symbols operating at an extra-ordinary intensity that defies their categorization as historically-situated, psychologically-driven human beings. And so the conflict that drives the play – and thus our theatreing of the sacred – plays out across the landscape of these symbolic embodiments: How do we negotiate a desire to embrace the unknown in a world that has conditioned us to define, compartmentalize and label in order to render our world less threatening? I am not advocating for the abandonment of logic, but perhaps we needn't work so thoroughly at destroying any and all sense of the "primitive wonder" Mother Superior speaks of so longingly throughout the play.

None of this would have happened had I not had my curious encounter in the University library with *Sacred Theatre*, had I not made discovery of the Ruiz performance, had the Department accepted my proposal of the Tremblay text. I could go on: accidents, surprises, *miracles* all. Or were they? Does this very essay undercut the wonder my *Agnes* collaborators and I so rigorously sought?

REFLECTING. REFRACTING.

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

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

Experience has taught me that life will unfold as a series of happy accidents. At each of my degree-granting institutions, for example, I fell completely unexpectedly under the tutelage of a master teacher without whom I would have the ability neither to write this very essay nor engage the practice described herein. In the instance of *Agnes*, this seems only appropriate, for what drives this work is the sense that the sacred in theatre "has the ability always to come up with something unexpected, and that it is important to explore precisely the forms and scope of that unexpectedness," with the crucial recognition that the unexpected by definition, cannot – and *should* not – be traced to a definitive, definable source nor rendered with the logician's sense of prescriptive linearity.²⁴

And so my challenge has been, then, is to discuss the fleeting, ephemeral, and, yes, miraculous moments that coalesced as springboard informing the entire *Agnes of God* process "without fixing and classifying" those moments "so thoroughly that they become conclusions rather than possibilities."²⁵ These words come in ethnographer Stacy Holman Jones's performative work on torch singing, a work that focuses on the subversive, hidden – "though not silent" – stories evinced in reading between the

²⁴ Yarrow, "Overture," in *Sacred Theatre*, 14.

²⁵ Stacy Holman Jones, *Torch Singing: Performing Resistance and Desire from Billie Holiday to Edith Piaf* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 82.

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lines of visible and invisible meanings, in “waiting for the accident to happen.”²⁶ As Toni Morrison says, “if writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.”²⁷ And so here, as I trace the accidents that shaped and defined the process that *was*, I continue to wait for accidents to shape and define the process that *will be*, unable to escape my longing for a play and process I never knew I wanted. I am not writing because I’ve answered all my questions. Quite the contrary: I am writing because I am *still asking* those questions.

I endeavor this work fortified with the hope that – in our increasingly rational-minded and information-ready world – it may help others to embrace contradictions and accidents. I propose that rather than over-thinking and rationalizing and imposing upon the creative process, we must learn to trust intuitions and impulses and allow for the accidents that inspire creativity to flow out from inside of us in vitalizing waves with breaks that remind us forcibly of the dynamic and endlessly unpredictable value of playing at the unknown. This perspective engenders a wild unpredictability that heats the air in the time-space of performance and makes the encounter a wonderfully vibrant and revitalizing experience.

SELF. OTHER.

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

- Ralph Yarow, *Sacred Theatre*

Now I must ask for one last moment of fellowship before we go. I must ask, as you must be asking yourself: *Why?* Why all of ... this ...

Why? Because, says Holman Jones, “performance can be an occasion to transcend differences in search of common understanding,” and “be a space of dialogue where different voices, experiences, and positions can question, debate, and challenge each other.”²⁸ Because at the core, at the heart of performance is a sensation that functioned as our driving force and – we hope, we *always* hope – emerged as the final consequence of our temptation of a sacred experience. This is a sensation that I have yet to name outright but one that has nonetheless permeated each and every inch of this writing. And that sensation is *empathy*.

Anne Bogart has written eloquently on the subject of empathy:

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, rev. ed., ed. William Zinsser (New York: Mariner Books, 1998), 192.

²⁸ Holman Jones, *Torch Singing*, 149.

Empathy is the ability to identify and understand another person's situation or to transfer your own feelings and emotions to them ... We reach outside of ourselves toward understanding and appreciation for the actions of others ... It is a positive and creative act [that] stems from a very deep and sacred human need to commune with the world through the imagination. When we lose our capacity to empathize, we lose an essential part of our humanity.²⁹

Bogart's conception of the "act" – no accident there? – of empathy encapsulates why I have always considered theatre a necessary thread in the fabric of our society: in the performance space, we dilate life via extra-ordinary and vitalizing means, thrusting a magnifying glass over existence that enables us to do the investigating of the human condition that needs to be done. In this way, through beauty and provocation, art engenders important conversations that can lead to advocacy. Artists take up people and places strange to us and invite our audiences to do the same. Regardless of this adversity – or perhaps *because* of it – we do it anyway, and through the difficult terrain of playing at the unknown, we are treated to a many-hued and interconnected view of ourselves and our world that can be sensed across the landscape of our bodies. Jill Dolan reminds us that the "magic of performance, the privilege of relief from banality and the pleasure of working at creating the ever shifting, always partial understandings and empathy that the stage allows" is a model of "a way to be together, as human beings, in a culture and a historical moment that's working much harder to tear us apart."³⁰ When crafted by a collaborative ensemble open to accidents and unpredictabilities, the theatre can posit fresh new ways of being together, alternate, non-hierarchical models of behavior. Such work makes visible an impression of the possible, and is rendered intensely because the spectator is in the same room with the work, the aliveness of the performance crashes against them in waves of vitalizing recognition and understanding. If *we* are so brave as to step outside the comfort of the ordinary and into a dangerous and ever-shifting event-space that challenges our most fundamental apprehension of the world, then might those who witness our selfless act be so moved to do the same?

Indeed, a performance can simultaneously entrance and build commitment: performers and spectators become bound in an sensuous and interactive dance, as does each spectator to another. The energy generated can be palpable, alive, and electric. In this way, something altogether unsettling happens; spectators become performers themselves: facing strangers-come-kinsfolk in intimate ways, their preceptors open themselves up to new ways of seeing and understanding each other and, thus, the world. In the case of *Agnes of God*, experienced in a communal way, such openness can ignite the spark of empathy: increased sensitivity that hopefully can lead to change. And so because the theatreing of the sacred implies "a shift in consciousness that effects a blurring of boundaries between ... self and other," it is

²⁹ Bogart, *And Then, You Act*, 65-7.

³⁰ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 165.

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ultimately “what opens us to the Other” in mutual and startling confrontation.³¹ The opening to accident, to surprise – to difference – is an opening to the Other.

OPENING. CLOSING.

Picture how in the expansive scan of narrative space connections between things are always partial ... there is always something more to say, always an uncaptured excess that provokes further questions, new associations that just come, and fresh gaps in understanding.

- Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*

In a beautiful essay on the importance of the collaborative experience of practice and scholarship, Anna Furse observes that “as artists we can offer a (fallible) human perspective which deconstructs the tendency of academia to see a body of work in logical arcs where we more often than not work from chance and intuition,” arguing against academic writing that “over-endows the work with coherence.”³² This reminds me of something one of my teachers often told us about the impossibility of perfection: the common Native American custom of knitting a small flaw into the otherwise unbroken weave of a blanket in order to let its soul out. Embrace the contradictions and the accidents. Don’t be afraid of the dark. Follow the flows of intuition.



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³¹ William S. Haney II, “The Phenomenology of Nonidentity,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 68; Ralph Yarrow, “Preface,” in *Sacred Theatre*, 10.

³² Anna Furse, “Those Who Can Do Teach,” in *Theatre in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, ed. Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 69.

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