The Actor as Vessel: A Journey Towards Citizen Artistry

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The Actor as Vessel: A Journey Towards Citizen Artistry

A thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy with emphasis in Performance specializing in The Use of Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum from Virginia Commonwealth University

By Joseph Anthony Carlson  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University 2008  
Masters of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

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Acknowledgement

My grandmother Carlson taught me that the most important thing in life are the relationships you forge with people encountered along the journey. For seven years I have walked the path of artist in training during which time I have been fortunate to meet an innumerable bounty of brilliant, creative, self-motivated artists whom have been a source of inspiration for years. From the folks that first let me try out my talents as a teacher in student run movement laboratories, to my third year acting students who have facilitated my journey as a teacher; I thank you. To my grandfather Carlson who taught me “persistence and determination alone are omnipotent,” everyday I rise I think of your words and attempt to make the most of my struggles and challenges so that I might grow. To my nana Mary who raised me from a little boy into a young man I share your gifts of humor, passion, blunt forward manner and unyielding sense of self with all I encounter. To my Aunt Lu I give thanks for being the closest thing to a “real” mother I’ll ever know. To Uncle Jack I thank you for waking me up in the morning to rake leaves, and for your intimidating beard. You are the kind of man I hope to be. To Abby Carlson, my cousin, my sister, my friend, and the first person I ever played make believe with, I thank you for a lifetime of laughter and a hand to hold on the toughest of days. To Louisa Sargent for a couch to sleep on and a floor on which to dance the stress away. Thanks to Trey Hartt for walking the talk and setting the example. I put one up on the board for Brian Gartland: friend, brother, and co-conspirator. I pledge loyalty and love to The Conciliation project for awakening my sense of purpose. To Olisa-Mequella F. Enrico Johnson, for strong shoulders to stand on and a visionary light to follow. This thesis is in honor of all those who have given me food when I was hungry, water when I thirsted, and strength when I was weak.

I want to give special thanks to Josh Chenard for allowing me to observe his classes, synthesize ideas, and suffer through a first draft. To Janet Rodgers I give thanks for opening up the doors to theatre across the world and inside myself, as well as bringing sense and structure to my collaged beliefs. Most especially I give thanks, and show love to Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates for allowing me to study at her feet for the past three years, and whom I credit for all my success now and in the future. I am forever indebted to you. You showed me the way to my self. The greatest gift anyone can receive is empowerment, and while you did not hand it to me, you showed me who I could become by being who you are. You told me I was brilliant, and that I was enough. I only wish my tears could find their way onto this page as a libation of my eternal gratitude. Thank you.
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Abstract

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By Joseph Anthony Carlson, Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008, Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

A thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy with emphasis in Performance specializing in The Use of Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum from Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Thesis Director: Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Theatre

This thesis is a personal journey examining the applications of Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum as developed by my mentor Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, to the profession of the dramatic artist whether they are actor, director, educator or producer, to the training of the dramatic artist as a means of empowering generative, self defined, self validating artists, and as a means of developing community specific dramas in the hopes of facilitating individual and personal revelation. Using the author’s personal experiences as evidence, it intends to affirm Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum as an emergent methodology for theatrical practitioners.
Preface:

This thesis speaks to the student, the teacher, the artist, the lover, the professional, the politically minded, the entertainment bound. It is both an experiential reflection and a manifesto. I invite you to come along with me on a personal journey through citizen artistry that applies the methodology of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum as a process towards self-definition and individuation.

What do I mean when I refer to citizen artistry? I mean an artist who recognizes the potential power of their craft to initiate/facilitate transformation in their communities, whether city, state, nation, or the world. It is an artist who realizes and accepts responsibility for the stories they tell as well as an artist who is aware, regardless of intention, that they inevitably contribute to the continuous shaping of culture, and to the understanding of ‘the other’ and ourselves. A citizen artist is one who creates art with the ultimate objective of facilitating transformation as an act of cultural evolution and serves as a catalyst for social or individual change in an effort to move their communities forward. Additionally, the citizen artist is an individual who believes themself to be part of a greater whole, as I believe actors must believe within the realm of theatrical production. The citizen artist, when specifically applied to the actor, reinforces the necessity of an artist to wield strong technical skills with the
intangible elements of spiritual commitment in the telling of a story, with revelation, not applause, being the ultimate product.

When I speak of the artist I simultaneously mean educator, and when I speak of the educator I also mean student. This methodology understands education as a reciprocal act. The drama unfolds between those playing the role of student, and those playing the role of teacher, each one wearing both hats at different times.

This thesis recounts the tale of a personal journey that demonstrates the eleven principles of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African continuum as a pedagogical method in the training of dramatic artists, an actor’s process in creating a character, and through collaborative authorship, the birthing of works that serve to question and reveal aspects of the human condition.

The thesis will be formatted after the cyclic model of ritual drama. The thesis will contain a prologue and an epilogue as introduction and conclusion with seven cycles composing the body of the text. These cycles will articulate the employment of Ritual Poetic Drama in pedagogy, process, and production/performance as both actor in service of traditional stories belonging to the western cannon, original collaborative works designed to engage communities in vital dialogues relevant to social issues, and the production of not for profit theatre as a service to the community. This thesis will detail how the methodology of Ritual Poetic Drama within in the African Continuum, as liberation pedagogy, facilitates a journey towards artistic self-actualization by returning to the origins of the dramatic artist. It will embrace the concepts of actor as a vessel
for story, both as shaman and citizen capable of shaping the world with the power of
the dramatic form while daring to imagine and realize another a world.
Prologue: Setting the Stage

I am drawing from a wellspring of adventures including my ‘in the field’ and on stage research, study and practical application over the course of my graduate education, incorporating experiences as a community organizer who created Theatre in Battery Park (an independent company founded for the mission of bringing free theatre of a high caliber to citizens underserved by the arts sector in Richmond, Virginia). In addition I am drawing from my experiences as a team teacher in the third year acting studio at Virginia Commonwealth University, where Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates (AKA Dr. T, innovator of this methodology) instructs students utilizing the methods of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPDWAC) and how I have personally witnessed students’ transformation from passive imitators to empowered generators.

Then, as a professional artist who employs the techniques of the methodology in developing, refining, and constantly evolving a character during rehearsal and performance, I will apply the values and techniques to the process of characterization, using Tom Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath* and Le Victomte de Valmont from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* as examples of the elements of the Ritual process in practice complimenting the foundational elements of more traditional acting methodologies. Additionally I will unpack the influences of other methods in the pedagogy of RPDWAC.
Finally I will attempt to re-define “community artist” as “citizen artist,” utilizing my experiences as a collaborator who participated in the research, development, and performance of an original devised work between partnering organizations, created in order to facilitate dialogue about addiction and commissioned by The Healing Place. I will verify Ritual Poetic Drama as means of encouraging individual and social change through the unique experience of live theatre when practiced using the example of the African Continuum as it’s foundation.

It is important for the reader to know that this thesis is primarily narrative in its form, acknowledges the author’s western perspective and focus regarding professional and educational theatre, as well as ideological apparatuses, and asserts that theatre is at its best when engaging audiences in important “political” conversations either stemming from personal experiences that reveal unique/shared distinctions of persons/cultures while recognizing commonality, or from current/historical events that bring into question the accuracy of the dominant narratives, institutions, and power structures.

In discussing my personal journey over the past six years of having practiced this method as an actor, director, producer, and educator, many of the stories and examples are first hand accounts and consist of opinions. The ideas are not all new, or radical. Authors, educators and artists (Grotowski, Boal, Artaud, Hagen, Stanislavsky, Eugenio Barba, Pettiford-Wates, along with others) who have shaped my aesthetic and philosophy in addition to sharing values with this emergent methodology, are included to acknowledge and respect those who have laid a foundation for the continued
evolution of the dramatic form. The ideas presented are an extension of my personal understanding as well as my interpretation of their techniques and traditions.

The artistic process is unique to every individual who chooses to explore the simple joy, adrenaline surging thrill, or power of expression in the theatrical medium, whether as a professional calling or casual hobby. Combine that with the facts that art is a subjective experience, and it is practically impossible to lay any empirical claim as to what does and does not work “best.” To make such claims is absurd. However, I can attest to what I have personally witnessed: both the improving quality of my own craft and the maturation of student artists, (ranging from ages 12-25), whom I have had the pleasure to instruct while employing this methodology. By sharing these experiences and relating them to the values of the methodology I hope to affirm its effectiveness and advocate its practice.

The language of this thesis aims to be accessible to varying levels of education and experience so that it might be used as a resource in order to facilitate the perpetuation of these teachings, and aid in reclaiming the power of the dramatic artist. It understands itself to be unfinished; that it is only part of a living history still being written. At times this thesis shifts directions, speaks in poetic and colloquial tongues, moves through time. I hope you will enjoy the ride.
Cycle 1: What is Ritual Poetic Drama?
The Answer and the Question

Ritual – An Altered State of Consciousness, moving toward a common goal together

Poetic – Symbolic expression through song, dance, and word power

Drama – Story impelled by the necessity to reveal itself, whose outcome must be revelation/transformation/change

This cycle details the principles and purposes of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPDWAC). I will discuss the 11 core values that comprise the methodology as it relates to story, community, and the dramatic artist or ensemble, and introduce the paradigm as an emergent form of pedagogy for the dramatic artist.

Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum is cyclical, ritual and transformational. Like life, story moves in circles, cycling as it lapses, echoing itself, its themes, its images and revelations. With each pass of cyclic progression the aim is greater revelation; consider this praxis spiraling upwards increasing in radius with each turn.

(See figure on next page)
Each cycle creates growth, expanding our capacity for knowledge and greater revelation. Now add the image of a triangle, each point representing the major “beats” of existence: Life, Death, and Transformation. This is how we perceive knowledge, and how we perceive story within the African Continuum. (See figure on next page)
This pedagogy, rooted in the African Continuum, disagrees with two particular predominate concepts in a western modality of thought. In a western modality, knowledge is either/or.\(^1\) The accumulation of knowledge is a linear, finite act (a common misperception, particularly in younger students). Within the African

\(^1\) Either/Or is a modality of thought, wherein ideas exist in binary opposition to one another. For example I know that black is black because it is not white. Something is either black or it is white. It is either day, or it is night. You are either wrong or you are right.
Continuum knowledge is never a matter of either/or but rather a combination of both/and. The African Continuum believes that the accumulation of knowledge only ends when the vessel for that knowledge has passed from this plain of existence (i.e. is dead). Let us imagine a student operating within the western paradigm at the end of a course in a semester of college. The student, having turned in the necessary assignments, and scoring well on the final examination, believes him/herself to have acquired all knowledge that could be gained from that study; final, complete, over and done with. In this way a student may determine that they have learned all they need to learn within the scope of that topic, that subject, and depending upon whether or not it relates to their chosen field of study, now they are free to forget. They have no need for the information since it was retained merely in order to make the grade. The information received was acquired from the lectures of the professor, some mandatory reading from an accredited textbook, a few group projects perhaps, and the receptacle student (to borrow a term from Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Freedom) is filled, ready to be emptied. In the end, and throughout the course, we may presume that the student’s goal was a grade. Obtaining knowledge is different from receiving a grade.

RPDWAC is a pedagogy that encourages the life long process of self-edification. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of educational subjects and intellectual pursuits so that no true learning is worth discarding. As an emergent pedagogy it compliments the burgeoning field of interdisciplinary studies and the concepts of divergent thinking (an ability to think of various solutions and variations) as we explore the relationship between fields and what we have to teach one another. Knowledge doesn’t end with
passing a final exam. If anything that should be only one of many steps on the path towards understanding. To be granted a grade is to be told that what you have accomplished is right or wrong, pass or fail. The methodology of RPDWAC operates from the paradigm of both/and, rather than either/or. Within the context of RPDWAC there is no one answer, and ideas don’t exist in binary opposition. Hopefully, each answer leads to more questions on the path towards greater knowledge of the world and thus of the self. In discovering our selves we find our relationship to the world, while realizing that we are “a presence that is relational to the world and to others.” (Freire, pg.25)

The primacy of story (and thus the drama as regarded through this lens) are the questions with which the story leaves its audiences regarding the self, the world, the systems, institutions, and events composing that world. This method does not work from plot. “Plot answers all the questions it pretends to ask.” (James Baldwin) Every student who has ever studied even the most rudimentary histories of drama have seen this linear graphing of the Greek model of plot: (See the next page)
As I mentioned before, Ritual Poetic Drama uses the triangle as its symbol for
story, traveling through those points with the expanding praxis. The three points of the
triangle represent Life, Death, and Transformation. As we pass through each point, one
informs the other, and each time the story is revisited greater revelation is achieved,
depicting how knowledge is a progressive and cumulative action. Time and space,
functions of existence that distance us from events in our lives, grant us greater
perspective and thus allow us to draw new meaning and insight from the events in our
individual and collective lives. It is by revisiting these events, speaking them aloud,
performing them in a solo show, or transforming them into dramatic works that artists
of the dramatic form achieve richer comprehension of themselves, and their place in the
world. It is how they acquire self-knowledge.
What follows are the eleven principles of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum as created by Dr. Tawnya Petiford-Wates\(^2\), and as defined through my perspective and experiences.

1. **It is cyclic, ritual, and transformational:**

   Ritual poetic drama works from the perspective that drama is life, because it is an organic and ever changing phenomenon. Theatre is live and unfolds moment to moment. Life is cyclic and if drama is the theatrical framing of life’s experience, and drama is story then story is intrinsically cyclic. This perspective of story often focuses on milestones in existence, Life, Death, and Transformation, as well as the impact of the ordinary. Ritual Poetic Drama involves an altered state of consciousness as it relates to the rehearsal and performance state of the actor as well as in many cases to that of the witness (audience). Its goal is transformation through individual revelation. This is where growth begins, and from which the hope for greater change is born.

2. **Its mission is to retrieve, restore, reclaim and recognize a purpose:**

   To articulate this principle let us look at the story of Sankofa, a West African Parable:

   A young person leaves home and half way to their destination they realize they’ve forgotten something back where they began. Sankofa: “Go back and fetch it.”

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\(^2\) The eleven principles are derived from Dr. Tawnya Petiford Wate’s dissertation *A Re-Vision: Toward a Re-Connection of the Dramatic Artist with the African Origins of the Dramatic Form*. The definitions that follow are my own interpretation of those principles.
For there is no shame in going back to get what was forgotten. But shame is to 
him/her who goes ahead only to arrive and discover that the most important thing s/he 
needed was the one thing s/he neglected to go back and get.

Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum emphasizes the development 
of the artist, as an individual with power to shape and influence their community. This 
methodology operates from the belief that the artist’s original role and the potential of 
theatre is to show the community itself, or versions of itself, so that the community may 
solve problems and move forward. “The potential is the ability to rise above our lower 
nature in order that we might be able to access our higher nature and contribute that 
inner knowledge to the good of our community.” (Pettiford-Wates, 37) This 
methodology challenges the artist to reclaim that purpose. Sankofa: Go back and fetch 
it.

3. It has the ability to help the individual and the collective 
artist/participant and/or the audience/participant access the depth of their 
own content and engage in the depth of their own consciousness:

3 Community/Drama within the African Continuum – “In African worldview there is unified 
purpose, the greater good. The spiritual and the natural are inseparable. If a person’s 
ethics are out of balance, and they do wrong to their sister/brother, then it would follow, in 
the African world view, that the individual’s physical well being would also suffer and 
thereby her/his community would suffer as well. One of my contentions with the 
“traditionalists” in looking at theatre is the way in which they dichotomize theatre arts and 
societies giving them separate realities rather than an integral co-existence and inter-
dependence with one another. The African continuum rejects one without the other. The 
Continuum can not have life without the spiritual/ritual/physical inter-relation of this tri-
unal force.” (Wates)
Training of the dramatic artist in this method practices the technique of emotional location aimed at developing the artist’s knowledge of their personal map. Emotional location is like a form of cartography for the artist. Facilitated journeys begin with guided meditations into states of relaxation achieving an altered state of consciousness, which in turn access conscious and subconscious personal histories as they relate to emotional memory connected physically by and manifested through breath, movement and sound. When these are applied to performance they aid the actor in presenting real human behavior and life on the stage, serving as vessels for the living story. After such journeys artists will write in a stream of conscious fashion and then share their writings with the larger group. The artist will speak from the emotional place from which the writing sprung, remembering the sights, sounds, and sensations of the environment in which it took place, and in this active oration, revelation is gained. Artists may unlock suppressed or forgotten memories, as well as physical, intellectual and emotional blocks. The experience of the individual once translated into performance may be given affirmation from the witnesses of the performance who have recognized some element of them selves in the story.

4. It is self-determining and/or self defining:

The process of artistic training is deeply personal and in this methodology it is dependent upon one’s knowledge and one’s ability to validate oneself. This self-validation and loving of oneself requires taking responsibility for that self and the decisions s/he make. As a person, and as an artist, the work I do, if it is of any quality,
impacts the world; it impacts my community. This methodology, in recognizing our interdependence upon one another, recognizes that our actions as artists have consequences whether or not we choose to work for social change or for popular entertainment.

5. **It is improvisational and presentational:**

The form is in the moment living off impulse, fueled by the conditions of the here and now. This supports the idea that even in a long run of a show there is the potential for new discovery and further revelation. It is about being (presenting) and not showing (representing).\(^4\)

6. **It is communal collaborative, connected to ancestry:**

It is Communal with regards to the people gathered fulfilling necessary roles for the harmony and health of the community. The classroom and rehearsal/performance space are viewed as a learning community. Collaborative means that all members of the communities’ knowledge and questions are required, recognized and welcome. It is connected to ancestry by our acknowledgement of those who came before us who paved the way enabling, us to be who we are and stand where we now stand. We

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\(^4\) The concept of Presentational versus Representational acting is adapted from Uta Hagen’s *Respect for Acting,* “The Representational acts from an outer form based on an “objective result for the character,” where as the Presentational actor trusts that a “form will result from identification with the character and the discovery of his actions, and works on stage for a moment-to-moment subjective experience.” (Hagen, 12) Representational acting operates within styles such as Commedia, American Musical, or Kabuki, valid powerful forms. Presentational acting is when the actor attempts to reveal real human behavior by allowing the character to use the actor as an instrument.
recognize this in two ways: the personal, recognizing individual heritage and historical biography, as well as our collective heritages and history/legacy.

7. **It is creative, not imitative:**

   ‘Can’t nobody do it like you do it. So do you and don’t try to be anyone else.’

Cover your ground, recognize, awake and embrace your power. You are creative enough!

8. **It is evocative and empowering:**

   It is visceral in its performance and witnessing (audience), intending to rattle nerves, unsettle perceptions, and acknowledge the world as the complex, beautiful place it is. It empowers and engages both the actor and the audience. Whether or not that opportunity for empowerment is received is dependent upon the participant and is entirely up to them. No one can force anyone to go along for the ride. In taking responsibility for your choices you begin to recognize the power of your influence. Ritual Poetic Drama values artist’s individual lenses, perspectives, and experiences. It illuminates the actor’s weaknesses, their tricks, and their fallbacks pushing them outside of their comfort zones so as to facilitate growth through submersion in the creative unknown. Risk!

9. **It has individual and or social content:**
It is personal and or political. It stems from the experiences of the artist, which are shaped through personal, familial, social, governmental conditions, and acknowledges the hegemonic structures that influence our conscious and subconscious lives. For example, if we are a country at war, how can I not consider myself involved in the commerce of war, if only by complicit complacence? I may not examine my life, or create art that dissect relationships through a military industrial complex perspective, however at some point I must reflect my country, at least in the eyes of the other. Likewise though, the joy it gave me to watch my grandmother perfectly balance the peanut butter and jelly on two sides of the sandwich, and what that might say about the universal quality of grandmothers, or the archetype of the crone, has little to do with my state and my country. They are both, however, part of my human experience that may contain commonalities with others outside of my social groups.

10. **Its ultimate purpose is to alter consciousness Past, Present and Future in order that transformation may occur creating for the participants artist and/or audience social change.**

Wayne Dyer expresses the principle, “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” This theatre form is not designed primarily to entertain, although it aims at a high caliber of artistry and recognizes entertainment as a valuable subversive tool in deconstructing social norms. It demands that the artist put the story first. The telling of that story is performed in service to the audience/witness. In order to challenge perspectives and facilitate individual and
collective progression Ritual Poetic Drama hopes to create dialogue surrounding the themes, truths, and images of the performance/story.

**11. It works from story rather than plot.**

“Story is impelled by the necessity to reveal itself. A story can have nothing to hide, at least not intentionally. There is no resolution to a Story. The aim of a Story is revelation, in each of us. What we do with the questions with which the story leaves us? A plot on the other hand answers ALL questions it pretends to pose.”

- James Baldwin
CYCLE 2: BIRTHING OF A CONSCIOUSNESS

In the midst of our day to day routines we are occasionally sucker-punched by an incident, or we step right in ‘it.’ An event rouses us from our daily grind and we see the world in a whole new light. Sometimes these events are small, like accidental inconveniences, a flat tire, or that doggy land mine. We lament “Why me? Why today?” Other times these events are momentous: elections, revolutions, rites of passage. Wherein once witnessed, once experienced, one can never be the same. There is no turning back. An existential alarum has been sounded leaving one to either answer the call or shut their eyes and hearts to the beckoning of destiny. The night I recognized a potential power of theatre to transform the hearts of individuals and inspire action from dramatic rendering was one of these events.

That night I was forcing myself into the fluorescent glow of the library in order to study for a huge art history exam being administered the following day. It was to count for 25 percent of my final grade. It was the second semester of my first year as a theatre performance major at Virginia Commonwealth University and while I was on my way to the library I passed the Richard Newdick Theater (student playhouse for the university). The lights were shining in the marquis window and people were filling up the theater. I had a flyer in my hand for the evening’s performance of uncle tom: de-
constructed. I knew a group of students who had studied under Dr. Tawnya Pettiford Wates (Dr. T), the current third year acting professor who had previously taught at and run the theatre program for Seattle Central Community College in Washington, were the members of this crazy troupe. These students had traveled across the country in order to perform, for two evenings, a play some had helped to devise and collaboratively author in 2001. The sojourn itself seemed to illustrate just how special this show might be. The group’s name was, and is, The Conciliation Project (TCP); a non-profit theatre company whose mission is “to promote through challenging dramatic works open and honest dialogue about Racism in America in order to repair its damaging legacy.”

Sitting up in the library that spring evening, surrounded by my textbooks, note cards, and piles of lecture scribbling to fill out my study sheet and memorize by rote dates and names that would be lost in a few weeks, I am distracted by a flyer for the play sitting atop the table. It depicts the fragmented face of a black minstrel with bulging eyes, and a grotesque broken smile. I should be studying, but the flyer is staring at me and I back at it. The image is so evocative that it seems to be speaking out loud to me. My consciousness (that little voice inside) is beckoning me. “Go to the theater . . . the theatre is calling you . . . there’s something for you there.” “Shut-up consciousness,” I say, not sure if it’s actually my conscious or the little devil whispering procrastination in my ear.
When I can take it no longer I shut the books, collect my papers, fill up my bag and rush down the stairs from the fourth floor, out of the library, jogging across the compass towards the playhouse; impelled.

I don’t remember what it was like walking into the theater. I don’t remember sitting down. I barely remember any of the play. The experience was so absolutely encompassing that in retrospect it’s as if I was in an altered state of consciousness. It was as if the performance transported me, and the rest of the audience, to another reality; a reality similar to our own, but extra daily and hyper focused. I remember being struck to my very soul. As the song, dance, story, melodrama, and scenes poured out of the performers, clad in the garbs of vaudevillian black and white minstrels, the theatre pulsed. I watched a mother belt a haunting melody through the ceiling towards the heaven from a time long ago, for her precious child stolen by a pack of white minstrels huffing and puffing across the stage as wolves would huff and puff after a kill.

That evening, theatre revealed a power and a purpose that I had never witnessed or thought possible in the medium before. At the time I had been struggling with my own identity. As a student and as an actor I was questioning if this was the path for me. In most of my class curriculum, in the attitudes of my peers and older students, it seemed like a competition for success. The path of the actor was a race towards stardom wherein fame and celebrity were the only affirmations for the quality

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5 I was fortunate to train extensively for a semester in the methods of Jacques Lecoq and Jerzy Grotowski which significantly contributed to my process as an actor, my work as an educator, and of course my philosophies on the role of the artist. However, this class was much different from most of my early collegiate curriculum.
of one’s talent. I didn’t consider myself an artist. I was an actor in training grappling
with self-doubt and personal inadequacies. I knew little to nothing of craft, technique,
or presence.

In my younger days (ha! I’m 26) I had always been a rebel of sorts. Newly
emerging values seemed to contradict the resistance I had once esteemed. I had
questioned authority, denounced capitalism, and swore allegiance to no flag. Fronting
a hardcore band, I had screamed to the sweating youths, “Freedom! We need more
Freedom!” Now here I was studying to be what? A celebrity? Another cog in the
machine of mass entertainment designed to inebriate with trivial humor and tired,
formulaic plot lines over canned laughter and Chinese carry out? What had I become
and where was I headed?

Several times throughout the evening’s performance I balled my eyes out, which
had never happened to me before when watching a play, or any film, except as a
young child one Halloween during Beauty and the Beast, and another time during a
Garth Brooks video, Standing Outside the Fire, where an autistic child crashes violently
to the track during a meet and his father rushes down to help him up and across the
finish line. I’ve always had a soft spot for the handicapped (one of many marginalized
populations) because both of my parents are mentally retarded, not because of
genetics but by accidental circumstance. As a child that video struck a nerve. The
cyclical drama I had watched that evening played a concerto through my identity. I felt
my soul shiver and the world tilt around me. The story vibrated past the edge of the
stage, wrapping its arms around me, plunging its fingers deep inside my metaphysical
It seemed as if spirits of the stage had risen from the boards of the Newdick Theater and filled the performers. They didn’t seem as much like actors putting on a play as vessels for the ghosts of history, vessels for the stories of a nation, vessels for the story of an American legacy.

After the performance, members of the traveling band sat drained on the proscenium’s edge, drenched through the layers of costumes, the remnants of makeup that had composed their minstrel facades now de-masked. Faces stained, empty from exertion but glowing, they sat along the apron of the stage like heroes, like warriors of light. A couple of members facilitated an open dialogue with those in attendance. The audience that bore witness to the story first shared sounds or words articulating what they were feeling in the moments immediately after the final cycle. The facilitators called the game popcorn. Having watched the drama reveal itself and reveal the inner parts of ourselves, we all entered into a dialogue, first with one stranger in the crowd, then as a larger group. We spoke of specific images and scenes from the play that illustrated in poetic form the legacy of Racism in America; the legacy of slavery, and the science of de-humanization through institutionalized segregation, legislation designed to oppress and divide, generating laws that constructed a system of privilege and unequal opportunity as well as systemic division enacted through dogmatic superiority that manipulated and perverted the stories of God to justify the abhorrent atrocities of slavery, coinciding with the genocide of the indigenous tribes, the 500 nations just to name a few.
Theatre was talking about all this? Yes, and we were talking about it in the theater. The strangers next to me became more than unknown faces in the crowd, they became fellow Americans. In our shared oppressions, responsibilities and histories, and most especially in our differences we discovered a common unity.

I spoke. I don’t remember what I said. I think during popcorn I called out “shame,” perhaps “guilt.” What exactly the shame and guilt were for I don’t think I could have articulated at the time. Looking back now years later, I’m sure it was the shame of my oblivion and the guilt of having never raised my voice in pro-active dissent before. The tears that sprang forth from my aching heart in empathy for the struggles of those I never knew but now felt a close kinship with, washed my eyes of all that oblivion. For a night at least I saw. I bore witness.

I was not given any answers. The play made no claims, and offered no catharsis. The members on the stage had no solutions, other than maybe ‘love thy neighbor,’ or ‘change begins with you.’ But I was conscious for the first time; conscious of the fact that I was white, and what went along with that whiteness.

In this nation if you are white, straight, male, and of a healthy body you are afforded the privilege of walking through life free to believe that race doesn’t matter; that enlightened forward thinking individuals see beyond color, sex, and class. Having grown up in lower income neighborhoods during the majority of my adolescence, I had friends of all colors. As a tow-headed white boy in a predominantly Latino, low-income, apartment complex, I was the actual minority. Being born the child of mentally retarded parents, I met a wide array of “differently-able” people. I had never held
prejudice for those people who were different from myself, or thought that in some way my skin equated with superior standing. I didn’t have to think about my skin and what it might afford me, or that it afforded me anything. I didn’t have to be on guard against the agents of a very large, and rather terrifying system in place for generations manipulated to benefit ‘Whites’ through denial of others’ civil rights. In fact, I had always wanted to be Black, or Spanish, anything other than plain old ordinary boring white with no real connection to an ancestry. My mixed bag of European blood had been assimilated over generations and I was merely your every day garden-variety white boy. That evening I recognized my whiteness. I realized how other people might see my whiteness.

There’s a phenomenon known as white guilt that often subconsciously inspires white folks of some means to give back to the poor, or the less fortunate, who often times just happen to be persons of color. This white guilt operates in a variety of ways. You can see the workings of white guilt at food lines in basement churches, or at book bag give away for back to school events in lower income neighborhoods. White guilt manifests itself in tutoring, or even right down in the bogs of the civil rights movement, which is not over despite so many calling for a ‘post racial’ America, clamoring ‘can’t we all just move on.’ I don’t know if that’s what was working on me that evening; if birthing a consciousness is like experiencing grief, progressing in many stages. I certainly don’t hold on to that guilt any more, or at least I work against it as best I can. I’ve learned that guilt and shame are the bookends of oppression. I know that I was
inspired by the piece. The performance had viscerally stirred in me a sense of purpose. I felt called to action. The alarum sounded and my heart pounded.

The best theatre contains the essence of life itself, because it reawakens your sense of connection to the happenings of the world. As I have mentioned before, each time we revisit a story in our lives we gain greater revelation regarding what it meant in the shaping of ourselves. That night in the theatre reflected the evening I gave my heart to Christ, in the ‘born again’ Christian sense.

Now, to be honest, that relationship and my philosophies regarding religion have changed a great deal since the time I was ten years old until now. However, both revelations were of a spiritual nature. Shortly after I had accepted Jesus Christ into my heart as my “personal Lord and Savior” (see born again Christian Dogma) I felt the calling to be a pastor one night at an evening praise and worship service during a summer retreat.

Praise and worship in “Born Again” Christian churches is more like a performance or even a rock concert at times, than it is a religious service (particularly in youth ministries). During worship the music swells and envelops, powered by the holy trinity as well as a large and complex sound system. One night the pastor asked if anyone from the congregation felt the calling of service to God? Did anyone feel in his or her hearts the calling to ministry? If so would they step forward and declare themselves? I felt God working on me and I made the choice (it’s always a choice in matters of consciousness) to walk on to that stage and announce myself as a young man desiring to spread the gospel. Over time I fell out of favor with such a religion. Snap, just like
that. I began to recognize the inherit hypocrisies between The Word and the deeds of my religious leaders. I’m sure that punk rock, hormones, moving cities, drugs and alcohol also contributed. The belief though, that I had the quality of a leader, that I had something to say and that was important in a way beyond my own selfish desires, stayed with me. As years went by I occasionally wondered how so strong a feeling could dissipate over time. Was the experience one of pure passion in the moment, or was it real and would I one day return to the church?

That evening in the theater I approached Dr. T and told her that I wanted to be involved with TCP in some capacity. She nodded and said that she understood such a desire. She didn’t say much after that as I proceeded to share some of the story above. I told her of the calling I had once felt. I told her that I had been wandering in my own personal desert for years and after having witnessed this play I believed that I could somehow conciliate my craft as an actor with my desire to change the world. I had recognized in those actors a spiritual quality. They appeared as shamans who had given themselves over singularly to the spirits of the story. They were vessels donning the holy robes of performance in the fashion of minstrels pouring forth the sacred. She told me to keep in touch.

Life is a funny thing; the way the universe unfolds itself, the way paths cross and people meet. I reflect on my life: the mistakes I’ve made and victories I’ve achieved, the paths I’ve chosen to take when forks in the road emerged, all of the heartache I’ve caused, the pain I’ve inflicted resulting from my choices. I reflect on these mistakes and do not regret that I made them. I wouldn’t change a thing. Those failures have
brought me to where I now stand. They were life’s little lessons that allowed me to grow and expand my understanding of my relationships to the people around me.

Now I see. I see color. I see color and value it. If we don’t see one another in all our differences, then how can we recognize our commonalities? If we don’t see how we are divided and at whose hand then how can we ever work to conciliate ourselves? If we begin to see one another and to recognize the value of all of the inhabitants of this planet then maybe we can work together for a common good. I don’t know how to do much. I can’t repair a flat tire or re-shingle a roof, but I can love, and I can show love and be love. I know theatre. It’s the best way I know to make love. I know its principles and its power and I believe it has a great purpose. I believe that theatre is a powerful tool for liberation and conciliation.

The magic of theater is its ability to bring together diverse persons and either under the guise of entertainment or the open admitting of agenda, share an experience and provide the opportunity to alter perspectives, as mine was altered that night. That’s why I do theatre and will continue to do theatre. I labor in the dramatic arts so that I might belong to the courageous branch of the passionate; those who seek to free people from their internalized oppressions of body and voice, from judgments, and from paralyzing stigmas laying dormant in the suppressed subconscious.

Theatre can be a light in the darkness illuminating the vastness of human potential and experience in an effort to grow, learn and transform. I know that change begins with me, and that consciousness is temporary. So I am vigilant, lest the complacency of oblivion blot out the light of consciousness.
Cycle 3: Re-defining the Community Artist

Hollywood, we have a problem. I call misappropriation. I believe there is a serious misunderstanding amongst most people who do and don't work in the arts, especially the theatrical arts, concerning community artists. Theatres and actors are excellent examples to the larger world because the terminology of acting is more accessible than other artistic mediums. Every Tom, Dana, and Henrietta may not keep up on twitter with contemporary sculptors, painters, or graphic designers, but they have a favorite actor.

When someone says “community theatre,” what do you think of? A small group of amateurs gathering at their local church to put on a pageant, or a B rated production of some classic work or recent off Broadway or Broadway success? The actors who fill out these productions are usually locals who dabbled in theatre while in high school or college. Maybe they even worked professionally for a short period of time but the demands of life and desires for family and financial stability led them to a more secure field of work. These folks hearken back to the days of yore when members of trade guilds would put on plays in the streets at appointed times of the year for festivals and pageants (no disrespect to blacksmith actors).

There is a certain disdain amongst professional actors or folks of other occupations when thinking about community theatre and what I call their citizen artists.
Union actors wouldn’t dream of participating in a “community” production that was beneath their caliber or pay scale (unions prevent them from taking such work without prior approval). The common perception of those outside the theatre is that community actors must not be good enough for New York, T.V., or film. I believe this to be both true and not true. I certainly don’t begrudge individuals for making a living from their craft. I am someone who desires to one day “play ball” as it were, in the big leagues of New York City, perhaps even finding my way into the world of large budget films, if only to make a living that affords me the ability to see the art created that I know to be vital and necessary.

However there are a great many highly talented and creative individuals who spend their lives working in community theatre and not for the purpose of hanging on to a long ago dream; egos bolstered by the bright lights and an applauding public. There are dedicated artists of a high caliber who make careers and earn a living by engaging their communities with their art and craft. Oftentimes they are practicing educators as well. For example Jo Carson is the most prolific playwright the world has ever seen, having been commissioned to write over three hundred plays for communities across the country over decades. She has made her living in this way, and continues to do so to date by entering communities and gathering their stories to craft dramatic works. The casts are comprised of residents. She documents community legacy, celebrates ancestry, and puts into word and action the ‘every man’ and ‘every woman.’ Her works serve as a living history of sorts.

I first learned about Jo Carson while attending the Alternate Roots Annual
Meeting, where artists and activists (citizen artists) from all across the Southeastern United States gather for a week of workshops, performances with facilitated feedback sessions for the artists, as well as elect executive officers of the organization and receive new members. For nearly four decades Alternate Roots has been funding individual and collaborative projects spanning all disciplines. The only requirement for funding is that recipients are a current dues paying member and that the project or educational endeavor be in some way connected to social change. While none of the citizen artists may ever receive mainstream attention, they have been laboring in their communities to create vital, inspiring works of high caliber, with the mission of bringing about community transformation while expanding the consciousness of their audiences.

While in Richmond I have worked for a number of not-for-profit theatres, many of which would fall under the category of a community theater replicating the model of an off-Broadway season. The Conciliation Project (TCP), with which I have worked for six years, does not follow this model. The company serves the community by ripping off band-aids; by airing old wounds so that they might heal. They supply citizens with a safe place to talk about the taboo issues of racism while recognizing both the external and internal scars. The company tackles other issues of systemic oppression, but race is emphasized as the great divide stemming from the inception of America when our fore-fathers acknowledged that slavery was a ticking time bomb (if they had had timed explosives in 1787).

During these six years I have had the good fortune to take part in the process of devising three original works. Two of these were commissioned by and created for
specific communities within the City of Richmond by other not-for-profit organizations. The Daily Planet provides assistance to members of the homeless community and The Healing Place serves as a shelter and in house treatment facility for men struggling with addiction. These two social issues are not independent of one another. Addiction feeds into homelessness and vice versa. Homelessness and addiction are two of the most prevalent yet often unaddressed diseases of our nation. We readily speak about the dangers of cancer and of AIDS, and implore one another, our friends and our families, to raise money and awareness in the fight against these awful illnesses, but we rarely speak about the dangers of homelessness and addiction. I believe this is partially due to the “It can’t happen to me” philosophy regarding homelessness, or the shame of accepting and admitting powerlessness to an addiction. In either case these are not comfortable topics to broach, even in serious conversation, because of the stigmas that surround the two social ills.

Yet I am sure that if many people were to look within their own families, their own circles of friends and oftentimes even at themselves, they would find that they struggle on a daily basis with addiction in some incarnation. Food addicts, workaholics, sex fiends, thrill seekers; persons obsessed with body image, eating disorders, and uncontrollable Facebooking are all dealing with forms of addiction. Then there are the more obvious addictions to drugs and alcohol, which very few people not in recovery will admit to battling. Personally, I know some very highly functioning alcoholics who have openly admitted to having a problem, but claim that it’s under control. They believe that as long as it remains in moderation, with occasionally binging, that it
needn’t be dealt with.

I am not above admitting my own struggle and examination of my relationship with alcohol. I can only say that because of my experience of working on TCP’s collaborative/communal effort with The Healing Place. This endeavor is a prime example of community theatre being an act of citizen artistry.

TCP was asked to create a piece about addiction for the 40th anniversary of The Healing Place, a homeless shelter that also serves as an in-house recovery program for men from all over the state of Virginia and beyond. For three months we worked with men from The Healing Place, gathering their stories, while we, as an ensemble, researched addiction. During this time we not only were given the great gift of men sharing their most intimate and oftentimes heart wrenching experiences regarding the highs and lows of addiction, but we as individuals came face to face with our own addictions.

I have had many conversations with peers about artists and their inclination towards addictive habits. We have a tendency towards excess. Drugs and alcohol lower inhibitions and for many people open up creative energies. In the culture of artists, libations and revels date back to the Greeks. Throughout time libations have been associated with festivals and celebration. So it’s no surprise that today the same relationship between intoxication and creation exists.

For the residents of the recovery program involved in sharing their stories or aiding in aspects of production, this process was one that contributed to their own journey towards healing. Some of the participants were either still working through the
treatment program at the center, had graduated through it and were still working on their twelve steps (as it is a lifetime commitment), or now were working for the healing place aiding others who were walking the path of recovery. Taking personal responsibility for themselves and their decisions begins with recognizing that they are powerless over their addictions. We were allowed to sit in on community meetings and see how their community functioned in order to solve group/individual problems, and to keep men on the wagon (to use an old turn of a phrase).

The men didn’t know what we were intending to do with their stories. They only knew that the stories would somehow be cobbled into a play for an evening’s performance at the Empire Theater as part of The Healing Place’s 40th anniversary and fundraiser. We first read through the script one Saturday morning at the healing place, joined by a reporter from a popular weekly magazine. The men from the center, along with the actors, participated in a choral reading of the first draft. Because of the structure of cyclic drama, which has been detailed in the prologue of this thesis, the collage of monologues and songs didn’t seem like a play script to the men. They didn’t understand just by looking at it how it might sound and feel. Upon reading it aloud they begin to hear not only the words they had spoken but also how the words reverberated, echoed one another, and built up themes surrounding addiction, thus revealing the commonality of their struggle through the dramatic form.

When we spoke with them after the first performance, a dress rehearsal at The Healing Place in their cafeteria/community meeting room, their eyes were stained with tears. They, and other men who had not been part of the process but were members
of the center, spoke of how we expressed their pain, their struggles through our acting, our voices, our faces our bodies and how they were able to see themselves in the characters of the play. TCP works with stereotype, archetype, and the form of minstrel, which is exaggerated and often larger than life. There are some elements of naturalism as well as characters that we create from our own personal experiences. However our intention is never to mock or imitate those who share their stories, but to express the essence of their personal truths. Their stories are sacred to us. The courage it took to offer them up in service to the play must be treated with great care and appreciation.

For men of The Healing Place it was not just a sense of catharsis at the play’s end but a chance for them to reflect on how far they have come from the depths of their addictions.

The men also expressed an excitement that their stories would be shared with other addicts whom they would never meet. Through the drama, they might be able to help a wider range of people than ever before imagined. Their lives were now recorded and rendered in performance. While the event was only one evening, there was the knowledge that their stories would live forever in scripted form. The company who created it would be able to offer aid through the medium of theater and public dialogue. The stories of their lives could work as another tool to facilitate the journey towards recovery, and the rediscovery of individuation for others beyond The Healing Place.

One of the men who worked on the development of the script also performed in the show as a musician. It was the first time he had performed in public since sobering
up. He rediscovered the joy and sense of self-esteem that he received from performance. Now he learned he could do it without the nerve settling powers of alcohol, and better yet, he would be able to remember the night’s success the next morning. He now works at a music store and is forming his own 70’s cover band. He attests that before this play occurred, though he had aspirations, he did not have the courage of his convictions to actively pursue taking to the stage again and playing for live audiences, fearing that the pressure of performance might be too great a temptation to drink again.

So what does all this mean in relation to the community artist, or what I would define as the citizen artist? Well, here is an instance where members of a marginalized community who are often detested by the moral superior of society were empowered through the dramatic form. They found another avenue of healing through the process of collaborative authorship by sharing ‘sacred’ stories with complete strangers. Having witnessed the journey from the depths of addiction to the heights of clarity they had now achieved, they were encouraged by this process. They found affirmation, and untold possibilities for their life stories to help future generations as well as present addicts and aid in the enlightenment of others who may hold preconceived misconceptions about the nature of addiction and recovery. We, as members of the ensemble, found healing through the confrontation of our own demons. Personally, I believe that experience saved my life. The time I spent with those men opened my eyes to just how thin a line I was walking. I discovered that at any moment the ice might break and into the freezing waters I could plummet, numbed, cold and dead.
Here was an example of individual, group and community transformation initiated through dramatic action. All of this was achieved from a piece of community theatre, or as I prefer to phrase it, theatre for the community headed by citizen artists dedicated to the act of heightening consciousness through the employment of their craft.
Cycle 4: The Pedagogy of Self-Actualization through Artistic Expression/
Reclaiming the spirit of the Actor

Too often in the training of a dramatic artist they lose themselves amidst the pressures to conform to the world’s idea of actor. Oftentimes if you tell an outsider of the theatrical world that you are studying to be an actor they’ll reply with something like, “Can’t wait to see you on Broadway,” or “Oh you’d be great in (insert name of popular primetime sitcom or drama).” The expectations for actors by others outside of the acting community are that they find success in the ‘commercial’ world of the professional industry; fame, stardom, studio contracts, the big time! They judge ultimate success based upon the validation of others: your adoring public, if you will. We prepare young actors for the harsh truths of casting directors who will tell them to, “lose weight, gain weight, get a boob job, fix your nose, work on your calves, you’d be better blonde, too bad you’re not taller, or give up now you’ll never make it in this business.”

In order to survive such brutal criticisms we refine our craft. We train our voices, our bodies, and our imaginations so that our skills as actors might overshadow the deficiencies of our physical appearances and land us that dream job, or catch us our big break. However, it is not the range of our octave or the definition of our biceps that will protect us from the naysayers and doubters. It is not even the quality of our craft
(although they all certainly help). It is our spirits. By spirit I don’t mean the immortal element of our metaphysical selves. I do not refer to religious beliefs or theological traditions. I refer to the intangible elements of our will. Yet, for some reason actors are not trained in freeing their spirits or awakening their unique genius. Genius is a word we reserve for the more established without ever awarding it to the young and untested unless they have exhibited prodigious talent. I would say that in doing so we are grossly underestimating and under preparing our students for the professional world. If we expect brilliance from our students and acknowledge the times they exhibit moments of brilliance they begin to expect more from themselves having recognized the heights they are capable of achieving. Artists must believe that they make their break, not luckily drop into the land of success.

It is my belief that what will assure a recently graduated student artist, or a student artist still in training, for professional work is that which is special in each of them combined with rigorous technical craft: the power and creative brilliance that is singular to them because of the biographical experiences woven into the fabric of their being. If we are to truly prepare young actors for life as professional artists we must awaken that power. With such belief in themselves they will survive the battery of exhaustive “nos,” and “don’t call us we’ll call yous.”

If young actors begin to see themselves not as little more than props, or types, but as artists with something special that no one else has to offer, they will persevere. They will shine. They will not need to wait for someone else to offer them a role through lengthy auditions that see them traverse the gate-keepers’ assistant casting
directors, casting directors, and artistic directors. They will be capable of generating work and carving their own name on the marquis. It is precisely this type of creative power that I believe makes artists desirable to those who hold the purse strings and projects. Instead of limiting actors into types, let us facilitate the exploration of their range. We must aid them in discovering their unique power so that others will recognize that certain something that excites, titillates and makes one want to learn more about what this actor might bring to a collaborative process. Then they will stand out, instead of being lost in the multitudes. It is this sort of self-empowerment, and self-validation that Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum facilitates.

I have been practicing the methodology of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPDWAC) for six years now, as an actor, director, activist, collaborator, and teacher at the university level by way of my graduate studies. For three years I have assisted in teaching this methodology in Dr. T’s junior acting studio. During this time, I have been blessed to witness the process of self-actualization as experienced by dozens of student artists at Virginia Commonwealth University. I can attest, as would the students, that the process works, if you work the process. This pedagogy is dependent upon the student’s desire to be a seeker of knowledge. It depends on a reciprocal act of learning not just between student and teacher, but student and student. Through this work I have observed timid souls burst forth from their shells and shower the studio with intuitive brilliance. I have witnessed struggle and failure, out of which was born a greater knowledge of self.
I must say as a disclaimer that this process’s intention is not to undermine the practices of traditional techniques. If anything, this methodology is about the synthesis of what has come before, carrying with it the ancestors of actor training and employing their methods, in an effort to move the craft forward. However, when something has for a long time been marginalized and pushed out of the way, it must for a time be brought into the light and given focus in order for it to be explored and mined of its potential value. During the first semester of junior acting studio this is the case with emotion, the spirit of the process, and the delicate histories that are the roots of the actor’s creative source.

This process seeks to restore the power of validation to the dramatic artist. In being told so often what is wrong and what is right, actors lose the ability of knowing for themselves what works and doesn’t work. They become dependent on the teacher or the director to tell them if what they are doing is valid. As professional actors know, we are not always blessed with an incredibly acute director who knows what they want, or what works, and often times at auditions and in a process of mounting a production, what the actor brings is all the director will see. Actors must be capable of knowing for themselves. They must be able to develop their own process, to validate their own work, and to persistently push themselves to excel beyond their own expectations. We encourage students in this pedagogy never to be satisfied. Therefore, in this methodology we do not offer much praise in the process, lest the student rest on past

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6 It is impossible to cite every instance of influence due to the nature of knowledge within this Continuum. However it is easy to point to the philosophies of people like Artaud, Grotowski, Boal, Bell Hooks, Paulo Freire, amongst others as informing the ideas given action in this methodology.
accomplishments thinking that they have somehow arrived at the solution. The truth is that there is no one solution. What once worked may not work later. You’re only as good as the last thing you did, and the ability you have to take it to the next level. For example, one week in acting studio you and your partner are performing a scene. The scene sings. Both you and your partner feel connected to one another. The conditions of the scene are vibrant and informing the mood of the room and you are present in the action of the scene. The next week the scene is dead. You and your partner feel that the scene is tired and neither of you understand why. I would pose that the partners have attempted to re-create the success of the week before rather than permit the possibility of something new to happen within the scene that would expand the quality and power of the pair’s performance. We must always be asking how might I improve?

By nature, actors are insecure. We put ourselves on display for complete strangers to watch while we experience the most vulnerable of life situations. Therefore the actor should be empowered through a process of being stripped bare in order to achieve a revelation of self (what Jerzy Grotowski described as the via negativa\(^\text{7}\)). This requires a safe space where the stories of the individuals are regarded as sacred, respected and kept private within the classroom community. This is where we apply the African Continuum and its concept of community. This concept maintains the interdependence of members of the community upon one another and their

\(^{\text{7}}\) Via negativa was Grotowski’s process of stripping his students of their blocks in order to “stimulate a process of self-revelation, going back as far as the subconscious, yet canalizing the stimulus in order to obtain the required reaction.” (Grotowski, 128)
contributions to the whole including disclosure (the importance of everyone sharing), communication (especially in cases of disagreement so that dis-ease does not poison the group from the inside by not telling somebody that they have stepped on your toes), and the principle of “what happens in studio stays in studio.” This sense of our community and the happenings within our community remaining private amongst only those who have participated as witnesses is essential for three reasons: no one has a right to tell someone else’s story without their permission, outsiders lack contextualization, and the fact that oftentimes words are inadequate.

There are several mottos or mantras we use in RPDWAC. “Cover the ground you stand on,” is one of the most important. To cover the ground you stand on is to be present upon your foundation. This means being able to stand up in front of a group of people who may completely disagree with whatever it is you have to say and exercise the courage of your convictions. To stand naked in truth, powerful in your vulnerability is to cover the ground you stand on. This phrase translates practically to the world of theater in many ways. When you walk into an audition room to begin your monologue, cover your ground. When you take center stage on opening night, cover your ground.

So what is it that an actor stands upon? They stand upon their craft and their passion. They stand upon the hours of rehearsal that have gone into preparing for the performance. They stand on the shoulders of those who have come before them, those who have helped them to reach this point. They stand upon their own creative brilliance and trust in the knowledge that they are enough no matter what anyone else has to say. They stand upon the preparation that will allow them to throw it all away.
and open themselves to the possibility of something new about to happen. They are free to play, discover, and excite in the onlooker a sense of curiosity. It is this sense of self that creates confidence balanced with humility that makes them attractive potential collaborators in artistic endeavors.

In order to learn what this means actors must be provided with the opportunity to work outside of their comfort zones as opposed to working within types that they might be best suited for. I say opportunity because the actor must make the choice to commit to the journey. We have all seen the stubborn student not wanting to participate, giving only half of themselves to the task at hand. The actor must choose to enter into and inhabit realms of discomfort. For it’s these places where we may expand our capacity for knowledge. It is in strengthening our weaknesses that we become more complete individuals. We acknowledge the spirits of our ancestors, or inspirational figures in our life, realizing that they live within us. Believing, we may call upon them in order to gain courage in the face of fearful discomfort. We are never alone. This knowledge allows actors to jump into the creative unknown. Not without fear, because without fear we may not exercise courage, but secure in the fact that it won’t kill them. The worse thing that can happen is failure. This failure is viewed as an opportunity for further growth by learning through mistakes and getting messy. It is not a sign of deficiency but a chance to improve!

In order to remove actors from their comfort zone, and learn the process of becoming generative as opposed to imitative artists, the students in the first semester of Junior Acting Studio work on narrative monologues. In describing this process I will
describe some of the essential qualities of this methodology as it relates to dramatic artist training and self-actualization.

To begin with the students adapt a rite of passage moment from a work of literature into a narrative monologue. A rite of passage moment can be understood as a monumental life event, after which the person is forever changed\(^8\). For example, when you first experienced death and what it was to grieve, or when a newly licensed driver feels the thrill of independence cruising the open road. When you have grown older and see your parents as people too, or as in my life, when I realized that I would never have a relationship with my parents like other kids have because of time and circumstance. These are revelations that are visceral, emotional, intellectual and spiritual in nature. They shape you and how you see the world.

Through the process of adapting a work of literature into a narrative monologue, which is a monologue wherein the actor plays all the characters in the story and lives the story as it is told, the actor begins to find the responsibility of creating something special and stage-worthy which will be all their own. This is even more the case when the students begin work with personal narratives through the process of facilitated journeys that explore the actor’s personal history, emotional, psychological and spiritual tapestry. Each rite of passage narrative monologue must have the elements of Life, Death and Transformation (which have been discussed in the prologue). The narrative can begin in any of these places, but the student must travel through each phase, and

\(^8\) The works of Joseph Campbell and Victor Turner can be credited for their contributions to the understanding of rites of passage rituals, however I abstract the term to make it less restrictive.
in doing so achieve a revelation. Each “beat” (Life, Death, and Transformation) of the monologue has a primary emotional location, that informs how the actor speaks. As they “perform” the monologue, first addressing the other person in the environment where the story was first impelled then moving entirely into the world of the story while living the story through the act of telling the story, the act of reliving the story achieves revelation.

Allow me to clarify emotion as it relates to the actor in this methodology. Actors are often told, “don’t play the emotion.” In my opinion this is an absolutely valid direction, because what results in the instances where they play the emotion is often little more than emotive masturbation focusing on themselves and not on the scene or the pursuit of their objective. After years of being told not to play the emotion they often forget that characters are emotional beings! Couple this with a lifetime of mechanization by ideological forces as to what emotions are and are not acceptable to publicly express it is no wonder why people have such a difficult time articulating what it is they feel. This methodology uses the technique of emotional location and emotional mapping to discover how emotions give life to characters. Emotional mapping charts where specific emotions exist in the actor’s body. Actors are able to push their own emotional buttons without relying on a scene partner or director to get them to where they need to be because, as I have stated before, that won’t always be

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9 Emotional Location – An emotional location can be understood as the primary feeling informing the emotional state of the character that is directly connected with the character’s wants, needs, the other, and their environmental conditions. It may also be understood as a location on the actor’s “personal map” where that emotion exists; like a button that can be pushed. For example I know that for me, focusing and breathing into my lower back can access the feeling of grief.
an option. Students learn how to channel emotion in pursuit of the objectives, and deployment of tactics, and creation of environmental conditions through activity.

Emotional mapping is an exercise that charts where emotions live in the body as it relates to psychophysical connections. The facilitator (teacher) leads the student artist in a process of relaxation to rid all unnecessary tension from the body; mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. The facilitator must also clear themselves of such tensions so as to not transfer their own tensions to the student. Throughout the process the actor visualizes an emotion as a seed planted inside that grows in them, all over them, taking over their whole self. They are it, and it is they! The emotion is given a breath, the breath manifests movement, and the movement erupts with sound. The combination of these three aid in eliminating self-consciousness throughout the process. Consistent sound seems to eliminate the inner critic or judge. The actor is asked to be the emotion and not feel the emotion. The goal is not to show what the emotion does, but to experience how it behaves, the qualities of its movement, of its sounds. The actor should not be “in control” of the emotion but permit him/herself to lose control and let down defenses. Once they experience what it is to “be something” as opposed to “show something” they begin to understand what it is to live life on stage, as opposed to indicate behavior. They learn how breath informs the body and communicates truths or lies.

During this exercise actors naturally experience a form of emotional recall, linking personal experiences to the emotional exploration as it manifests itself through sound, movement, and imagination. These personal histories exist in the mind as well
as the body and compose the conscious and unconscious psychological and spiritual make up of the artist. Learning where these emotions and experiences live in our bodies allows using the parts of our selves that are essential to the character, and begins the process of “freeing the repressed unconscious.” (Artaud, 28)

The work on rite of passage narratives offers the actor application of emotional location to the beats of Life, Death, and Transformation. The actor must incorporate ‘the other’ (who they begin talking to, and ‘the others’ present in the story that they are reliving), objective (want they must have), action (what they do to get it), and activity (what establishes character, and environment). In this method the emotion is understood as that which supports the objective and colors the quality of the ‘performance.’ This is just part of the process that supports the journey towards self-actualized generative artistic craft. In learning to feel, and feel freely, we discover how we remove the masks we wear in our everyday lives as a means of survival, so that we might reveal our secret truths through the medium of performance. We don’t have to shut down our feelings so that others are made to feel at ease. In this space the artist is free to feel and express that feeling through the act of dramatic performance. Ideally this learning to feel will translate itself into the actors’ lives outside the studio, so that they might live fuller lives and continue to grow as actors not just on stage but in the world beyond the boards.

10 RPDWAC maintains several essential quotations in its educational practice. One such quote is collaged together from the writing of Antonin Artaud in The Theatre and Its Double: “A real theatrical experience shakes the calm of the senses, liberates the repressed unconscious and drives towards a kind of potential revolt, which cannot realize its full value, unless it remains potential and imposes on the assembled crowd a difficult and heroic attitude.”
As the first semester progresses the journey is used to access the depth of the actor’s consciousness. The technique of facilitated journey can yield therapeutic qualities, but it is not intended to serve as a form of therapy. The student artist might awaken sleeping dragons; forgotten experiences that can be awesome or traumatic. The student artist is encouraged to seek out professional therapy on these occasions when the memories are particularly painful. Unhealthy artists create unhealthy art, and need to learn to treat their whole self with respect. Their instrument is composed of the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual, and must be finely tuned. Though it may be difficult, accessing and expressing these painful experiences are part of the process towards self-actualization. There is an incredible sense of liberation when we speak deep pains into the world. We gain power over them when we expose them to the light, rather than allow our pain to be a secret shame holding us captive in our shadow self. In this sense artistic expression has the power to break our own chains.

We learn what we are made of only when we are tested. We exercise courage only when faced with that which we fear. In confronting, wrestling with, and conquering those fears we discover that we have power. Our will needs only to be exercised like the muscles of our physical forms. When the dramatic artist is tested in this manner s/he will build the skin of resiliency necessary for survival in the long haul of this business. Students find out what they are capable of achieving, who they are, and what they want to be. They define themselves so that other’s opinions will not determine their sense or value of self. They stand upon and cover their ground, actualized and self defined.
Cycle 5: Journey of a Process
Searching for the Ghost of Tom Joad/The Hudson Super Six Chronicles

“I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes. Slept on the ground in the light of the moon. On the edge of your city you see us and then, we come with the dust, and we go with the wind. California and Arizona, I make all your crops. Then it’s north up to Oregon to gather your hops. Dig the peach from your ground, cut the grapes from your vine, to set on your table your white sparkling wine . . . my land I’ll defend with my life if it be, cause my pastures of plenty must always be free.”

-Woody Guthrie, Pastures of Plenty

This cycle applies the methodology of RPDWAC to the rehearsal process and performance of The Grapes of Wrath in crafting the character of Tom Joad. The need for drama to be communal, collaborative and connected to ancestry is one of the core values of RPDWAC. This value, amongst others of the Ritual process, is demonstrated in the dramatic rendering of the Joad ‘fambly’ story. In this cycle I will emphasize the importance of connection to the ancestry of our collective heritage that comprises the spirits of the stories we tell, and how through research and gathering content the actor may gain access to these spirits in order to serve as a vessel, thus infusing the character with recognizable qualities of persons from an historical epic in which those stories are set. I define spirit as something intangible, though it may grab hold of you. It is the essence; the ‘rawest, realest’ quality of a being, and it is rooted in the soil of that person’s homeland as well as the details of the time.
This story focuses on the period of the Great Depression, the migrant farmers of the dirty thirties, and the individual’s relationship/responsibility to the whole and to the land. The Joad ‘fambly’s’ courage, persistence, and determination in order to stay together no matter the dust storms, the flat tires, the 2,000 miles, the thorns in the cotton, the seven cents a bushel, the blood running off or dying, the loss of brothers, grandparents, and babies. Their journey is exemplary. Their story expresses the collective experience of hundreds of thousands of displaced and exploited Americans who struggled and died as a result of the man made disaster that was the dust bowl. The storms afflicted the panhandle of the high plains including territories of Kansas, New Mexico, Nebraska, Texas, Colorado and Oklahoma, but didn’t become a national problem until the dust landed quite literally in the chambers of congress. For me the Joads, Pa, Ma, Winfeld, Ruthie, Noah, Roseasharon, Al, Grandpa, Grandma, Uncle John, are the epitome of surviving hope and the power of a ‘fambly’s’ love. Their ‘fambly’ exhibits the values of an interdependent community working for a common cause, a rich connection to ancestry and tradition, transformation experienced through the cycles of life and death, and the journey towards altered/expanded consciousness. While just about every character demonstrates at least one of these principles, it was the journey of Tom Joad that was my path to walk.

The crafting of a character is unique to each actor. Not everything works for everyone. To each and everyone their own! For some people they may not believe in the spiritual realm, and to them I say this may not be for you. I contend, that while you may not believe in spirits as present tangible energies, everyone in their life has
influential figures that have contributed to who they are as people. The knowledge they have passed on lives with you, and you learn it better by and by. My own process relies heavily upon content gathered through rigorous research of images, reading materials, music, recorded narratives, and any experiences that help me find a way into the world of the story and a connection to its ancestors. *The Grapes of Wrath*, adapted by Frank Galati from the Steinbeck masterpiece of the same title, tells the story of The Joad ‘fambly’ as they sojourn two thousand miles in search of work in California after the banks have bulldozed their house and pushed them off their land. The Joads exemplify the hundreds of thousands of dustbowl refugees making the journey west in search of work that would provide them with the opportunity to carve out a home in the fertile hills of California, only to be treated little better than slaves upon arrival. De-humanized in the eyes of their fellow man, these refugees are regarded with contempt at every turn. One gas station owner regards the fambly as “goddamn Okies” that “don’t got no sense and feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do.” (Gallati, 39) It is this kind of de-humanization that justifies the atrocities perpetrated against people of marginalized communities. In the face of this hatred Tom Joad refuses to let himself or his family (again the example of individual or collective empowerment/consciousness) be defined by the judgments of others. Though the family is dirty, tired, and poor they will not submit to the notion that they are a lot of bums. All they want is to work, and to earn what they eat.

As a child growing up I had often listened to a song by Bruce Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, although I had never read Steinbeck’s novel I was familiar with
Springsteen’s epic ballad. Landing the role of Tom Joad was a boyhood dream come true. In my eyes Tom Joad was a folk hero, ranking up there with the likes of Pretty Boy Floyd or Robin Hood. At first, the task of portraying such a mythic figure was almost overwhelming. However, I know that with proper prior planning no task is too large. I knew that if I used my time leading up to the production to fill myself up with content, read and re-read the novel, and get myself into physical condition for the role, I would be ready come the start of rehearsals.

To begin I immersed myself in the music of the time, particularly the music of Woody Guthry and Pete Seeger. Learning protests songs, and stories of the common man, I filled myself with the sounds, the sights, the stories of their music. Later, before performances and during my personal warm-ups (I’d arrive at the theatre two hours before curtain) I listened to their old recordings while progressing through a series of stretches and exercises that were the first part of my work towards an altered state of consciousness. RPDWAC believes the act of performance is inherently an altered state of consciousness, since the actor is working both as character, and as actor within that character. In order to better dilute the ego of the actor, RPDWAC practices altered states of consciousness through techniques of relaxation and immersion, so that the vessel (actor) can hold onto the parts of itself necessary for the character, but eliminate those things that don’t serve the character, thus making room for those qualities which do serve the character and present recognizable human behavior. Out back of the theatre I would walk around in my hard-soled boots, smoking hand rolled American Spirits, bellowing their old tunes in my Oklahoman twang. These songs became
hymnals in my hollering for the spirits of the outlaw, the man with too much dignity and
smarts behind his dirty brow to be treated like a bum.

“Pretty Boy grabbed the long chain, the deputy grabbed his gun, and in
the fight that followed he laid that deputy down . . . Through this world I
ramble, I see lots of funny men, some will rob you with a six gun, some
with a fountain pen. But it’s through this life you travel, and its through
this life you roam, you will never see an outlaw, drive a family from their
home.”

- Woody Guthry, Pretty Boy Floyd

I vigorously read Studs Terkel’s Hard Times, Timothy Egan’s The Worst Hard
Time, Caroline Henderson’s collection of articles that brought national attention to the
plight of the farmers in the panhandle published in Atlantic Monthly in 1931, now
compiled into a collection entitled Letters from the Dust Bowl, and of course Steinbeck’s
cannon. The Ghost of Tom Joad, the spirit of the exploited laborer, the qualities and
persons he served as living metaphor to, are alive in these works. These are the stories
of the ones who stayed for years suffering through dust and electrical storms, swathing
black clouds of granulated doom; every day sweeping dugout homesteads (houses
carved out of and into hills) that give voice to the ghosts of history, the ancestors of the
story. Their tales provided the specific details I could use for my part in telling the
story. These details grounded me in the reality of the environmental conditions so that
I might help in imaginatively transforming the ether of the stage, thus evoking in the
audience sensations of the story, making their experience visceral as opposed to purely
intellectual.

“I been thinking a hell of a lot, thinkin’ about our people livin’ like pigs, an’ the
good rich lan’ layin’ fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a
hundred thousan’ good farmers is starvin’. An’ I been a wonderin’ if all our folks
got together an’ yelled, like them fellas yelled, only a few of ‘em outside the
gate.” (Gallatti, pg.78)

When I look at the world around me, and the brave people that still carry this
torch, this determination to enact change in the world at no matter the cost, I feel the
ghost of Tom Joad present. His is the spirit of a revolutionary, of a man determined to
shape the world, not for his own selfish gain, but for the gain of his people.

It is this spirit I was in search of for Tom Joad. Connection to the spirit is of
primary importance to whatever character I allow to use my physical, emotional and
intellectual self. While I may step into the shape of a hard knuckled parolee, and adapt
the twang of an Oklahoman dialect, this is not enough. Outward form, empty of
content, is a shallow surface rendering. I require firm knowledge of the time, the laws,
the sounds and sights of the environment, the tastes, the customs, and the styles in
order that I may create those same elements in rehearsal and in performance. I
develop physical exercises specific to the character that remove my own blocks, thus
clearing my instrument. As I worked on the character of Tom Joad I was given an old
boxing bag. Before performances I would heave this bag on top of my shoulders in the
shop where the actor who was playing grandpa would sit and tell me old stories or dirty
jokes. I’d walk in circles or jog in place to feel the weight upon my shoulders in an
effort to enter a psychophysical state of the exhausted laborer, the prodigal son
returned from a shortened bid in the penitentiary. When I wiped sweat from my brow
or rung out my hat it was real salt and water. I would go out to the woods with a
shovel or a pickaxe to dig and dig and dig in order to create calluses on my hands. I
grew out my fingernails so that dirt could gather underneath their cuticles. I'm not interested in mere imitation. I seek emersion and transformation. This transformation is achieved by performing the techniques that will lead me to an altered state of consciousness as part of my ritual in preparation and performance. My own transformation, from actor to character (if viscerally realized) will serve to alter the state of consciousness within the audience (suspended dis-belief) and ideally through telling the story in this manner, facilitate revelation in the audience that might lead to altering their consciousness of the past, the present, and future possibilities.

One custom I practice in seeking connection to the spirit is a tribute. As tribute to the migrant farmers hankering for protein, I fasted from meat for the entire three months of rehearsal and performance. Now I love meat; hamburgers and pork chops, bacon on my bagel in the morning, big honking helpings of turkey on a sandwich, chicken pineapple subs. However, I wanted to sacrifice something just as those people had been forced to sacrifice. I wanted my belly to be like their bellies. I ended up losing 15 lbs on what would be later known as the dustbowl diet: a steady helping of home made chili packed with beans, and peppers. But more than achieving a physical resemblance to gaunt men of the earth, I believe that my offering was received. The hunger served me during the course of each night’s performance. In talking about this I reiterate the fact that acting, and theatre, is not just a physical, emotional, or intellectual experience, but that it is intrinsically connected to the spiritual. To deny that connection is to be incomplete in the portrayal of our characters. I view myself as more than an entertainer because entertainment is fleeting and surface. I am a
shaman that summons the spirits of a story. I transform the ether of the stage while transporting the audience to another reality, not in order to facilitate their escape but to reveal truth and prompt questions in an effort to create dialogue that may continue long after the casual conversations in the lobby. This mission is the ultimate goal of RPDWAC; to evoke, empower and transform.

Those conversations may include my performance, but if that is all that is spoken about then I don’t feel I’ve truly done my part in serving the story. Tom Joad may in some sense be regarded as the “star” of the show, but I never take that point of view when thinking of my role in a production. I have played many principle characters, but I never think of myself as the “star.” To do so would be to dishonor the story, my ensemble, and my community of storytellers, technicians, and directors. I belong to the greater whole. Like preacher Casey says to Tom early in the play, “. . . maybe it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit – the human sperit – the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.” (Gallatti, 12) In rehearsal and in performance, especially dealing with a play of this scope where we must convey the essence of traveling thousands of miles over the course of weeks, every single person must be pulling for the same cause, laboring towards a common end, loving, supporting, and working for one another in order for the production to actualize the themes and ideas of the story.

Remembering that the work is not about me alleviates the pressure of performing a character that is on stage for ninety percent of the play. When, as an actor (and often in life), you focus on the other people around you as opposed to being
bogged down with self-consciousness, you are freed to play, really living life on stage, not through rich spectacles of production, but through invigorated story telling. When I summon the spirits of the one hundred thousand starving farmers, I am never alone in my portrayal. When I am tired and lacking that extra umph to push through the three hour epic, I remember the backs bent from swinging an axe all day digging ditches, or hunched over picking cotton, the arms swollen from carrying bushels of peaches on empty stomachs craving a strip of side meat. It is from these people that I gather strength, and remember that I don’t know what tired really is.

After every evening of that play, during the six-week run, I was completely exhausted. Two thousand miles, family reunions, funerals, brawls, repairing and maintaining a Hudson Super Six ‘will take a lot out of a fella’. Yet by the end of the run I felt like I could go another six weeks. Each night I gained a new insight about the character of Tom, about myself as an artist, as a man, and about the story. The goal of this methodology is progressive revelation; both in the actor and in the audience. Too often in performance actors forget that just because the show is up and running that new things can still happen. The goal of every stage actor is to give the impression that each night the story is unfolding as if for the first time. If I as an actor too surely fix moments in place, removing the possibility for something new to happen, I deprive myself of the opportunity for further revelation and deprive the audience of an organic performance that might lead to their own revelations and transformations. However, if leave my own ego by entering an altered state of consciousness, focusing on the people and conditions of my imaginary environment, I am open to the power of the creative
unknown. The way in which to forget self is by focusing on others.

The Joad family, particularly the characters of Tom and Ma, focused more on other members of the family and their fellow man than they did on themselves. They loved and protected one another fiercely. Near the play’s end, Tom must make the decision to leave his family, not because he wants to abandon them in order to assemble unions and empower the laborer, but because he has endangered his mother, father, brothers and sisters in loosing control of his rage. There is a thought repeated time and time again throughout the play, that says, “nobody can’t tell anybody nothing, you got to learn for yourself.” The journey of Tom Joad is not only the journey of a family exodus. It is the journey towards spiritual awakening and transformation, similar to my own awakening that evening in the theatre years ago. All along Tom denies what he sees, or turns a blind eye because he is too important to the family as both a protector and a worker to put food in the pot. But when a random thug working for the bosses bludgeons his only friend Preacher Casey, who is wanted for leading the strike outside the gates of another work-camp, he can restrain his rage no more and lashes out, brutally beating the thug to death. He returns to his mother with bloodied hands, a busted nose, and eyes open to his responsibility for fighting the injustices perpetrated by the bosses, the exploiters, the oppressors.

I received my second Irene Ryan nomination for the portrayal of Tom Joad. I do not attribute the nomination to my skill as an actor, but to my willingness to work in service of something larger than myself. I worked not for my own aggrandizement but for the success of the whole, moving the community forward. In the paradigm of
RPDWAC, this community includes the witnesses compromising the audience. I believe access to the spirit contributed to a production that brought people to their feet night after night, visibly rocked by the epic journey taken through the medium of dramatic story telling. It is my hope to perpetuate this belief in the power of the story’s spirits and save artists from the danger of their self-centeredness if new generations of actors, actors I would deem citizen artists, can begin to access the spirit of the stories, embracing ancestry, and serve as vessels rather than representations. If the actor’s ultimate goal is not individual success, but collective prosperity within the production and facilitating revelation within the audience, then perhaps the theatre will be filled with riveting renderings, and not shallow forms void of content. Perhaps theatre will once again become a vital element to the cultural landscape of our cities and states. Perhaps theatre will be recognized as a powerful tool for social change, facilitating individual or collective revelation through dramatic expression.
Cycle 6: Layering "Style" on the Ritual Process  
Dancing with the Devil

“I am very beautiful, and I can do whatever I wish”  
- The Mantra of Lucifer from Acting and Singing with Archetypes by Janet Rodgers and Frankie Armstrong

I explored in the previous cycle how the ritual process of theatrical creation acknowledges and calls upon the power of the spirit to be present. I also touched upon attributes of technical craft, such as a disciplined work ethic, the value of applied research, and the necessity of pre-show preparation that transforms one’s everyday consciousness to the altered consciousness necessary for the stage. While RPDWAC emphasizes a connection to ancestry and relationship to the spirit of a story in artist training and practical application, it does not exist independently from more traditional and technical acting methods that are essential to the ‘artist’ dimension of the term ‘citizen artist.’ Just as the physical and vocal form is incomplete without the presence of spiritual power and purpose, the spiritual element lacks structure without technical craft, and the ability to adapt to style. All are required in a holistic approach if actors are to be fully invested in their roles within the story. If actors are to transcend the average and achieve brilliance or intuitive genius they must balance both the intangible spiritual element with the technical mastery of the artist. While crafting the role of the deadly, sexual, and 18th century French Le Vicomte de Valmont, I experienced this
knowledge first hand. I entered into a dance with the devil, wherein I continued to explore how one may fuse the technical with the spiritual. This cycle is an illustration of the fundamental technique necessary to the ‘citizen artist.’ Without the fundamental technique the artist will fail to capture the imaginations of the audience and thus fail in the ultimate goal of facilitating revelation through powerful dramatic expression.

The play Les Liaisons Dangereuses is a highly stylized, text-based play, lending its-self to elements of spectacle both in design and performance. The language is sensual, seductive, and full of power, therefore, it requires that the actor wield a technical precision and range in the use of body and voice. For our production, in the fall of 2010 at Virginia Commonwealth University, for characters of varying status, the cast wrapped their mouths around versions of the transatlantic dialect, which allowed us to exploit the erotic and violent sounds, rhythms and textures of the language. The body was just as important since the styles of dress, etiquette, and mannerisms are immensely different from our contemporary forms.

Let me begin first with the body. In 18th century France the body was a corporeal illustration modeling elegance and status. When the aristocracy was announced into a room they were determined to capture the attention of the court. The aristocracies were glamorous in the adornment of rich fabrics and sparkling brocades, praised for their grace, and envied for their poise and beauty. Much of ballet is derived from the customs of presentation and court dances dating back to the reign of Louis the XIV. The movements I crafted and body center I chose (where an actor puts the energy of character in order to create a physical shape different from their
own) were derived from traditions of the court and etiquette. These forms necessitated a use of *sats*, a technical term derived from the work of Eugenia Barba and the Odin Teatre. *Sats* can be described many ways and as a principle of performance is recognized in various methods and disciplines. This moment exists of potential just on the edge of balance with double direction between two poles of energy in a place of stillness. It is the moment before an action is realized wherein anything is possible. It is “the moment in which the action is thought/acted by the entire organism, which reacts with tensions, even in immobility.” (Barba, 55) This composite of energy translates into a dynamic physical stage presence that creates a sense of expectation in the audience who are curious as to what might happen as oppose to knowing what will happen. Le Victome existed with double direction and taut physical tension in smooth angles. These angles denoted power and importance simultaneously presented with a sense of ease. While standing the feet were in a stance similar to that of a swordsman, or duelist. Shifts in weight or changes of direction were accomplished with a gliding sweep of the leg, led by the right foot, a characterization derived from courtly bows of the time. One hand rested on a hip often with a pinkie out so as not to conceal his beautiful ring, the other arm held up and out, ever so bent at the elbow, the fingers of that hand resembling that of a swordsman without his steel. The physical demeanor of Le Victomte crystallized the paradox of a body presented at once as physical illusion and as elegant visual pattern. Valmont’s outwardly fashioned physicality demonstrated observable traits of the period, evoking a spectrum of states and emotions in the public and private arena, such as lust, envy, and admiration.
The outward beauty served only to mask the decadence of the soul. While I do not judge a character I serve (doing so limits the complexity of the individual), upon reflection there can be no doubt that by moralistic standards Valmont is a wicked, wicked man. The villain must win the favor of the audience through charm and shamelessness lest he be entirely despicable and thus failing to facilitate in them the recognition of anything they share which may be similar to the desires of the villain. Who, at one time, like Valmont, hasn’t craved to be remembered, if only by their friends and family, for having achieved greatness? I would ask people who might judge him: What would you do if you could get away with it? If you had the power and cunning to execute your every whim would you be able to resist the temptation to abuse that power, especially when surrounded by a society that encourages such behavior? The debauchery of the aristocratic society was born out of excess and an oblivion regarding the plight of the people suffering under the oppressive class system encouraged by the ruling class. Early in the play Valmont, defending his decision to refuse the behests of Marquis de Mertuil states, “I have to follow my destiny, I have to be true to my profession.” For Valmont every conquest contributes to his legacy as the greatest seducer and lover that France, and the world, has ever known. He pursues the status of a legend. This status would grant him a sense of immortality. Personally I believe in immortality because I have immortal desires, just as the Valmont does, and in many ways he and I are not so different. I must bring my humanity to the character, sympathize with his perspectives, and share his thirst. This erasure of judgment is a fundamental technique in character development.
Along with adopting the physical grace of a dancer I infused in the characterization of Valmont with the demeanor and bravado of a swordsman. My physical actions supported the combativeness, precision, speed and intelligence of the short sword, which had gained popularity at the time, particularly in duels. This is a style of sword that is quick and deadly in its exchanges. Only the very tip of the sword is dangerous, and it is just enough to pierce the muscle followed by the power of a thrust capable of puncturing a lung.

This sense of the duel, of swordplay, exists simultaneously in the language. The Marquis and Le Vicomte are always at odds with one another, engaged in a deadly and sensuous parry and repost of language; cutting, slashing, flicking, and at times lunging with desperate thrusts. As Le Vicomte, my tongue and my wit needed to be as quick and as sharp as my sword. Transatlantic speech is a dialect of refinement and education that honors sounds of words and the pictures they paint. Each consonant must land as it propels the character forward with momentum into the next thought or verbal action. The characters use language to baffle, woo, and wound in pursuit of their objectives. It is their mastery of linguistics linked to their breeding and extensive education that wins them favor or keeps their enemies at bay. Their games of sex and betrayal are performed with dynamic verbal gymnastics.

While working on Le Vicomte I was blessed with a magnificent vocal coach, Stacey Cabaj, who would not allow me any slack in adhering to the textual demands. I could not simply ignore a key sound change or throw away an end consonant; structure, placement, technique were paramount if the text was to be honored and if
the audience was to experience revelation. Because of Valmont’s high status we explored a wider variety of sound changes whenever we felt those choices supported the nature of the character; one who relishes his own brilliance and eloquent power. The transatlantic dialectic incorporates voice techniques like vocal glides, and delicious liquid U’s that we combined with hints of Parisian delicacies. It is at times elegant and at other times fierce.

My primary spiritual inspiration sprang from summoning Le Vicomte through the breath, imagery and mantra of the Devil himself. The technique is derived from Archetypes for the Actor. A brilliant pedagogy, Archetypes for the Actor, developed by Virginia Commonwealth University Professor of Voice and Speech Janet Rodgers along with recording artist, voice trainer and author Frankie Armstrong, explores universal archetypes that exist across cultures and how they might enhance the actor’s playable range. Archetypes are living breathing figures composed of recognizable characteristics, behaviors, physical demeanors, vocal traits, ages and experiences accessed through facilitated journeys developed by Rodgers and Armstrong. The actor is able to expand his/her range by recognizing that s/he has a vast variety of archetypes already present within the self. These archetypes need only to be awakened. In calling upon the archetype of Lucifer I discovered my own sensuality and joy of manipulation, without shame and without guilt. I have never been entirely confident in my ability to be “sexy.” It may stem from growing up in a society where men aren’t really supposed to be sexy. Women are supposed to be objects of desire while men pursue them in the name of conquest, or as a sign of their masculinity. This
role demanded that I tap in to that sensuality, embrace it, caress it, and put it on display for all to envy.

The archetype of Lucifer is a dangerously powerful figure. I must note that when working with the technique of archetypes it is important that the actor always step out from the archetype after an exercise or performance. Lucifer is a particularly tempting persona to maintain outside of performance spaces and should not be carried around in the day-to-day life of the actor. He intoxicates, hypnotizes and controls by exploiting that which the other most desires. I used this tactic in my work onstage to determine what it is that the other wants and then finding ways to present it harmlessly like a biscuit with poison baked inside. For example, when Valmont visits the young Cecile in her bedroom to begin what will become nightly lessons, she is startled to find a banyan clad man in her bedroom during the dead of night while the rest of the chateau sleeps. The Victome has gained entrance only because he has persuaded Cecile to steal her bedroom key from her mother’s mantle and bring it to him so that he can make a copy solely for the purpose of delivering letters from her suitor, The Chavalier Danceny. By exploiting her naïve love for Danceny and under the guise as his trusted friend he has begun working towards his own end, that of pleasing the Marquis and satisfying his revenge on Cecile’s mother. Valmont proceeds in the scene to seduce and win Cecile’s submission, first with a kiss, then with a hand on her purity, as he deftly maneuvers towards her virginity. Others may view this act as rape. However, as the character, I could not take such a stance on the act and preferred to think of it as the education of Cecile. By the end of the deed she asks him to come back the next
evening, so within his success, there is some justification for such a perspective. It was the archetype of Lucifer that granted me permission to revel in such ripe forbidden fruits. The archetype, the spirit of Lucifer, is accessed through specific technical qualities of the body that, when fused together, go a long way towards creating organic performance that indicate a high caliber of artistry.

Le Victome is most certainly a villain but he is not without the opportunity for redemption as he eventually becomes snared by his own trap. During the story he often expresses the sentiments of love that he regretfully feels for the object of his conquest, Madame de Tourvel, although he is also obviously in love with Merteuil. The love he feels for Tourvel is true in the sense that it carries with it the opportunity to change his whoring ways. In this regard le Vicomte is not all devil. He is also lover, existing primarily in the lover’s shadow self; jealous, envious, greedy for all the attention, prone to rage when viewing a rival. Through the progression of his relationship with Tourvel, the audience is able to witness the tender vulnerability that is also part of his emotional make-up, as well as his saving grace.

I include this element of technical character analysis because it provides the counterbalance to the wickedness of Valmont’s other deeds. It is the root of his humanity. This seed of his humanity is planted early on in the play. It justifies the perspective that he is not so much purely wicked, as he is a man of his time with honor, reputation, and legacy at stake. Clues like these should indicate to the actor that the character is complex, textured, dynamic and capable of transformation (an essential element in story within the African Continuum). The journey of this man, within his role
in the story, is from that of salacious libertine to repentant martyr. His journey must be expressed with great spirit and technical craft if his character is to reveal to the audience some part of their own humanity, warts and all.

In dealing with passions as great as those in plays like *Les Liasons Dangereuses* the actor must be grounded by technique. It is the technique that focuses the jealousy, rage, passion, love, or lusting for pleasure and revenge. The style provides a frame within which to work. It roots the character in the reality and customs of the era, supporting the actor’s choices through technical clues of language and custom. The spirit is what permits the actor to transcend a craftsman form. The spirit breathes life into the style. When the two fuse together what occurs is a holistic rendering so that the work of the technique is invisible to the audience. It is this strong technique that provides credibility. It grounds the passions in logic so that the story will be told coherently, allowing for the potential of revelation in the audience. This technical skill is essential to the actor as vessel, and to the citizen artist. It is the artist’s craftsmanship that supports and articulates the passions s/he is impelled to express through her/his art. If the citizen artist is be successful in promoting revelation and transformation within their communities, the artist’s work must be technically sound as well as impassioned.
Cycle 7: Artist as Producer of Community Action; Battery Park Theatre Exploration

This cycle tells the story of the visioning, conception, process and performance of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* in August of 2011.

"Work is love made visible."

- Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Just about everywhere I look I see a stage waiting to be filled; front porches, backyards, playgrounds tucked away in alleys, and long abandon structures in public spheres. For me “all the world” truly is a stage. It is equally true that we all play many different parts. In the theatre world, the majority of my experience has always been on the boards, a few times as a director, once a stage manager, but always, always I have been an advocate and ambassador for whatever project I find myself involved with. I also believe that dramatic artists do well to diversify their talents early in their training. Beyond accumulating and refining talents like singing, dancing, sword fighting, gymnastics or juggling, the dramatic artist should have intestinal knowledge of performance and the machinery of production; how it moves from vision to event, in order to better prepare themselves as generative artists.
I received a vision late one December evening. The night started off simple enough. A few beers after dinner and it was time to take Ali, my mentor’s gorgeous, powerful, inspiring figure of an animal, for a walk. I leashed him up and we sauntered down the street towards Battery Park so that I could let Ali run wild in the open, empty field. Truth be told I had never stepped foot in the park before the evenings I took Ali for a run. I was still relatively new to the neighborhood and walking in the park carried a great many stigmas, as well as it being illegal to enter the grounds after dark. Walking that dog gave me an excuse to explore the streets on foot with an escort of sorts. Since it was about nine o’clock in the evening and the park was empty I let him off the leash. As Ali raced all over the expansive grounds I sauntered and took in the crisp winter air. I noticed a corner of the park, and experienced a revelation. There was a huge stone staircase that dated back to the 19th century, and at the foot of the staircase was a curved low wall edging a hill that stretched up and boasted a great many tall trees. Next I looked around me in the field and began to imagine people on blankets in the summer with picnic baskets, toddlers scurrying about, or adolescents perched atop their parents shoulders smiling, together, stretched out on blankets. I saw them all there together to attend a play. The play would be free. It would be Shakespeare out-of-doors and we would offer it up to the community, as a way to celebrate one another, young loves, autonomy, and adventure.

Theatre in Battery Park would de-mystify the works of William Shakespeare, and re-envision the face of those who perform his stories. Shakespeare did not write solely for Kings and Lords nor is his legacy the property of those who can afford to patronize
the productions. He belongs just as much to the everyman/woman as he does to the privileged. By “re-envisioning the face,” I refer to the practice of color conscious casting, which affords opportunities for persons-of-color to play some of the greatest characters in dramatic literature, which are typically relegated to white actors. Exorbitant prices coupled with biased casting have prevented scores of citizens and performers access to the most influential writer of western drama. So, in response to this legacy I assembled a diverse ensemble that featured talented persons of color in leading roles. By featuring persons of color playing roles that are more traditionally viewed as the domain of white actors we expanded the appeal of Shakespeare and encouraged the exploration of his works. Not only did I want to provide that opportunity to talented persons of color, but I wanted the predominately African American population of the neighborhood not to feel like this was some happening of cultural imperialism, dictating what was of artistic merit, or that the work itself was just reinforcing stereotypes of the bard itself. The artist must always consider and respect their potential audience.

It is my belief that fine art should be available to all members of our community regardless of race, class, or geographic location. Community oriented theatre in Battery Park fulfilled a void in a community of Richmond, and my neighborhood, specifically the diverse, predominantly African-American North Side of Richmond. This sector was, and is, currently under-served by the Arts Community in Richmond. As a neighborhood arts project, our inaugural production of William Shakespeare’s As You Like It, aided in the revitalization of historic Battery Park and
highlighted the natural richness of its residents and artists. Through advocacy and campaigning we earned support from the City of Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities in addition to the neighborhood association, Friends of Battery Park, media outlets and most importantly ordinary folk on the streets of the neighborhood!

Formerly known best for destruction from Civil War heavy artillery, or the location of the tennis courts where Arthur Ashe learned his game, and later in April of 2007 for a massive flood that wiped out the landscape of the park, a corner of the space became an oasis for creativity and community celebration. Just over 500 hundred Richmonders gathered together for the five day run of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Theatre in Battery Park's inaugural production. As live zydeco, jazz and rockabilly careened through the August evening sky, an eclectic audience, representing all seven stages of man from across the city of Richmond, emerged. The open field filled with picnic baskets, beach blankets, lawn chairs and even a living room couch thus proving that theatre has the ability to transform our perceptions of space and one another. By bringing together folks from all walks of life with the forum of live outdoor Shakespeare, we opened Richmonder's eyes to the limitless possibilities of their own imaginations and our shared environment. A public space was re-envisioned with revels for all.

Because of the belief invested in our mission by Culture Works, a local arts advocacy organization, and the citizens of the Battery Park neighborhood, Theatre in Battery Park’s production of *As You Like It* was not only a success for the park's
surrounding citizens and Richmond at large, but it also provided a professional paid experience for thirteen actors, a stage manager, award winning designers and a director (who graciously worked for well below his standard rate). The entire company signed on before a penny was raised for the production and by the run’s end the production had brought in enough money in concessions and donations to match an Innovative Projects grants sponsored by Culture Works, as well as recoup all of our non-stipend performance expenses. In the end a not-for-profit venture, sponsored by two other non-profits, one providing funds, and the other serving as a fiscal agent for distribution and stewardship of those funds, created in the spirit of access to the arts for all, actually turned a meager profit of 125 dollars which was donated to the Battery Park Athletic Association.

While the production received praise from local critics, the real success was in the responses from members of the community, not only regarding the quality of the production, but also for our care of the park. Before we ever “raised the curtain,” or in our case, plugged in the flood lights which, along with carefully placed tree branches and stumps, shaped the edge of our "stage" we hauled out 600 pounds of debris, weeded and cut back overgrowth, and regularly collected random garbage and swept in order to refresh and beautify what would be our playing area. Some mornings I would arrive at 7:30 am before the sun became too unbearable and work until the early afternoon, or arrive before I would have to shoot scenes for a movie I was filming. This was only fair to the cast, director, and the stage manager who rehearsed in 90-100 degree weather on a regular basis. Talk about dedication, and toughness. Everybody
was pulling. I was serving as a jack-of-all-trades, producing, inserting my own aesthetic that we must emphasize the accessibility of the performance, contacting media outlets, promoting, wrangling props, budgeting, buying materials, accruing lights, and trying to maintain a modicum of sanity while the performance team rehearsed and persevered through the stifling elements.

It was all worthwhile once the crowd assembled and the band began to blow their horns into the inviting summer’s eve. Actors made grand entrances down the epic stone staircase, hid and mingled in the audience, leapt off of walls and from behind bushes, and joined hands with audience members to dance and shout “hey nonny ho!”, all in a beautiful and clean environment that had previously been littered with broken glass. Shortly after the close of our production, The Friends of Battery Park asked for my counsel as to how the park could be improved to better accommodate events of this nature in the future. They had not before thought that a neglected little corner of our public sphere could be so transformed. One witness shared that he had once imagined an amphitheatre in the hill. Now that it’s free of debris and broken bottles and they have seen what can be done, the local residents are looking to see how they can better utilize Battery Park for other events that engage and inspire the community.

We set out with a simple mission in mind: Provide a high quality cultural event to a community underserved by the arts sector in Richmond. Not only did we accomplish revealing the felicity, humor, and drama of Shakespeare to future bard enthusiasts, many of whom had never seen a play before, through a simple and recognizable story, but we also helped to re-shape the perspectives of Richmonders not residing on the
North-side about that neighborhood.

The most rewarding part of our event was seeing people from different backgrounds who would normally not interact and would possibly even be weary of each other, sitting side by side, laughing together and pondering the universal truths as observed through Shakespeare’s language, and dramatic performance. First timers to this part of town were heard saying, “I wish my neighborhood had a Battery Park!”

The neighborhood felt included. Schoolboys and girls watched us rehearse as they twirled on tire swings. One girl shushed her friends scolding, “Be quiet; this is my favorite part.” A toddler strolled on stage as if prompted, to be scooped up by the actor playing Jaques emphasizing the “mewling infant” part of his "all the word's a stage" soliloquy. Whether it be the random passers by who stayed for just a few moments or the ones who attended all five performances, residents of Battery Park knew something special was being done, and done for them.

My hope is that this was only the first of many more productions to take place in Battery Park, as we work toward stronger relationships with community leaders, educators and students. We want to foster a love for the live performance and utilize its power to strengthen our bonds with one another. There are already vendors and funders looking to be a part of the next Theatre in Battery Park event.

I want people to be a part of theatre. So I will bring it out to where they are, and produce it as an offering. I want to move forward the opinion that attending theatre is a vital necessity to our lives. What better way to achieve this goal than to sometimes
give it away, and allow the witnesses to determine how valuable it is to them? I believe in acts of love. I believe that love is work made visible. Theatre is often a pure act of love. It rarely pays all the bills. It is hard, demanding, strenuous work. Without passion and true spirit the artist will wither under pressure of the heat, instead of flourish in the summer sun.
Epilogue: Looking Towards the Future

"Traveler, your footprints
are the only road, nothing else.
Traveler, there is no road;
you make your own path as you walk."
-Antonia Machado

Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum is continuing to expand in its application as a methodology in training the dramatic artist, as a means of devising community specific works, and as a pedagogical tool to be applied in other focuses of study. With the emergence of individuals achieving graduate degrees specializing in the application of the form, individual artists across the world incorporating its values and practices in their collaborative and solo work, and The Conciliation Project (TCP) continuing to evolve by strengthening its presence in the central VA region and beyond, RPDWAC is showing itself to be an emergent presence in the domain of academia, and citizen artistry.

In the spring of 2010, eighteen years after Dr. Tawnya Pettiford Wates published her dissertation *A Re-Vision: Toward a Re-Connection of the Dramatic Artist with the African Origins of the Dramatic Form*, having instructed hundreds of students utilizing the principles of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum, Olisa Enrico became the one of these pupils to receive a Masters of Fine Arts specializing in Ritual Poetic
Drama within the African Continuum (RPDWAC) while applying it to Voice and Speech and Acting Pedagogy. Her ambition inspired others to follow suit in furthering their knowledge of RPDWAC practices. In 2011 three graduate students, Donzell Lewis, Jacquelyn Camden, and your Author will turn their tassels while accepting Master’s degrees in the fields of acting, voice, speech, and movement while specializing in the application of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum as a pedagogical methodology in the training of the dramatic artist.

Donzell Lewis, a fourth degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, has been applying the methods of RPDWAC to his work as a martial arts instructor for six years. Jacquelyn Camden has studied, and applies the method in her work as a voice and speech teacher. I continue to work as a theatre teacher and effective speech adjunct faculty at VCU, as a Program Leader for Art 180 (a Richmond based non-profit organization which is dedicated to turning children’s lives around through the power of artistic expression) an after school arts program at Huguenot High School (a Richmond, VA Public School), and at Seven Hills School (an all boys private middle school) using the method as pedagogy, while introducing, or in some cases re-introducing students to the dramatic form. It is not my belief that all, if any, of the students at both the middle and high school levels will decide to become artists of any medium. However, I believe that the path of the self defined individual travels through the discovery of the power of self-expression. The seeds of this methodology continue to be planted in young persons all over the state of Virginia and beyond as those who will be moving forward with their degrees will continue to practice these techniques and, hopefully, germinate awareness
of the form. As we travel and share our knowledge, we ever so slowly may be altering an individual’s or whole group’s perceptions and definitions of the actor, or the dramatic artist. If their perceptions are not changed they are at least presented with an alternative as to how the actor/dramatic artist might define him/herself and their role in shaping the trajectory of culture and the medium of theatre.

The Conciliation Project, of which I am a proud board and ensemble member, practices the methodology of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum in the training of its artists and the collaborative creation of original works, as well as continual re-mounts of past productions. TCP has performed at the New Orleans Fringe Festival, the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity, in churches, theaters, schools, colleges and universities across the country and in Africa. Preparing to celebrate its 10th anniversary as an officially recognized 501 C-3 not-for-profit theatre company, after having relocated from Seattle, Washington to Richmond, Virginia in the fall of 2005, TCP is hosting an annual meeting, entitled “Ashe Ashe” a west African term meaning, “I agree with my whole being.” TCP is calling on people from all over the country and across the world to re-unite for a week in June to re-connect and share experiences of practicing and applying the methodology of RPDWAC, to share how they have applied the methods to their own work as actors, directors, collaborators, activists and teachers.

In the past year alone The Conciliation Project has been commissioned to create plays for three different organizations. Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities asked the company to develop a play to address issues of bullying at the middle and high
school levels of education. The piece entitled *PUSHED: Explorations into Bullying*; has been performed before community leaders of Richmond as well as in local high schools, thus facilitating dialogue-addressing issues around adolescent bullying. H.O.M.E. (Housing Opportunities Made Equal) hired the company to develop a play as part of their 40th anniversary fundraiser. The company pulled from decades of case files and studies conducted by H.O.M.E. to explore the legacy of housing discrimination in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Queer Action Student Organization of Virginia Commonwealth University brought in the company to devise a half hour piece portraying the color line in the queer community in order to facilitate dialogue about the distinctly different, as well as the shared struggles of white folks and persons of color that identify as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender).

Awareness of this methodology continues to spread to other communities. Currently its application is being examined in an effort to see how it might evolve into the training of not just actors, but other artists as well, additionally exploring how principles of the form might be used in other areas of study. The people it has influenced are too numerous to count; from audience members, employers of the TCP, institutions and establishments that have invited the work into their own buildings and communities, to the hundreds of students who have learned from Dr. T and her disciples who practice the methods in classrooms and workshop spaces. Even strangers in casual conversation baffled by the term itself, yet always intrigued when hearing the term, are acquiring knowledge of the paradigm. Their interests pique. They want to know more.
What remains is to blaze the trail ahead, to continue facilitating the process towards self-actualization through expressive creation. The company, and the educators who practice the method, supply a safe space for individual revelation where honest dialogue may be opened and masks removed. All this is stimulated by challenging dynamic artistry. The birthing of a consciousness is a righteous transformative act. It has many movements and elicits grand dreams of virtuous wonder. It is optimistic and ideal in its hope for bringing out the best in human nature. It is my ambition to facilitate this journey towards self-definition for others through the practice of challenging dramatic art in the arena of live theatre.

I hope to achieve realization of these visions with theatrical activism through citizen artistry. Through this approach, what is put forth and foremost into the purpose of the artist is progression of the audience/community. It does not singularize or limit the scope of revelations or attempt to persuade to any end other than personal discovery. What the audience is left with is theirs to determine.

As I work to apply and synthesize the disciplines I’ve studied I’m left with ideas while looking towards the future, which apply and hopefully enhance the methods of Ritual Poetic Drama Within the African Continuum.

I believe there may be a generation of audiences that would appreciate a new popular form of theatre that shatters the mold of Aristotelian spectator oppression, wherein the audience sits complacently, aiding and abetting in the reinforcement of acceptable performance practices. We don’t necessarily have to stir the audience to revolution, aside from a revolution of expectation. I’m interested in playing with and
advancing the medium of theatre through sustained effort while examining the relationship between audience and actor. This demands, not the complete abandonment of older traditions, but a return to that which is most singularly theatre (the connection between story teller and witness during the living performance rooted in the progression of the community), and a vigorous exploration of how we tell stories.

To diverge from the tried and true is to risk failure. It is to risk looking like the fool. Yet I believe risk must be taken if we are to make theatre a relevant and vital medium in our cultural arena, and if we are to reclaim theatre’s true potential power.


Vita

Joseph Anthony Carlson was born July 12th, 1984 in Fairfax County, Virginia. He graduated with honors from J.E.B. Stewart High School in Falls Church, Virginia in 2002. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Performance from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2008 and stayed to pursue his Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate Pedagogy Program while working professionally as an educator (teaching at middle, high school, and collegiate levels), activist, and actor in stage, film, and commercial/industrial.