2011

# "Spending the day in front of the mirror"

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Honors Thesis, Spring 2011

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## I. Introduction

*Heah heah, I will say to you…*

One year ago, I was in an acting class at the British American Drama Academy, learning about suspension. Another student and I stood ten feet apart, staring desperately at each other. We each had long wooden dowels in our hands like spears, pressed vertically into the floor. In this exercise, we were meant to reach a silent agreement between each other to remove our supporting hands from the dowels and run at break-neck speed to the opposite dowel, grabbing it and returning it to a vertical position before it hit the ground.

Believe it or not, this exercise taught me that humor and truth came hand in hand. We were not "performing" for anyone. We had a task to complete. The "audience," our class mates, erupted into laughter when one of us reacted a second too late as the other one went sprinting. This exercise required of us complete anticipation, readiness, eagerness, and intense focus on our partner. We were completely vulnerable, on the edge. We had no time to worry about appearance, about how things were *supposed* to sound or look or *go*. All ego was stripped away.

In the opening moments of *JOHN,* I slowly emerged from the gauzy curtain, contorting frenetically but silently into the characters of Linita, Lina, and La Curandera. At last, I reached the water tank at the center of the set. I slowly scaled its edge, perched fretfully over the water. Before each performance, I thought back to these exercises in suspension. *Ego stripped away*. Although I didn't technically have a scene partner, I reached for the same suspension, for truth, with every thing around me. I was in communion with the tank, with the walls, with the lights, with the audience. *Ego stripped away*.

Believe me, I realize just how New Age-y this sounds. Unfortunately, these New Age-y, highfalutin terms are the only way I can find to express the New Age-y, mystical way I've discovered the art of performance.

I've got to stop myself once again—I don't claim to know *all* about the "Art of Performance" now that I've completed my Honors project. In fact, I'm more confused than ever. Lillian Hellman has harsh words for egocentrism in the theatre, and I would hate to be the butt of her disdain: "They're silly people, most of them [*in reference to 'luvvies,' as my mom would call them]*. They're very vain. Vanity is a disease in theater […] You don't have to be that interested in yourself. You don't have to get up every morning and stand in front of the mirror and then spend the day there."[1] Ms. Hellman may scoff to hear that that's exactly how I started in my rehearsal process eight months before the first performance: in South dance studios, with the curtain pulled back, inspecting every movement and gesture in front of the mirror. Yes, I may have been literally "spending the day in front of the mirror," but from the beginning, I *spat through my teeth* not to do so figuratively.

I have certainly struggled in my attempt to academicize my three-year relationship with *JOHN,* but I shall attempt to do so in this paper by breaking down the various elements that went into the final product. I will discuss my processes in three distinct areas: writing/devising, collaboration/direction/production, and, of course, acting. I will explain why I chose to do a project of this nature, and how it is representative of my Oberlin theatre education and of the kind of work

I'd like to continue to do in my professional life after Oberlin. Hopefully, in the end, my affair with *JOHN* will finally get some closure.

## II. The writing/devising process

*Would you like to see a trick?*

I began writing *JOHN* at the beginning of my sophomore year, and finished a final draft my junior year, Thanksgiving 2009. As the piece evolved in mind, it deviated more and more from the original story that first inspired it.

Google Lina Medina and you will find a couple of paragraphs about the world's youngest mother. There's even a photograph of her at six-and-a-half, standing bashfully behind a crib that contains her newborn son. Next to her is a stoic gentleman in spotless scrubs, eyes blurred out by thick spectacles. The photo is sanitized, unemotional.

Linita was born in 1933 in Peru. She had her first period at eight months, and gave birth at five years of age. She was said to suffer from "precocious puberty," but her baby boy was completely healthy in every way. At first, the girl was brought to Peruvian healers who claimed a snake was growing in her belly; doctors thought it was a mere tumor. The identity of the father remains unknown. Lina's own father was wrongfully arrested and then released. The baby boy grew up believing that Lina was his older sister. Lina Medina lives in Lima to this day.

Naturally, this story intrigued me. At the time, I was fascinated by magical realism—I took a Spanish literature class in which I read Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, which influenced *JOHN* with its multiple generations and iterations of a family, and several characters with similar names; I also took a translation workshop in the Creative Writing department in which I explored writing in Spanish and English simultaneously, interweaving the two to see how they merged into a new means of expression altogether; a Latin American history class provided me with gruesome details of Tupac Amaru's reign—the first hand accounts of the time period definitely lent a particular aesthetic, even though the time and place of my own story was never grounded.

In the very beginning, I tried to adhere to the details of the story I read, but I kept getting stuck: I attempted to flesh out a plotline for Linita's father, but he kept eluding me. And what of the ominous doctor, allegedly "shocked" by Lina's condition but grim-faced and stoic in photographs? It all would have been great for a Law & Order episode, but it was too grounded in realism and plot detail to service the kind of story *I* wanted to tell. So I scrapped it all and stuck with one image: a pregnant five-year-old.

But I couldn't quite rid myself of La Curandera, who cared for Lina before the doctors and who initially thought there was a snake growing in her belly. These facts lifted from the original story…well, they weren't *facts* at all. They were unexplainable. They were mystical. They could never be rationalized. That's the kind of fodder I needed to release my own narrow imagination.

As I wrote during those years, my identity as an actor also evolved. I had a relatively clear sense of my strengths and my weaknesses. So, I began to cater my writing of *JOHN* to those challenges and assets of mine, which I will elaborate on in the section about acting process.

Charles Ludlam claims that he too catered original work to his own talents in his creation of the Ridiculous Theatre: "I had to create a theatre where I could exist. I had to create, for my own survival, a world where I could take advantage of my talents." In my set of circumstances, it was more a matter of experimentation than the dire straits of *survival* in the real world, though that will

come later. I wanted to do something that *fully* showcased exactly what I had learned here at Oberlin, and what I was capable of as an actor. Ludlam points out that "Bach and Mozart were virtuoso performers who needed material to play so they wrote their own scores."[2] There are very few roles in the world that could have done that to the same capacity that *JOHN* did. For instance, I could have easily played Ms. Maccers for my Honors project—while the role is undeniably demanding, the challenge of birthing and "giving suck" to an original work was ten times as terrifying.

**a. Reconciling theater and performance art**

In The Surrealist Connection, David Zinder attempts to provide a catch-all description of a theatrical experience, whether conventional or more experimental: both involve "communicators entering into a relationship with communicants through delivery, within limited time and space, of a communication that is either prepared from a scenario or text, or improvised. This performance engages primarily the aural and visual senses, but at times appeals also to tactile and olfactory senses as well."[3] I began work on *JOHN* with this framework, but I also wanted to break some rules. After reading Michael Kirby's article *On Acting and Not-Acting*[4]*,* I wanted to insert some instances where I could play with reality, naturalism, and a fantasy world.

After taking Non-Literary Theatre, I developed a great interest in exploring task acting, that apex of naturalism, as exemplified in Alan Kaprow's Happenings throughout the 1960s.

Today, we often use the terms 'naturalism' and 'realism' interchangeably, when in fact 'naturalism' can almost never be attained while on a stage—the performers are elevated, and we, the audience are detached, passive, submerged in darkness. Therefore, neither performer *nor* audience member can ever quite shake the feeling that they are in a theatre. In fact, it'd probably be considered delusional if, say, a meticulous Method actor forgot he was John Doe *portraying* the character of Hamlet, and began to think that he actually *was* Hamlet.

The line between reality and dramatization was blurred in Happenings. They didn't take place on stages, where there were clean delineations between seeing place and acting place. Usually Happenings cropped up on the streets or other everyday sites. They were often intended as an assault on the unknowing "audience." Kirby elucidates: "the performers [*note the distinction between the use of the word 'performers' rather than 'actors']* in Happenings generally tended to 'be' nobody or nothing other than themselves; nor did they represent, or pretend to be in, a time or place different from that of the spectator."[5]

But task acting, or hyper-naturalism, doesn't always have to be quite as violent or raucous as in Happenings. Task acting can also occur in a Poetic Realism play like *The Seagull,* in which actors are required to play a game of bingo in the background while another scene is played out in front of them. Perhaps the actors decide to *actually* play a board game one night on the stage, and one actor is winning—he or she is *really* winning, in real time, and he or she is actually invested in the game

I'd read all about this type of task acting, but I was finally able to see it played out when I saw the Rude Mechs in their production of *Method Gun* in New York this month. I found the concepts and theories they presented fascinating, but altogether the production seemed held back by

their performances, which felt a little musty after so many years. The most stunning part of the performance was the penultimate moment that gives the play its fame—when several heavy lightbulbs suddenly dropped from the ceiling and started swinging like pendulums. The actors had to choreograph their movements through these pendulums, threatening a blow at any moment. Even though I understood that this choreography had become honed to a clean science over the years so that there was 0.01% chance of any actor being hit, the tension of the moment was palpable throughout the audience. The performance had transcended a suspension of disbelief—the danger was real. Compared to the acting beforehand, this was absolutely inspired in its effortlessness. It was effortless in trying to convey a particular emotion or concept. All the effort was refocused onto a particular task that was played out in real time.

As *JOHN* grew in my mind, I tried to find places to insert exercises in "task acting." Perhaps, during a particular monologue, La Curandera could take a small water dropper and suck up a single drop from the tank, hobble across the stage, and then deposit the drop into another container. I, Lauren, would have a task at hand—to rid the tank of all its water, drop by drop—and La Curandera would be given a stage activity, something symbolic of her emotional state portrayed in an expressionistic manner.

Obviously, a task such as that would get rather tedious to watch, resembling some eight-hour Warhol film documenting a day in the life of the Empire State Building. So, instead of continuing to force elements of performance art into my narrative structure, I simply used elements of task acting in smaller, less noticeable ways. For instance, throughout the performances of *JOHN* I [Lauren] became physically exhausted, and began feeling cramp-like pains in my feet and back—perfect for informing my [La Curandera's] own physicality from a very real place. In another example, I plunged into the tank at the very beginning of the show, and became dry in *real time*. I loved that element of being unable to "fake" wetness and dryness, of the evaporation and slight shivers that followed. Of course, I wasn't trying to emulate the most delusional Method actors by inflicting pain and discomfort upon myself, but it certainly added an element of "naturalism" that cut through the artifice of performance.

Thus far, I have been using the terms "acting" and "performance" interchangeably, but now I'd like to make a distinction between the two.

Phillip Auslander explains in his article *Just Be Your Self* that "'Acting' and 'character' are linked to the Western notion of 'narrative.'" He continues by extrapolating that into the sociological sphere, saying, "All three together are major building blocks of the apparatus of Western theatrical representation which inscribes the binary and hierarchical gender distinction of male and female. In contrast, 'performing and 'persona' disrupt the working of conventional Western narrative and […] allow for the ecological expression of many selves."[6] Auslander goes on to explain why there are more autobiographical one-woman shows than one-man shows, and why many female performance artists center their work on feminist issues: "Through personae a woman can speak as a subject from the perspective of multiple selves, moving beyond the limiting subject of the female gender in theatrical representation."[7] However, with this assumption, I don't see how any female performance artist can divorce herself from the 'stigma' (as I see it) of feminism. Any trace of it will inevitably be projected on to her work. Assumed "phallic oppression" can be dug out of any nook and cranny.

On the other hand, perhaps a woman cannot divorce *herself* from feminist influences. Perhaps that's why I had such a hard time doing so in my piece—I certainly did not intend for it to be a didactic diatribe against all of mankind, even though that's what many people took away from it. It wasn't meant to be a universal tale in which I make a case for all women and all men everywhere. I did not mean for this microcosm of a world to be extrapolated into a macrocosmic view. Perhaps because the themes of male oppression and female submission are practically clichés nowadays, we can't help but lug all our socialized presumptions in with us when viewing such a story.

**b. Actor as signifier becomes actor as character**

The acting process was an uphill battle for me in *making things more interesting.* In plays produced by director/designers like Gordon Craig, humanity was ripped out of even the most recognizable plays, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* where the soliloquies were rendered incomprehensible by incantatory dialogue. There was nothing representational here, nothing recognizable or human. I liked that idea in theory; however, in practice, it became near impossible to stand. Though I wanted to be an actor-as-signifier at the outset of the process, I quickly morphed into an actor-as-*character,* or sort of a double agent who has infiltrated the two (or three) disparate spheres, those being the skilled/masked actor (or the character) and the personal actor (or himself.)

The skilled actor, of course, has been defined in different ways over the years, corresponding with the most popular approaches toward acting of the day. Joe Chaikin of the Group Theatre claims that "acting is a demonstration of self with or without a disguise."[8] Even if someone is performing in an autobiographical solo show, or being a charismatic, performative version of themselves (as Laurie Anderson often is in her shows) that is still acting, or a degree of performance.

For Stanislavsky, the disguise was comprised of the actor's own emotional experience—thus, there was the danger that an epic character such as Hamlet or Antigone would be reduced to what the actor playing them knew or had experienced. Brecht, on the other hand, believed that the disguise should be completely separable from the actor's own persona. Even further, "Grotowski believes that the actor must use the disguise by her role to cut away the disguise imposed on her by socialization and expose the most basic levels of the self."[9] Though I don't intend for my acting approach to be a means toward a social or political end, I must agree with Grotowski and Brecht about creating a character separate from the limitations of one's own world perspective.

Auslander claims that acting and character are inherently rooted in Western theatrical traditions, where actors can "draw on different performing techniques according to circumstance and individual need"[10] even though Anne Bogart often warns against this kind of "multi-cultural grab-bag" of acting techniques—a little Suzuki, a little Butoh, a little commedia, a pinch of Stanislavsky…

**c. Exploiting the Greats: an amalgamation of influences**

…Nevertheless, the inspirations for *JOHN* did end up resembling a "multi-cultural grab-bag." This paper began as twenty-pages of *quotes* from theatre innovators, visionaries, theorists, who all said genius things about the art of theatre in better words than I could ever express them, so why try? It's certainly been a struggle to tailor those down, to stop hiding in books and start writing my own ideas.

My process for writing *JOHN,* however, also began with a great deal of reading, studying, and incorporating ideas from various influences introduced to me by Non-Literary Theatre and other resources. The top inspirations for me in creating *JOHN* were Beckett and magical realism, which both greatly informed the writing style; Butoh and Suzuki informed the aesthetic of the performance; Joe Chaikin and the Group Theatre gave me guidelines for how to navigate collaborative theatre, which I shall explore later in this paper.

At BADA I had the honor of performing and workshopping an excerpt from Beckett's *Not I* for Fiona Shaw, who first turned me on to Beckett years ago when I saw her in Deborah Warner's *Happy Days* at BAM. Beckett was a major influence in the conception of this piece, both in the style of writing and in the style of performing. In particular, I drew from this piece *Not I,* a ten-minute-or-so monologue in which a woman's illuminated mouth releases an enormous cascade of text, which is actually fairly narrative, though it's not immediately apparent from the outset. She divulges her story in fragments, in bits, releasing a flood of words after years of muteness. The audience is not meant to catch every word—instead, the words create an atmospheric wash that attacks the audience, drawing them in to her mind piece by piece. Rosemary Pountney, who performed Mouth in *Not I,* says that, "Beckett had favoured an extraordinary pace at the Royal Court, which tended to preclude immediate understanding, because the words (although audible) were part of a torrent of sound; but as phrases recurred they began to take on significance, rather as in music—and a cyclical language structure emerged."[11] Laypeople such as myself can grab a hold on to music when we recognize recurring motifs, or choruses—this is why catchy pop songs get stuck in our heads so easily.

I shamelessly copied the style of *Not I* for a monologue spoken toward the end of *JOHN* in which Curandera finally tells the story of her and the Emperor, after struggling to confess her version of "the truth" for the entire play. I by no means believe that I constructed this text-cascade nearly as artfully as Beckett does, but I attempted a sort of clunky facsimile.

**d. Missing in action**

This play was difficult in the writing stages and the performing stages—I often found myself cursing the playwright's name! In taking the play from page to stage, I was struck by something I hadn't realized in the writing of this piece: the blurred lines between personality shifts within La Curandera. I wasn't even sure if it the play *did* truly have only one character, or three, or five, or more. I wasn't sure, as I set out to portray this story, just whose story it was. Did it have to be one person's story, even? Eventually, at the insistence of my collaborators (Anya Kazimierski, Kat Lee, and Moze Halperin, whose watchful eyes and helpful hands were essential to this process, as I'll explain later), I found the idea of ownership a vital one. It was intrinsic to the stakes of telling this story, which made it all the more playable on each given night.

As rehearsals went on, my collaborators and I began to realize that the stakes were missing in action, so to speak. Why was I telling this story? Why tonight? Why was it told is this way, so vague, so fuzzy, jumping place to place, leaving all sorts of elements unsolved? It moved like the most surrealistic dream. Ironically, we had to cement a few things so that the never-ending puzzle of this story *made sense*—not in plot, but in necessity. Why must it be told, and why in *this way?*

One rehearsal, Anya was suddenly struck with an epiphany: isn't this Curandera's story and hers alone? Her others selves, Lina, Linita, the Emperor, her past, are all jumping in the way to interrupt her story—but she is the one who is at last able to tell it, reaching back into her past and channeling the truth of what happened with her, the Emperor, and her three sons. Of course, it was of no use to me to think in extreme psychological terms, with Lina and Linita perhaps being stunted versions of the woman she used to be, traumatic moments in her life that she could not push past. Ultimately, none of that is really playable. But just the *idea* that this is one woman, made up of many selves, fighting to tell her true story which has been retold and obscured and redefined over the years, was the perfect amount of reality to make the play playable for me, using conventional theatre techniques. I could get a hold of those concepts easier. It was an entryway.

For instance, there is a certain character who seems to emerge toward the end of the play. She never had a precise name (though they all really have just *one* name, Lina, reiterated in different ways throughout the stages of her life—diminutive Linita and professional, wizened Curandera), and it wasn't clear exactly who she was. She was distinguished by her Spanish accent, more mature than Linita's, thicker than Lina's, and unadorned by Curandera's rasp. She loved the Emperor, sought his admiration with a similar pursuit to Lina's. But she was wiser. She was fit for maternity. She was the younger Cura. Her most common position was kneeling in the tank, slumped over its edge, looking off into the distance and reminiscing with bright eyes about her wedding and marriage to the Emperor. The warm water sloshed quietly around her. She was cleansed and exhausted and waiting. This character never emerged in the text itself—in fact, the words she spoke were left unassigned in the script. She only emerged in performance.

I was fascinated, in making the transition from written word to performance, in who "I" was in between characters. "I" as actor and "I" as character. Who was that neutral person in the seconds it took to jump from one character to another? I tried to imbue those split seconds with the "younger Cura" character or, as we erroneously and *disrespectfully* called her, "the neutral character." As Lecoq says, "To be a personality, to be onself even, is not to be neutral. […] An actor can hope to perform a neutral action, but he cannot be neutral—neutral is a 'fulcrum point that doesn't exist."[12]. I tried to shape this "neutral character" into those transition moments in a similar way to those outlined by Copeau: "silence serving as a resting state, a condition without motion but filled with energy, like the condition of a runner in the moment before his race. All impulses were to arise from that state and return to it."[13]

Copeau's quote reminds me of the Suzuki training I had this winter term, with one exception: instead of the resting but energized state resembling a runner *before* his race, we were told to channel a runner *after* his race, without letting the "audience" see his exhaustion, his jumbling insides, his heaving breath, his wracked body. The containment of *all that.* I didn't have the same

knowledge of Suzuki vocabulary during the rehearsal of *JOHN* that I have now, but in retrospect I realize that that is what I was attempting without knowing quite what it meant.

## III. The Collaborative Directing/Production Process

*There are things to* do*, you see, to* get *it out. ARE YOU LEESEN? A regimen.*

Anne Bogart once said, "The greatest spiritual level is insecurity."[14] This quote has resonated profoundly with me as an actor, ever since I first read it. And still, I have next to no idea what it means.

Time and time again I've reconsidered this quote, attempting to fully grasp the concept it poses: this so-called "spiritual level" that comes with insecurity.

It's the "spiritual" thing that catches me up. What measures a "great spritiual level?" Is it an unspoken mysticism in performance? That aforementioned 'magical communion' that wafts between the audience and the actors? Even Phylicia Rashad admitted to us in a master class at BADA, "Acting is magic…haven't you seen Harry Potter?"

I find that hard to stomach.

Kristin Linklater responds to Bogart's tricky quote in the same interview: "Heisenberg proved that [*insecurity*] mathematically."[15] I can only assume that she is referring Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle. But can uncertainty be used interchangeably with insecurity? One engenders the other, but does that mean one equates the other?

Michael Frayn, who somehow turned Heisenberg, Bohr, and the uncertainty principle into worthwhile theatre with *Copenhagen,* says of the uncertainty principle: "[it] says that there is no way, however much we improve our instruments, that we can ever know everything about the behavior of a physical object. And I think it's also true about human thinking." [16] We can never fully know all aspects of human behavior—there is still a touch of this theatre "mystique," even in scientific terms!

In any case, I've returned to the quote repeatedly, particularly in times of "cold feet."

Never were my feet more frigid than in the process of my Honors project. The emotion that I associate with the entire process, start to finish, is pure terror. Even now, looking back on the process, I get small shivers. In returning to the text for the purpose of writing this paper, my heart jumps a little with nerves. I certainly did not expunge all my insecurities with the production of this project, but I certainly challenged them head-on. And I don't think I ever want to do it again.

Charles Ludlam qualifies himself as an over-all overseer, rather than as a director. He defends his method, explaining that "the director as separate entity started with Stanislavsky at the end of the nineteenth century."[17] Before that, director/designers like Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig put their compulsive desire to control to good use by overseeing *every single aspect* of production. Craig even said, "It is impossible for a work of art ever to be produced where more than one brain is permitted to direct."[18]

I certainly didn't (and still don't) trust my own artistic vision to that vainglorious extent. I relied on a support system (often heavily-burdened, I'll admit) of people I trusted to bring their own artistic visions to the work, which I was sure would make the final product all the more rich and multifaceted. Having one distinct director to obey may have made personal hang-ups and anxieties easier to manage, but it certainly would have limited the scope and vision of the piece to a crippling minimum.

**a. The Beast of Collaboration**

The collaborative process was an awkward, ferocious thing to negotiate, particularly among our group of close friends. But we are all, alas, only human. Even Joe Chaikin, an expert at negotiating and reconciling collaborative theatre, had immense issues and even *drama* (the bad kind) in attempting to collaborate with the Group Theatre on *The Serpent,* which I used as a source of inspiration in approaching *JOHN*.

Reading Chaikin's book Presence of the Actor after finishing *JOHN* was an eerie experience: it seemed that Chaikin was whispering assurances to me directly from the grave with such gems as, "There are many things in *The Serpent* which are still unsolved—in fact, I don't remember being part of any ambitious work which has seem to me solved."[19] What a relief that is! Even after *The Serpent* toured around Europe and back, the cast felt uneasy, struggling for new ways to convey this story. I often wonder what would have developed had I more time and resources to realize *JOHN,* which only went up three consecutive nights. By the end of the week, I had certainly been stretched to my breaking point. Not only did we do at least one full run each day, but all week I ran around like a chicken with my head cut off, trying to organize technical issues with lighting, the limitations of the space, fall-throughs in publicity, and more.

I could barely contain my yelps of joy (and didn't have to, tucked away in my scholar study room) when Chaikin wrote, "The personal hang-ups always take precedence, unless the ensemble is fully focused on the work."[20] I could not believe that the Open Theatre had been comprised of committed, talented actors who on occasion, well, behaved like real people; people with quirks, convictions, conflicting views, stubborn tendencies, troubles in communication, and bones to pick. I believe these tremendous conflicts arise because presenting a work with YOUR name on it makes you ultimately vulnerable. One cannot blame the playwright (well, one can, and we all did, but the problems in the play were then easily fixable). One cannot blame the director, or the production team. Each one of us is to blame for failure, and each of us were fully committed to success.

That fortress of comfort, Joe Chaikin, yet again says, "In our case performing is taking private work out into the world. If it were possible just to move the workshop work to audiences, it would be one thing, but it isn't. Performing takes another kind of preparation. It is giving birth, and the pain and trauma of birth is part of the move from private to public." The inherent *process* of creating collaborative work is an uphill climb, and a treacherous one at that. There is nothing to rely on. Nothing to count on. No guarantees. Just one: "**the danger is that we will get lost. Plan on it: count on it.**"[21]

There it is.

Right there.

The thesis of this experience. What I learned, through and through: *you can count on not being able to count on anything,* or anyone. If you plan for something, you will become lost. I'll admit it's got a bit of a gloomy, existential tinge to it. The bright side is that the effort of elucidating that confusion creates great work. Knowing that can't help but spawn insecurity. Process, *progress,* is the evolution that occurs during The Work.

One cannot rely on the route one's life will take—certainly one can *plan* to be married with children by the age of thirty, but one never knows when something else will get in the way. That's certainly something I have to embrace if I want to have the life of an actor. Moments of certainty (employment) are followed by long, long periods of uncertainty. Insecurity. Systems can't always be followed.

The same is paralleled in collaborative or experimental theatrical processes. In traditional theatre, a director has a game plan for the evening's rehearsal. Everyone must obey it. Maybe you'll even have a wily director who decides at the last minute that the final scene in *Our Town* is just not doing it for him, so he'll turn out the lights and have everyone take off their clothes. Still, that is a system, and the stage manager will probably jot in down in short hand afterwards.

As the aesthetic of the piece develops, the system develops with it. As we, the collaborators, found our foothold on exactly *how* to convey this piece aesthetically, we slowly re-found the play itself.

It was a foggy time. It was murky, and it was terrifying, because there was no sign of light at the end of the tunnel. There was no sophistication and no reassuring hand on your shoulder to guide the way. Identities were vague, and rearranged. Pretensions were stripped away. This was the state of the truest self. This was the state most interesting for an audience. I think back to that exercise with the dowels, to that moment perched before the tank—suspension. Readiness. Anything could go wrong. And it probably will. But that exposes the truest self!

In collaborative theatre, it is absolutely grueling to try to assess one's own creative improvement, or accomplishment. I personally felt constantly "behind," constantly unprepared or having failed at something or other, especially when I had other actors/collaborators/peers to account for, to make sure they did not feel as if they were wasting their time.

I am definitely not a born leader, and I certainly haven't become one since. I am usually unsure of my own thoughts and have convictions about nearly next to nothing, so it was hard for me to "accidentally" take on a leadership role—perhaps I was naïve in not anticipating such an occurrence when not labeling one distinct director. I had to learn to trust myself. It's a process still in the making, but I'm many steps closer to getting there thanks to this project.

**b. The set: sacred spaces**

Anya and I worked together in creating the atmospheric setting of the play, and we found ourselves thinking a great deal about sacred spaces. Even for rehearsals, before we had the chance to go into Hales Art Space and build our set, we had to create sacred spaces, safe havens in which to work.

South Studio, where we rehearsed, became a sacred space. Considering the nature of the project, and the fact that two-thirds of my collaborators lived in my house, it would have been easy to become lazy and not make the arduous Oberlin-scale trek from Woodland Street to South Studio spaces. But we did. We entered that space, our blank canvas, prepared for work and not for distractions. We forced ourselves to maintain a steady work ethic.

South Studios were an ideal space for me, despite the occasional tap-tap and step-ball-change of the Tap Exco next door. It had sprung floors, wide, clean, vast, a blank slate, a clean palate. There were wall-to-wall mirrors with curtains to get rid of them at any time, and the back wall was all windows to look out onto South campus.

When I rehearsed in this studio during the summer months (I started rehearsing six months prior to the performance of the show), I kept the windows wide open so I could always see that stretch of land behind me. It lent me a wider scope and gave me perspective, helping me to tune in to that vast, vague landscape these characters inhabited.

One day in June there were hot summer rains. The air was thick, muggy. Thunder clapped and rain pelted down with extraordinary force. I was in my rehearsal skirt and white makeup. What choice did I have? I had to rehearse out in the rain. I had to have that visceral, solitary, expansive, freeing, primitive experience. It felt like the womb. It felt like the universe. It felt environment-less. It felt ageless. It soaked me to the bone. It was hot in those summer months—I had to keep two fans running in the actual rehearsal studio. It refreshed me. It cleansed me. The three characters stripped bare. No one was watching—I rehearsed all for myself.

The idea of the sacred space was reiterated during my Suzuki training. We were instructed to briskly enter and exit the taped-out box for performance (and when in the box, one is *always* performing.) In that box, we had to mask all frustrations and mistakes from the imagined "audience." When we exited the box, we were not to slump forward and assume our pedestrian stances, forgetting all we had just attained. We were meant to keep that memory of effort and of containment in our bodies and our brains.

Once we finally, *finally* entered Hales Art Space that Thanksgiving break, a week before the show, I felt like I stayed there until the final performance. I was very adamant from the beginning about using an alternative space for *JOHN*. I wanted to use Hales Art Space rather than a theatre space, like Little Theatre or Wilder Main. This was so I could assist audience members in forgetting about plot and conventions of a narrative theatre piece—this piece was in Visual Art Domain. A student's senior art show was even being prepared in the room next door, and the odors of her wool and feather textiles wafted in to provide a perfect, though incidental, olfactory element. Even the clangs of the pipes and the furnace in Hales Art Space provided an accidental but appropriate soundscape. In the Visual Arts, Modernism has taught us to not look at a painting and immediately pinpoint things we recognize from our everyday lives. We are allowed to look at a Mondrian and not try to contextualize it by "what it could mean." We see a Picasso and accept that no, perhaps women don't really look that way in real life, but this is a painting, which is allowed to be non-representational. I wanted to coax my audience to watch theatre and try to accept it, at times, as non-representational, as purely aesthetic, the same way they would a painting.

Anya's set dove in to the audience—the people on the mats, on the chairs, under the burning lights, were part of my world. There was no discernible line of distinction. The atmosphere took over.

**c. What and why**

Joe Chaikin explains what profitable acting (profitable equaling meaningful, for some) is today: "An old idea of acting is that you make believe you care about things which you don't care about. To the degree that you are convincing, you are a good actor. In New York actors spend time making 'rounds' for plays which they often don't care about. In between producers' offices actors go up for commercials. There the actor praises a product and testifies to the change it has made in his life. In both cases the actor is a salesman. The salesman who sells vacuum cleaners is also an actor."[22]

For me, there is certainly a distinction between actor and artist in today's business. While I want to know the ins and outs of the industry, I do not want to be a salesman. I don't want to get caught up in work that, while perhaps lucrative, does not interest me. However, I don't think I have much of a choice: Simon Callow confesses, "'So leave the profession,' I hear somebody say. Many do; but more stay because they have no choice. It's in the blood and the bones. They may not even be very good actors—but they're actors nonetheless. Of course the profession is overcrowded, but every one of those actors can play at least one part better than anyone living; and who shall deny them the chance to do so?"[23] I am one of those actors who has little choice, because there is nothing in the world I'd rather do.

So, *JOHN* was an exercise in wish-fulfillment. It was my creation, and thus more daring. I invested everything of myself, exponentially raising the risks and the stakes. *JOHN* was an exhibition of fantasy, of my imagination. My imagination is no slice of life—nobody's is. The story I told was not even remotely in my realm of experience—it extrapolated out into the unknown, the unseen, the unheard of. That has always been my tendency as an author and now, I suppose as an actor. Why write (or portray) everyday life? We live everyday life! I would much rather use the theatre as an opportunity to go out of my own experience. However, I realize that there is a danger in there being *no* foundation of truthfulness, or sparse moments of reality—then it just seems like one is writing about something one has absolutely no idea about. It doesn't seem plausible in its own world. The world I created was not recognizable, but it was consistent in the rules it created—blurred temporal shifts, unclear divisions of persona, the amalgamation of many environments and biospheres. This harkens back to the The Surrealist Connection once more, when Zinder describes the kind of settings Appia and Craig created and the theatre that late Strindberg urged for in *Dream Play:* "In the dream or day dream there is no intrinsic need to communicate other than with the dreamer's own consciousness. The very opposite is the case in art work. […] In art work, then, the "managing" or "distancing" of psychic conflict is accomplished not only to allow the artist to cope with its dangerous essence, but also to make it presentable, and thus pleasing, to his audience."[24]

I found inspiration and limitations in attempting to create work similar to Robert Wilson's theater. John Rockwell says that "overly simplified as it may seem, the theatrical innovations of the last one hundred years might best be visualized as falling into two camps: the visionary mystical, and the naturalistic-sociological."[25] At Oberlin, our scene studies and theatrical productions certainly fall into the category of naturalistic-sociological. Most of our mainstage and student productions are contemporary, realistic plays—this makes sense, since that's the vocabulary we're given in our education here. I find it interesting that this is the only artistic department at Oberlin where this is true: in Creative Writing, Visual Arts, Cinema Studies, and Dance, I know the norm is to reach for

more abstract, expressive, non-narrative, non-representational, post-modern forms of expression. People need to unhinge themselves from the concrete, from the descriptive. We are accustomed to the expressive in the visual arts, dance, and poetry. But more concrete art forms—theatre, film—supposedly "popular media for the masses"—must be descriptive. I intended to fight against this convention.

## IV. The Acting Process

*I shall have to be charming for you.*

I came into the process of *JOHN* with several ideas about what I thought good acting was, gathered along the course of my education at Oberlin and the British American Drama Academy. Each idea, of course, came with its own set of contradictions and special exceptions.

As I mentioned, Roger Copeland's class in Non-Literary Theater 1960s to Present was a seminal one in my Oberlin theater education. I took this class the semester before going abroad to London; the academic exposure to avant-garde, post-modern theater in conjunction with Britain's long-standing, more conventional theater traditions provided a great deal of inspiration for the process of *JOHN*. In London I became very sure of a few convictions and ideals I had as an actor. I knew the kind of work I wanted to create. I knew I wanted to hold myself responsible.

As I mentioned, I am a person of few convictions—my opinions often flap to and fro in the breeze. However, there *were a* few things I was sure of before entering into the *JOHN* process—things I was *sure* I wanted to achieve. I came to these conclusions at BADA, jotted them down, peppered them with a great deal of CAPS LOCK enthusiasm, and tried to hold them close throughout the process.

The following are a few excerpts from this diary abroad (in italics), which I have incorporated into more explanatory paragraphs that represent convictions I still hold to be true.

### i. Secrets

*Being naturalistic or realistic is not always what it most interesting. Being HONEST is not even always the most interesting. Seeing a character lie to herself. Seeing falsity, two-facedness, hypocrisy, lies, affectations. Seeing those layers. Since we are not always (usually not honest people in real life).*

In the acting process, I experimented with secrecy and ignorance. One of the basic inherent tenets of acting is that a person [me, Lauren] is portraying a fictional character [in this case, Lina, Linita, or la Curandera.] If that is an undeniable fact about acting, and two sets of souls are attempting convergence, why not have fun with the fact that the actor could know something about the situation that the character does not? Or one character knowing what another character does not? Or the audience and the actor conspiring against one character, keeping something from her?

For instance, in scene work for *The House of Bernarda Alba* at BADA, I played Martirio opposite Adela, in the scene where she finds Adela has illicitly been going with Pepe, engaged to one of her sisters. Martirio chastises her, demanding an explanation. I [Lauren] and I [Martirio] had two versions of the same secret. I [Lauren] was convinced that Martirio was in love with Adela (in a more-than-sisterly fashion), and I [Martirio] knew this in my heart, but it had not yet been vocalized out loud or even fully-formed in my own head. I [Lauren] didn't let my scene partner in on the secret, just as I [Martirio] fought to keep it from Adela and from myself. Perhaps it wasn't Lorca's intent. Perhaps in the entire arc of the play it wouldn't make sense. But it certainly gave me high stakes in that scene, and thus made it all the more interesting.

Brian Cox raises the question in reference to tragic heroes, such as Titus Andronicus: to what extent are you [the tragic hero] aware of your fatal flaw?[26] He, too, urges actors to learn about ignorance. Of course, with lies and deceit comes…

**ii. The true thought**

*KNOW what you want, as the character*
*KNOW who you are, as an actor*
*KNOW what you are attempting, as an actor. Having a clear idea in your want about how you want the image to be, how you want something to sound…? But ALWAYS lead with the thought, never mimicking sound.*

This exact belief was re-affirmed for me when taking Voice for the Actor this Winter Term. JOHN required me to make enormous leaps of emotion, and the vocal demands of these characters—Cura with her rasp, Lina speaking bent over backward, straining on my throat, Linita's high-pitched coos—forced me to strategize how best to save my voice while utilizing its full power and range. After *JOHN*'s first run, my throat was parched and raw. After one session with Heather Anderson Boll, I came away with the most important piece of information I needed: to LEAD WITH THE TRUE THOUGHT. If it comes from a place of honesty deep within the gut, it will bypass any strain in the vocal cords. It seems so simple! But I had to remind myself of this throughout the process.

**iii. Creating character/persona**

*Physically delve into a role, but do not adorn the role with a series of superficial and untruthful quirks, twitches, habits that only thinly veil that this is just You in another set of circumstances.*
*And yet, every role has an inherent element of You in it.*
*About finding the specifics of emotion and articulation (re: Suzuki.) Emotion. The movement of breath?*

Bogart says, "The theater is about being spontaneous, in a way that you can repeat."[27] Beckett may have agreed with this, even though he was very strict about choreography of movement and voice, and did not want emotions to get in the way. This is why I was so shocked when I went to the production of *Waiting for Godot* in London with Roger Rees and Ian McKellen. We waited by the stage door for autographs. My friend complimented Ronald Pickup, the actor playing Lucky, on his dance. Pickup chuckled and replied, "Well, it's different every night." I was appalled!

At the beginning of the process, I intended to pertain to the same direction in my acting that Beckett gave to Billie Whitelaw in her performance of *Not I*: tonelessness. That is, being an actor in the sense of a pure vessel for text, not letting messy and unintentional emotion eek out. As it went on, however, as people began to sit in on rehearsals, tone crept in no matter accidentally. But it was more interesting that way. Jonathan Kalb elucidates the idea of tone in Beckett and Performance*:* "When you feel yourself too far away from the right tone, you have already failed. You are looking in your acting for the right tone; that is fatal. You are acting in too healthy a way…try

gradually, while you speak the words, to see the whole inwardly. It has a visionary character…it is an image which develops gradually."[28] He clarifies that it might actually be dangerous to attempt to find tone first, to, in fact, go from the outside in rather than begin inwardly, as I initially intended to do. Brian Cox agrees that "The thing is to find the tone, after you've found the objective."[29] Fiona Shaw coaxed me in this direction as well during our workshop together. I had to give in to the notion of actor as character, rather than as signifier.

Perhaps this is all true. However, I was already at an advantage by having written the piece. I had navigated the characters' rivers of thought and development and inner life, so it was already embedded deep within me. I did not have to do the same amount of preliminary character work—I was already infused with it.

In a way, I wrote the characters starting from the outside in. I knew Linita stayed on all fours, close to the ground. I knew Lina was bent back, looking down her nose at everyone she encountered. I knew la Curandera was crouched, craning her neck upward to speak. I explored their tribulations and personalities from what I assumed someone with such a posture should be like.

Phillip Auslander says, "The temptation to play the cliché is always present. If the actor is spending a lot of energy keeping it censored, the actor may be staying inside the temptation. Sometimes if the actor plays the cliché, he is more likely to go beyond it."[30] In the review printed in the Oberlin Review after the show, my performance was thought to, at times, "[border] on caricature." Certainly it's a very fine line between colossal stretches of personality and outright cartoonishness. However, Ludlam warns against "the tendency to be less than you are, to be more specific and less,"[31] which is quite prevalent in naturalism (or what actors think they are trying to achieve when performing in a contemporary, realistic drama). Ludlam assures us that "you can't really perform an unnatural act, unless you claim to have superpowers. Generally, through training with Stanislavski teachers, I realized that they wanted me to behave in a civilized manner in a room, and not do anything extraordinary. But everything I'm interested in is extraordinary."[32]

In order to concretize these characters, honoring their extraordinariness but veering them away from caricature, I spent a great deal of time of the specifics of sensory work. Here's an excerpt from a sensory work rehearsal I spent with Kat, focusing on senses for each character:

*Linita: crawling on small, dirty hands and knees. Small pebbles and sticks poking into her knees. Sniffing the dirt. Poking at the worms. Whistling through blades of grass. Crushing ants under little fingers, tracing them to an anthill. Muddying her dress, torn at the hem. Sweating and itching in the backs of her knees. Tasting grass and rocks. Throwing stones as far as she can. Laughing wildly. Red all around her mouth. Slapping her chest and knocking herself backward.*

*Lina: Bent backward, looking down her nose at everyone else. Her long hair trailing down to the floor. Looking up at the sky, identifying whispy clouds. Seeing circles of birds heading somewhere. Chest up and out, ready for lightning or rain or sun. Blinking and squinting in the sun. Smelling rose water and dusty pillows. An old book smell of the Emperor. Cleanish sheets, but not completely clean. Sweat and smoky breath. Perfumes. Satin and silk, lace (lace luxury?) Creams, moisturizers.*

*La Curandera: crouched down low, searing cramps in her neck and between her shoulder blades and in her lower back. Toes folded inward, tenderly feeling every step before her since her cataracts are clouding over her eyes. Smelling dust, powders, old rotting leaves, sand and salt. Tasting musty copper.*

**iv. DFS: Dead Fish Syndrome**

*Fight through the frustrations and the repetitions and the limpness. Use it. Let it manifest itself organically in your choices. Let it inform your choices.*

Because I didn't have a scene partner, I relied on (and again, please forgive the New Age-y vernacular) a means of communion radiating between the audience and me. Though I felt a need to fight the good fight and win the audience over, I also wanted to attack them with an inundation of senses and words, with a strange plot that refused to travel at an even, understandable pace. At the same time, the audience was my confidante, my friend, rather than keeping them at a distance. With the easing in of action, objective, and tactic, I began to feel a wave of unity tethering the audience to me.

Action, objective, tactic. That's Oberlin's theatre education, and turns out it was right all along. And maybe I wasn't a pure vessel for the text, and Beckett would have been pissed, but I think it made the whole thing much more entertaining. A basic tenet from my Oberlin theater education that I could not deny was the fact that the character must constantly desire something. She must be in a constant struggle to get what she wants, which may be temporarily alleviated when she wins, only to be followed by another desire and another tactic in order to get it.

David Warrilow warns against distancing the audience too much in his article *Creating Symbol and Cipher*: "There was a time when my perception of the audience was 'us' and 'them.' I was so full of anxiety and insecurity that I was not atble to enter into the proper flow of exchange, as I now perceive it can be and ideally must be…I therefore was for a long time in the position of investing a great deal of energy in defending what I was doing against supposed criticism—often because of the unusual nature of the material or style that I was involved in."[33] Even though Warrilow was a prominent Beckett actor, performing in pieces that usually capitalize on estrangement, he explains, "What I had to understand about the actor's relationship to the audience…with a piece of work that one would consider dense and difficult and to some people dark was to what point members of an audience are willing to be challenged, the degree of courage that they bring to the theatre experience. […] If I as an actor invest myself to the best of my ability in the work I have chosen to present—if I give it my best energy—then there's a chance that the audience can trust what is going on on stage. If I hold back, if I sit in judgment on myself or the material or the audience, then there is less chance that the audience is going to be jsutified in trusting and therefore joining the experience. If the actor is willing to go through some kind of transmutation, then the audience can, too."[34] In other words, the actor must hand themselves over entirely before they can experiment in teasing, withholding from the audience. The actor cannot be passive. He or she must take control, and there must be a wholehearted communication between actor and audience.

**v. Willing to please: humor and the banal**

*DON'T TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY!*

"Seriousness can […] be a container for the banal,"[35] says Laurie Anderson. Another addendum to my Convictions List that I've strived to hold onto is: NEVER forget humor. Don't bury your head so far into your role and your "craft" that you can't see humor, just your own ass. How fitting, then, that I should create the Emperor, a self-important character who can *only* see and talk out of his own ass, and who provided the most comic relief throughout the play.

This doesn't suggest that a performance should be raucous and over-the-top all the time—in fact, after a while, that kind of behavior will cease to be funny at all, and will become merely obnoxious. The bare truth is often the funniest thing in the world. Charles Ludlam says "If you tell people the truth you'd better make them laugh or they'll kill you."[36] Again, this harkens back to having *layers* of truth. The peeling away of these layers, how characters hide things from themselves, can be inherently funny as well. For instance, Curandera's struggle to remain a healer, eschewing all suggestions of modernization embodied by Lina, can be humorous at times despite its tragedy.

This causes me to think back to the very beginning of this paper in my description of the dowel exercise I did at BADA. That exercise proved: task equals truth, truth equals humor, and humor equals union. As I mentioned, I felt the most connection with the audience when Curandera did her impressions of the Emperor, who provided a tremendous amount of humor and response—the audience absolutely *erupted* every single night, and I think it was because these impressions occurred in the beginning-middle section of the play. They were still trying to find something to identify with and to grab on to, and the Emperor provided a perfect diversion. He allowed the audience to trust me more. He helped draw them into me.

**V. Hindsight is 20/20**

*It was a very sick thing to do.*

This paper may be in defense of my Honors project, but a great deal of the project's aftermath has led to me defending my honor. As I said before, I constantly searched for comfort in the depths of a book, siphoning out reassurances from theatre revolutionaries like Joe Chaikin and Laurie Anderson to back me up. It was difficult to find that voice, those convictions, within myself. Throughout the process of writing this paper, however, I think my voice has emerged, even if in a whisper.

I was thrilled to be hounded with questions for the weeks after *JOHN's* run. Reactions ran the gamut: some people were glad to see a different quality of theatre. Others seemed to have a difficult time understanding why the story unfolded the way it did. They could not grab a foothold on the character's relationships to each other, and who this unseen *JOHN* person was. Everyone had their hypotheses, and they hunted me down for answers. Of course, I never let on.

I called the project *JOHN* because I did not want to hold the audience's hand. Certainly I could have called it *La Curandera,* or *The Tank,* or *Three Women,* or something equally unadventurous.

This would have made things too easy. It would have directed the audience's attention to *exactly* what they should be focusing on, symbolically, narratively, relationally. It would have been heavy-handed and instructive. I gave the audience no instructions except to take off their shoes and turn off their cell phones. I didn't provide a production note to warn the audience, let them in on what they should expect. In the weeks prior to the show, when people heard the title and asked who *JOHN* was, I told them to come to the show and they'd see for themselves. They came and left without being given a precise answer, and they consequently made their irritation known to me. *JOHN* is such a vague, bland, all-encompassing word. So many different male faces come up in everyone's mind when you say the name. There's also the prostitute-customer/toilet slang. Maybe the Emperor is John. La Curandera refers to herself by her profession (even though at the end she reveals that her name is also Lina) so why shouldn't he? I wanted the audience to go through this thought process, instead of having a single correct answer to appease them.

To incorporate some of those reliable sources I have found to back up my own ideas, I will summon the work of Jochen Gerz: "Of course, those who expect clear-cut theses and solutions at discount prices will not be able to find more than emptiness and secrecy in performance art […] Usually people are afraid of disorientation. They act aggressively against anybody and anything that confuses them. Yet, confusion is an essential element of human thought. Whenever old guiding concepts fall apart and new convictions emerge, there is bound to be a period of uncertainty. The solution lies not with the avoidance of these contradictions but with their intensification. The deepest confusion is the threshold of insight. In his works Gerz counts on viewers who are not afraid of confusion."[37] I count on the same. After all, what has the audience done to deserve any coddling? I respect them much more than that—I want to expect much more of them. I tried to coax them to that place by not offering program notes and forcing them to take off their shoes, putting them on the floor or squeezed against the wall in an unfamiliar performance space.

Laurie Anderson, too, is a girl after my own heart: "The most important thing to me is not be didactic. […] As an artist, I consider my job a descriptive one, not prescriptive, you know. I don't have any answers for anybody. […] So the situation I'm interested in creating is, yes, a sensual one, but one that's airy enough so that people can say, 'Well, I'll think about that but I don't have to think about it right now. I'll think about it later, maybe totally disagree with it later. But now, I'll just sit back and watch."[38] That's what I tried to propose in the interview for my press release, which probably didn't reach as many people prior to the performance as I would have liked.

Nevertheless, the very start of the show was an assault on the audience anyway, from the get-go, so they couldn't quite get the foothold they wanted. I peppered the play with humor to draw them in, though, so they wouldn't sit back and become totally disinterested. I wanted them to become interested in the *quality,* the aesthetic, rather than exactly what was happening and when. I wanted it all to wash over them, with certain images snagging and becoming fleshed out in their minds.

In the set design, we fought against creating a solid, recognizable space. It had hints of the moor, or the womb. In Adolphe Appia's designs, he too advocated "a theatre of intimation rather than crudely realistic appearance."[39]

Robert Wilson's vast expanses of stage area are somewhat similar. Robert Stearns explains that "Robert Wilson's art is about showing us things that exist. He shows us what people do. He does not tell us *why* they exist [emphasis mine]." (44) Stearns goes on to explain in reference to several of Wilson's works that, "We will never learn more about Hess, nor more about Freud, Stalin, Queen Victoria, Einstein or Edison [the titular subjects of several of his works] if we expect Wilson to tell us about them. But we might come to see and feel their impenetrable presence."[40] *JOHN* is this way. We are never even sure who *JOHN* is. But we certainly feel his/its overarching, stifling presence throughout the piece. We even come in to the theatre with preconceived notions of what *JOHN* could be, even though our preconceptions aren't quite as concrete or historically based as those of Stalin or Queen Victoria. We come in knowing he is most likely a man of Western descent. For the time being, that tells us all we need.

Stearns continues, "As in dreams, shapes and actions present themselves, disappear and return in other forms. We as the dreamers may be delighted, surprised or terrified [or exasperatingly confused], but the dream is independent and can't be controlled. Awake we analyze, interpret and try to find meaning. But Wilson's art is elusive as the stuff of dreams."[41] This period upon "waking" is what Laurie Anderson referred to earlier, when the lights come up and one exits the space, suddenly allowing time to reflect or to remember snatches of what just happened. But that dream-like, subconscious state as one absorbs the piece cannot be experienced again. It can only be analyzed and re-interpreted, examined more closely on a philosophical level, after the fact.

## VI. Conclusion

*And wouldn't that feel nice, Linita? To be so feroz, so kissed feroz? To be so scared of everything?*

In the first rehearsals of *JOHN,* I spent the day in front of the mirror against Lillian Hellman's wishes. As these characters, I contorted, twisted, pulled faces. After a few weeks, I pulled the black curtain over those mirrors and began to get to the heart of things. As these characters, I began to crave truth; I craved to be heard, to find my father, to find a home, to finally, *finally* be safe, to be a woman in all senses of the word: wife, mother, sister, guardian. Instead of cavorting before a mirror, I held the mirror up to nature. Instead of examining the shapes my body took, I examined myself as an actor, a writer, a teammate, a worker in the theatre. And in the end, with the help of my collaborators, I became strong enough to leave the mirror behind.

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