

**THE LONG DRIVE: EXPERIMENTS IN THEATRE CREATION**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THEATRE  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

May 2017

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## Abstract

The following thesis records the process of writing, developing, rehearsing, and performing a solo theatre show called *All The Birds in Their Bird Houses*. It is a personal process that explores doubt and fear as both hindrance and catalyst for creation. It examines storytelling techniques via mask, cartooning, clown, and automaton. It touches on Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints*, Jerzy Grotowski's *River Work*, as well as the emotional colour wheel of Dr. Robert Plutchik. Ultimately it seeks to define and identify the concepts of risk and depth in theatre and how those concepts can be applied and utilized in the creation of solo theatre.

## Dedication

To Erika Batdorf for her unwavering and honest support and guidance, and to all of my colleagues in the Solo Creation classes of the past two years for opening their hearts to this project,

To Eric Armstrong and Mark Wilson for their thorough, intelligent, and generous feedback during the writing of this thesis,

To Robert Chafe and Tanja Jacobs for their deft dramaturgical eyes and kind sensitivity,

To my MFA cohort for welcoming me into their family and teaching me so much,

To my other instructors at York—Paul Lampert, David Smukler, Michael Greyeyes, Shawn Kerwin, Allyson McMackon and Gwentyth Dobie—for challenging me to reach beyond my imagined limits,

And finally to my parents, Kevin and Anne, for their constant support, love, and encouragement,

Thank you. None of this would have been possible without you. Tennyson famously writes “I am a part of all that I have met.” I am very glad that you are now a part of me and I will take your lessons with me and do my best to make you all proud.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
The Long Drive: Experiments in Theatre Creation.....	1
Further Explorations.....	16
Conclusion.....	22
Works Cited.....	26
Appendices.....	28
Appendix A: All The Birds in Their Bird Houses.....	28
Appendix B: Selected Journals.....	46

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Screenshot from “2 Dogs That Meet on a Regular Basis.” .....	5
FIGURE 2: Screenshot from “2 Dogs That Meet on a Regular Basis.” .....	5
FIGURE 3: Chris Ware, <i>Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth</i> , Pantheon Books, 29 Apr. 2003. ....	8
FIGURE 4: Emotional Color Wheel. <i>Study.com</i> , <a href="http://study.com/academy/lesson/robert-plutchiks-wheel-of-emotions-lesson-quiz.html">http://study.com/ academy/lesson/robert-plutchiks-wheel-of-emotions-lesson-quiz.html</a> . ....	12

## The Long Drive: Experiments in Theatre Creation

There is a saying, circulated widely online and attributed to Abraham Lincoln, that reads “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe” (Elliot). Although there is no evidence that he ever said such a thing, the concept of “preparation before execution” rings true. As a theatre creator, my life is spent in preparation. The work and learning of an artist never stops as long as the drive to create exists. This paper is an examination of my theatre creation process, my inspirations, experiments, successes and failures—“the preparations”—which have resulted in the play titled *All the Birds in Their Bird Houses*.

It is my belief that every act of creation is also an act of destruction. A white page is covered in words. A pure canvas is splattered with paint. An empty, quiet stage is filled with light and sound and movement. A child is born in blood and pain. The act of creation is an inherently violent one. Violent in the sense that one state is erased or changed and replaced with another state. Emptiness is filled, an emotion provoked, a thought formed. That destruction, or transformation, can provoke fear. The true artists are the ones that push past that fear to get to the heart of the artistic question that they are asking. As someone who has pursued a number of art forms, including theatre, that fear often couples itself with doubt. And it was in examining my own doubts that the journey towards *All the Birds in Their Bird Houses* began.

As a thirty-nine-year-old theatre artist, returning to school to pursue a graduate degree at York University, I was plagued with doubt. I was leaving a moderately successful career in

Newfoundland to move to Toronto where I knew very few people and even less about the Toronto theatre scene. I found myself surrounded with extraordinarily creative minds from a variety of backgrounds. I missed my home and my place in it, and though excited and artistically stimulated, I felt lost and insecure. It was inevitable then, that I would start to explore those feelings in my work.

In my classes that began in the fall of 2015, instructor-led exercises got to the heart of my insecurities and feelings of homesickness. Those exercises resulted in a short clown piece titled *The Attempt, or This May Be Terrible*. I found myself greatly inspired by the work of the clown Avner Eisenberg, also known as Avner the Eccentric, in particular his work *Exceptions to Gravity* (Eisenberg). I sympathized with his clown character—someone who is trying to achieve a goal, constantly running into obstacles, and yet continuing to move forward. One can tell by watching that no matter what happens Eisenberg is still in control. I longed for that kind of confidence in my own work and explored the idea through the piece, in which I attempted to navigate a playing space while tied up in belts and trying to contact an unresponsive entity named Baz. I had no background in clown, nor any formal training, but instead drew upon my own experiences in theatre as a performer, and the work I was exploring through my classes in movement, acting, and solo performance. It was an important step in my development and would lead me down a number of other roads.

As an artist, I find myself attracted to many creative fields. If I am provoked by a creative effort, I automatically want to learn how to do that for myself. There was a freedom in clowning that I had not explored before—an opportunity to investigate deep emotion, without necessarily

depending on the use of text. In the same way that I could sit at a piano and improvise, or at a lump of clay and sculpt, there was no wall between me and the emotions I wished to convey. In the words of sculptor Dorsey James, “Carving provides me the silent communion with myself that is necessary for me to function and grow” (James). As a performer, the work was intoxicating and I likewise found myself attracted to similar performance methods in mask technique, and Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints—a method and vocabulary for examining movement in space which I will discuss later in this paper.

It was my intention from the very beginning to create a thesis production that was a solo show. This would allow me to grow and strengthen as an actor, as well as providing me with a show that I could then produce elsewhere post-graduation. Early in my graduate school career I became enamored with mask work. There was a kind of freedom in mask, similar to clown, that allowed me to access physical emotion that I hadn’t been able to before. And as a maker, the idea of mask-making was very appealing. I started building my own masks in February of 2016, using a plaster mask making recipe by the brilliant paper mache artisan Jonni Good. This recipe foregoes traditional paper for more fibrous shop cloths resulting in a strong and very light structure (Ultimate). Finishing a mask, and getting to try it out—to discover the character within—was fascinating. As a tool for writing material, discovering characters through mask was a valuable exercise but I would run into trouble when I would write the material separate from the mask. A disconnect would occur and I found myself fighting between what I wanted to write, and what the mask was telling me. It was an interesting problem that I am still unpacking as an artist.



As I considered the themes I wished to explore in my work, the concept of doubt of my place in Toronto, I was naturally led towards exploring the definition of home. At this point, the show I was developing was a solo piece, entitled *Reasons for Returning*. I would play three characters in the show, in mask, and would step out of mask to share personal stories with the audience. In the show, Jack is returning to Newfoundland to take care of his family affairs after the death of his father. He is torn between his family ties to Newfoundland, and his own hatred towards the place. The other two characters, Cecil and Nan, are both deceased, and exist in different times from the present of Jack's story. I was able to present this work in progress twice to an audience over the course of the school year. Both times were well received, but the show was lacking an edge. Also, my own inexperience in mask performance was starting to poke through. Never the less, I continued to work on the piece and explore other artistic methods that might inspire and improve my work.

It is important for me, and I believe anyone in the creative arts, to take an active interest in a wide variety of creative mediums. Exploring those mediums can enrich your own work by providing alternate means to tell stories and evoke emotional responses. By viewing the work through another lens, one may better connect with an audience and grow as an artist. Examining other artists work helped me to shape the lens I was using to explore the theme of home. In particular, I found myself moved by the works of Paul Spooner, Vladmaster and Chris Ware, as well as the world of game design.

A hand extends towards a small wooden crank. The crank is attached to a wooden platform. On top of the platform are two carved wooden dogs. The hand begins to turn the

crank and the dogs start to spin. They move at different speeds and at different times, stopping occasionally. At one time the dogs are facing away from each other (see fig. 1). A moment later one dog smells the other dog. And every once in a while, the dogs face each other (see fig. 2). When this happens, the hand pauses, allowing the two dogs a moment to see themselves, before starting the crank again. This small automaton, titled “2 Dogs That Meet on a Regular Basis”, built by Paul Spooner as part of the *Cabaret Mechanical Theatre* founded by Sue Jackson, is an example of the simplest of storytelling (Cabaret). Two characters, in this case the dogs, meet and interact. There is no dialogue. No actors. No lights, sound, or costumes.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from “2 Dogs That Meet on a Regular Basis.”



Fig. 2. Screenshot from “2 Dogs That Meet on a Regular Basis.”

As we see in figs. 1 and 2, the placement of the dogs tells a story. It tells us something about their relationship. In fig. 1 they may be searching for each other. They may be lost. They may also be disinterested in each other and more interested in their environment. In fig. 2 they meet. Are they happy about this meeting? Are they surprised to see another dog? As viewers we are given the opportunity to fill in the blanks. Nothing here is spoon-fed to us, although at first glance it might seem that way. My interest in Paul Spooner's work is in how he can tell a story and develop relationships very simply. He boils the story down to its essence and allows the viewers to extrapolate and form their own opinions. This supposed simplicity is the kind of work that appeals to me, and something that I wanted to feed into my own work.

The American artist Vladimir, who works under the title Vladmaster, builds custom made Viewmaster reels that tell a story in a number of slides. She builds the images using small toys and objects, usually discarded or vintage in nature. She then photographs those images, combining those stories with a soundtrack on CD and organizes public performances. Each audience member gets a Viewmaster and the reels needed for the story. In her own words "It's such a novel experience for an audience that they're all having this private moment looking at the tiny pictures, but it's simultaneously a public experience" (qtd. in Gallivan). This is another means of theatrical storytelling, like the *Cabaret Mechanical Theatre*, that I find appealing to my artistic sensibilities. In this case, the audience members themselves in a way become the performers, as they are each responsible for pushing the lever on their own device to move the story forward. Vladimir is able to create the story, and specifically frame that story with music and the physical frame of the Viewmaster reel, but she is not in control of how well each audience member responds to the prompts to change the picture.

Both Paul Spooner and Vladimir deal with objects that are manipulated in order to tell a story. In both cases, they are not necessarily the performer. The observer becomes an active part of the storytelling. One can make an easy comparison to a child playing. As a child picks up their toys, they create a story. These stories are fantastical and imaginative, often following a logic that only the child can understand. They are creating the story for themselves, becoming both performer and audience. I began to explore how this method could translate to the stage. In particular, over the summer of 2015, I began to write material akin to the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of the 1980s, and started to examine how game designers manipulate players by using game mechanics to tell a story.

In a kind of *Choose Your Own Play*, a performer would lead the audience through a series of episodes, allowing them to be an active part of any decision-making process. I imagined giving an audience member a rolled-up sock as a fireball prop that must be used at an important part of the show or casting some audience members as bards that must help to sing a monster to sleep. In some cases, the agency given to the audience would be false, as any choice they made would lead to the same place. This is a mechanic often used by game masters in the role-playing game genre. It keeps the story going in the direction they want, while allowing the players the illusion of control. There is a deep rabbit hole of game mechanics to explore that could be translated to the world of theatre creation, but as I examined them, I found myself losing my original intentions—the examination of the definition of home, doubt, and fear—and so I put the *Choose Your Own Play* format on the shelf for another day.

As I continued to “sharpen the axe” and develop *Reasons for Returning*, I found myself getting reacquainted with the work of the American cartoonist Chris Ware. Ware is a draftsman par excellence. Every line is considered. Every colour and angle carefully chosen to help tell his stories and invite the reader into his worlds. He approaches his work like the best set designers, using everything at his disposal and wasting nothing. In Ware’s work, the silences and atmosphere are just as important as text, and he uses the visuals, by bending reality, to show us the inner emotions of the characters. Take fig. 3, for example, from his award-winning graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*.



Fig. 3. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Pantheon Books, 29 Apr. 2003.

In this moment we see Jimmy as an adult, lying on his estranged father’s couch, in a sleeping bag. He feels powerless here, as he often does in the book, but this feeling is exacerbated by the childishness of sleeping in a sleeping bag, while resting on a flowery pillow. As he tosses and turns, he slowly turns into a child. Even the pillow itself changes to help reflect this shift. The best cartoonists, like Ware, take the form and flip it on its head. They bend time and space to tell their stories, without losing the core of the subject matter. Playwrights have often used such conventions in their work. Ware’s technique recalls David Young’s *Glenn*,

wherein three actors portray different aspects of Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's personality—all interacting with each other and moving in and out of time periods seamlessly. It is my habit as a creator to be story driven and linear. As I looked at Ware's work I found myself thinking less linearly and more emotionally, instinctually, and metaphorically.

I put *Reasons for Returning* away for a while, so I could explore the themes I wanted to talk about through a different lens, and without the text in hand. Some interesting things started to happen. At the time I was working as a props master for a St. John's opera company and as a result I ended up spending a lot of time driving. During my drives I would start improvising monologues. At first it was just something to pass the time, but then I began taking those bits and pieces home and trying them out in mask. The mask helped me to tease more material out of the monologues and to build some interesting characters. In these sessions I would let the mask lead, and change what I had written appropriately. I would then write that material down as something I might draw upon in a later project. I think those long drives, free from distraction, really helped in the creation process. Without an apartment full of activities, I was able to focus entirely on improvising around my chosen themes. Going back to *Reasons for Returning* I suddenly found the script stale and empty. It lacked the bite of the improvised bits I had been creating. It felt soft and clichéd. I was much more excited about the new material. It felt more like me.

I started piecing this new material together, examining the monologues like an actor, looking for clues as to who these characters were, and a new play started to take shape. This piece would be the play *All the Birds in Their Bird Houses*. *Reasons for Returning* would go on

the shelf for a later time, and this new play would take all of my focus. Some ideas from the first play would move over into the second. It was still a solo show with three characters, examining the definition of home, and with a central tragedy inside the action. But this time, inspired by my research, I would approach the material through metaphor, with each character representing a different definition of home. The characters—John, Trevor, and Catherine—represent the home that is another person, the home that is a place, and the home that is found within. The bird imagery in the piece speaks to the freedom from doubt and fear that happens when we die. Interestingly, I also abandoned the use of mask other than as a tool for generating material. Without additional training, I felt in order to do the characters justice, I would need to perform with my own face, and without anything in between me and the audience.

As we have seen, in any creative effort, exploring other mediums and how they tell stories can help to jumpstart and inspire creation. The theatre artist must be a student not just of theatre, but of everything that the theatre encompasses: visual arts, dance, literature, music, storytelling, games, and others. Above all things, the theatre artist must be curious about the world. In order to present work that is meaningful, artists must enrich themselves. In *The Viewpoints Book* by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, the use of other arts to enrich and inspire the theatre artist via Composition work is discussed (Bogart). Although the focus is on the arts, other subjects such as science, math, and history, and in particular psychology and movement, are just as valuable to the creation of theatre.

In the introduction to *The Philosophical Actor*, author Donna Soto-Morettini addresses the actor's emotions by not focusing on their own emotions and feelings, but on changing or influencing the emotions of the other actors in the scene (xxiv). This was an interesting discovery for me. While I believe in the principle of the idea, I don't believe that it is so one sided. While I may be trying to change the feelings of another actor in order to achieve my character's objective, I cannot be blind to my own emotions and how they are being changed in turn. Every scene is a tug-of-war filled with emotion on both sides. Artists are creatures of emotion and understanding some psychological principles can help in the creation of that art.

When I was a young actor I used to experiment in eliciting emotion without any external catalysts. I considered these sessions as a way of warming up my emotions, in the same way a singer might warm up the voice, or a dancer the body. In those sessions sadness turned to anger, then back to sadness, then to joy, then to distress and remorse. It was an opportunity to explore how those emotions felt in my body. What I hadn't realized at the time was that I was exploring a kind of primitive emotional wheel. During my creation process I found myself thinking back to those early explorations and discovered the work of Robert Plutchik.

In 1980, psychologist Dr. Robert Plutchik conceived an emotional colour wheel (fig. 4.) to describe how emotions are connected to each other and how they change in intensity (Plutchik).



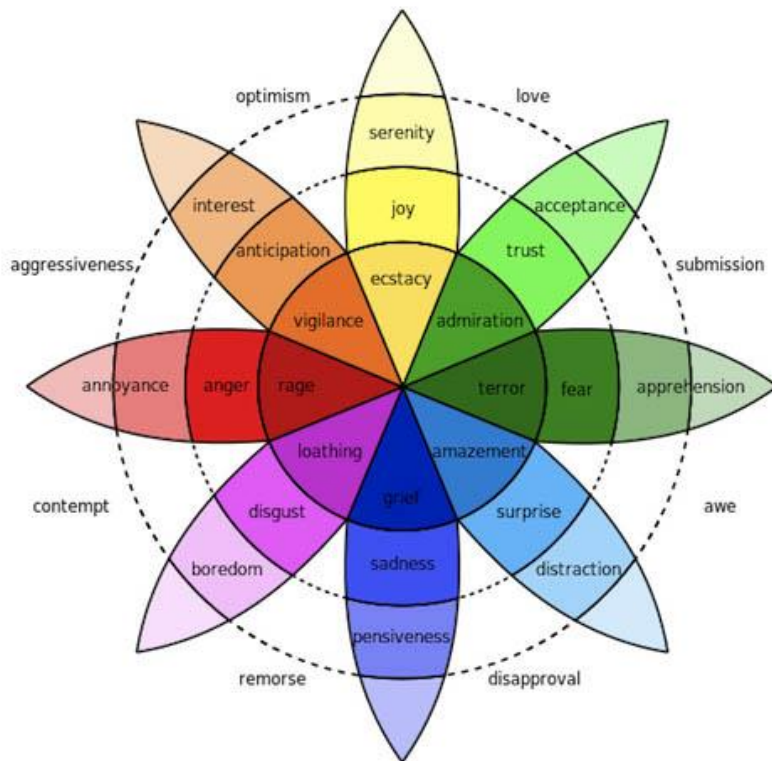


Fig. 4 Emotional Color Wheel. *Study.com*, <http://study.com/academy/lesson/robert-plutchiks-wheel-of-emotions-lesson-quiz.html>.

I started to wonder if the wheel could be used not just as a way to warm up the emotions, but also to generate character material. In this way, emotion would lead the narrative. For example, a situation is presented and the wheel consulted for an emotional state. What emotions are related to the state on the wheel? Where would a character naturally go? And what kinds of emotions and actions would elicit that response? As I worked on *All The Birds in Their Bird Houses* I found myself tracking the emotional journeys of the three characters. John, for example, would move from rage to vigilance fairly easily, as his rage against the world for what had happened would turn to an inner vigilance in order to protect himself from going too

far. Using related and opposite emotions on the wheel enabled me to explore some variety in the narrative. I would write down the major emotions on index cards in order to see how the three characters' emotional states worked as a whole. It would do no good, for example, if John, Trevor, and Catherine all had monologues that ran back-to-back and in the same state. As fascinating and useful as this was, it all started to seem a little too measured.

After an interesting conversation about emotional journeys with a colleague, in particular using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an example, I realized that humans are far from rational. Although there is logic in how emotions are related to one another, and psychologists such as Plutchik have examined that at length, people are not logical creatures. Emotional response is as varied as the stars. And a journey that is full of surprises and twists-and-turns makes for fuller and more compelling characters. I did not regret my research into emotion, and moving forward I decided to dip into that research as needed; to keep an eye on the bigger picture of the piece in order to avoid repetition in motivation and intention. As I worked I tried to also keep in mind the words of the French drama theorist and writer Antonin Artaud, "All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it" (Artaud 71).

One of the many things that Artaud was looking for in his work was a vocabulary to describe the theatre outside of text. He examines this idea among others in his staggering work *The Theatre and Its Double*: "...this language, if it exists, is necessarily identified with the mise en scène considered...as the language of everything that can be said and signified upon a stage independently of speech, everything that finds its expression in space..." (68-69). Once again, as an artist who has relied so heavily on linear narrative and text, I found my conceptions of

theatre blow apart. I would soon discover the work of Mary Overlie, adapted and popularized by Anne Bogart, as a tool for creators to invent and explore via a common language of movement.

I was introduced to Viewpoint work early in my first semester of graduate school and found myself greatly attracted to its simplicity. Anne Bogart's nine physical viewpoints—architecture, tempo, duration, spatial relationship, repetition, shape, topography, gesture, and kinesthetic response—as well as the twelve vocal viewpoints, are excellent ways to generate and discuss movement in space (Bogart 7-12). Let us take for example the viewpoint of spatial relationship. If we look back at Paul Spooner's "2 Dogs That Meet on a Regular Basis," how they are together in space tells us something about their relationship. When they are facing away from each other it may evoke a feeling that they are alone. Or that they hate each other. When they narrowly miss each other as they spin, it may make us feel sad; that there was a missed opportunity. When they finally come face to face, we may feel elated. As you will read later in this document, I was able to experiment with viewpoints in my rehearsals to explore the physical lives of the characters.

Since beginning my studies at York and working on this project I came to the opinion that the greatest emotion at the heart of my creation challenge was fear. The act of creation and sharing that creation is a deeply personal one. Early in his career, the playwright and actor, Spalding Gray, said, "Art is not life but the living's realization and creative reaction to the termination of life" (Casey 40). Creation and performance can create a fear response similar to the fear of death and it can prevent the artist from moving outside of themselves and

connecting with an audience. Exercises in creation, including viewpoints, mask, and exploring other artistic mediums, have helped me to alleviate that fear. At the same time, it is in facing that fear, that spark of immediacy and exposure, which creates compelling work. Being comfortable is the death of art. It is only in exploring and facing what is scary that one can grow. It is up to the artist, through practice and thought, to discover the methods that enable them to access that immediacy and break down their own inner walls and the walls between themselves and the audience.

Putting away my first script and beginning again made me anxious, but at the same time excited. I consider that the first piece, the work in developing it and the research since, was all part of my natural creation process. It was preparation: a long drive down a twisty road, if you will. There are many such roads to creation. It is a valuable, life-long pursuit requiring study, practice, and personal examination. Finding my own inspirations, in the work of Spooner, Vladmaster, Ware, and others, while drawing on my own personal life experiences, will help me to create compelling work that can move an audience. My own fears and doubts will always be present, but understanding that those feelings are a natural part of my creation process, will help me find a higher understanding of myself and a deeper and more personal connection with the audience.

## Further Explorations

In September of 2016 I returned to York from my summer semester in Newfoundland. I had completed a first draft of the new script and was both excited and nervous to share that material with my instructors and colleagues. It had become a very personal piece and I had drawn on my own history to populate the backstories of the characters in it. I was also full of new information and theatrical theory, and I was chomping at the bit to try to put those theories into practice. I had recently read Jordan Tannahill's *Theatre of the Unimpressed* and Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Both had affected me greatly.

Of all the notes I have received from my instructors at York the two biggest have been for me to consider risk and depth. Tannahill's work talks about contemporary, dull theatre that is "...often intensely risk averse, resistant to new or unusual expressions of activism and aesthetics" (19). He considers that it is "...an artist's responsibility to acknowledge his or her failures and learn from them. [To] Fail in more exciting ways" (Tannahill 19). I began to recall shows that I had seen over the years where the most exciting and compelling moments occurred when something happened that was unplanned or a mistake. The feeling as an audience member when it seems an actor has forgotten his or her lines can often be the most one might feel during an otherwise drab performance. Tannahill's book spoke to my need to take risks and I was determined not to create another boring piece of theatre. In order to really push myself, I began the process of planning a post-graduate Newfoundland tour of the show. By raising my professional stakes, I hoped to invest the work with further urgency and vitality.

One of the first assignments I was given in the fall of 2016 was to present a performance piece based on my summer research. As I was examining the nature of fear both as a hindrance and catalyst for creation, and also being encouraged to take more risks, I put together a piece that I hoped would demonstrate both. I decided to read from my junior-high diary, sight unseen. I would choose pages at random, facing the fear of embarrassment and the unknown, and share my teenage thoughts with an audience. As I would discover, this idea was far from new and as a result many members of the faculty did not see it as much of a risk. For me, sharing my journal from twenty-five years ago that no one had ever seen before was in fact a huge risk. I was tremendously nervous but I got through it. The piece ended up being quite funny and I considered it a success and a thorough learning experience. I also considered it character research, as John talks about reading his diary to Catherine in the play.

The definition of “depth” was something that I was having trouble with, until my movement instructor Allyson McMackon suggested the word “density”. It was a small change in vocabulary, but it enabled me to further understand what the faculty was asking for. Even though I was inspired by simplistic storytelling, there still needed to be many more layers in my work. Allyson’s movement class, which used a form of Grotowski’s River Work, helped me to develop some of those layers. As an instructor Allyson has a no-nonsense, straight-forward style that I really opened up to. My lack of physical training is something that is often pointed out to me and I felt refreshed to discover a technique that I could really wrap my mind around. I found that my own experiments in emotional colour wheels were tangentially related to River Work.

In the river, one considers an archetype: the “beloved”, for example. There is no preparation beforehand. It is very much an open playing field of improvised movement based on the image or images of the chosen archetype. As we worked we would slowly learn to recall physical movements that we had already used. In this way, the river could be used to create and develop choreography. While exploring the various rivers, I was graciously allowed to insert my thesis work and use the class as further research for my play. Surprisingly, backstory started to emerge for some of the characters. I would discover that Catherine was a school teacher and liked to knit. While exploring John I was bombarded with images of whips and chains—very much a sign of his need for self-punishment. Trevor found freedom in the “world” archetype. In those sessions he was living a life that he dreamed about. River Work was immensely valuable and I believe it helped me to access some of that depth that I was looking for.

Feeling inspired by movement class, I used the fall semester of 2016 to further explore my physicality. I did so by regular sessions at the gym, combined with free-form improvisations to music in my private studio time and a re-evaluation of my diet. It had been many years since I had done a solo show and I was nervous about whether or not I was up to the task on a purely physical level. Dieting and increasing my physical training would begin to address those concerns. Meditation would provide similar support in enabling me to focus, to find perspective, and to calm my mind while working. I would attend weekly group mindfulness sessions, supplemented by my private work at home. Meditation has taught me to be aware of my physical nature; to breathe and to acknowledge my own habits and quirks without judgement.

At the end of the fall semester I was very lucky to have the opportunity to do a public reading of the script. It was a long night, with a number of my colleagues also presenting material, and I happened to be at the end of the program. Having the chance to do a public read was invaluable. As with any public presentation many discoveries were made. Trevor suddenly changed from someone with a slight stutter to someone with an obvious mental and physical disability. John was much more on edge than I expected, breaking down into tears. At the end of the piece, as I quickly shifted from one character to another, I had trouble dropping the emotions of one character in order to live in the other. Some of my notes from the audience indicated that the characters all lived in kind of the same pace. This is something I would start to work on, among other things, as I moved into my last semester.

I was very fortunate to find two wonderful dramaturges to help me work on the show. Robert Chafe provided long distance assistance, while Tanja Jacobs was able to meet with me in person to provide notes. As I worked with them both I began to make sweeping cuts to the script, realizing that much of the text was really subtext or character backstory that didn't need to be said out loud. Some sections I discovered were simply the author speaking and trying to work something out, and not necessarily the character. In particular, when it came to the character of Catherine, Tanja's notes really hit home. She noted that I should never tell the audience how to feel, but rather create the conditions in which they can discover it for themselves. That is something that I have taken to heart. I started to look at the text the way a poet might: considering subtext and metaphor. I also had the opportunity to address some of the pacing in the script, by looking at longer pieces of text, particularly in the end.



As I began to lift the script into performance, physicality, voice, and pace were foremost in my mind. One of the biggest criticisms of my mask work on *Reasons for Returning* was that my characters lived in the same physical worlds. They moved at the same pace and there wasn't enough difference in them to make them compelling. In my solo performance classes with Erika Batdorf, this note was a recurring theme. I started to dip back into Anne Bogart's Viewpoints as a way to explore the physical life of the characters.

In rehearsal I started to examine tempo and spatial relationship. Catherine would live mostly in breath, with a slow sustained tempo. Her world is one of poetry and loss. John would always be moving, even when standing still. He was nervous and anxious and constantly rubbing his eyes. Trevor would be sitting and live in a varied tempo depending on his emotional state: sometimes fast as he complained about drivers; other times slow as he shared his dreams of owning a motorcycle. Spatial relationship was an interesting viewpoint to consider in a solo show. The set consists of a single chair. Already there is spatial relationship in play. I could sit in the chair, be upstage of the chair, downstage of the chair, left or right, etc. Perhaps the chair could stand in for other set pieces and be flipped upside down, or on its side. I began to play with each character occupying a particular space on the stage, with the hopes that the audience would come to recognize these areas as belonging to those characters. Trevor would sit. John would be stage left. Catherine stage right. In that way I could play with the relationships between the three characters even if there was only one physical body on stage. For example, what happens if John sits in the chair after we have determined that the chair is where Trevor lives? And how would the physical action of sitting change from character to character? These ideas are still something I am examining in my rehearsals.

It was and continues to be very important for these characters' voices to be unique and I have been working to discover where they live in my body. In *Towards a Poor Theatre* Grotowski provides a number of methods and exercises for considering the placement of voice. These exercises involve the head voice, the mouth voice, the occipital voice, the chest voice, and the belly voice, as well as utilizing the shoulder blades, the small of the back, and the lumbar region (Grotowski 176-177). In my own rehearsals I started to examine where these characters' voices would naturally lie. Catherine seemed to live in the head and chest, with a softer voice and breath. I was very aware, however, that I wanted to avoid doing any kind of cliché female voice. By mixing chest into the head I could achieve something with a little more weight. John seemed to live more in the belly, and I found that his physicality and center of gravity changed as I discovered his voice. Trevor was a little harder to pin down and changed often, probably as a result of his disability. His voice was mostly a mouth voice, directly in front of the face, but also seemed to come from the shoulder blades. As I worked alone I self-recorded my rehearsals so I could examine the physical and vocal lives of the characters. There is still work to be done, but I am pleased with my progress and excited to continue.

As I sit writing this, just five days away from a public showing of an excerpt of the show, I find myself growing in confidence and looking back on the work with pride. I have made many discoveries in my time at York and in the preparation of my thesis. I've explored new techniques and have had a very hard look at examining my own faults. I've still got a long way to go, but I've found the inspiration to continue to look for depth, to take risks, and to create art that is both vital and compelling.

## Conclusion

On April 17<sup>th</sup> I arrived at The Commons Theatre in downtown Toronto for the first day of loading in the Third Wheel Theatre Fest. My show was to be part of a micro-festival that included the works of two of my York colleagues: Andrew Ritchie and Taliesin McEnaney. The Commons is a DIY theatre space with a capacity of about forty. It was exactly the kind of space that the show was made for and I was ecstatic to get it up on its feet and in front of an audience.

Opening night was very much like a first date. As I waited in the tiny area behind the curtain all the usual questions ran through my mind: Will they like me? Will they listen to what I have to say? Will they want to see me again? As I entered the space and started, the questions fell away and I found that confidence that was always there. I found myself reminded that this is what I do and what I'm good at. The next three days were filled with exploration and discovery as I worked with the audience to create the experience, and some interesting things happened.

On the Saturday matinee I was faced with a very small house of about six or seven audience members. The earlier show had been quite full, so I was startled when I came out on stage to find so few people. I found myself reaching for some lines and fighting harder to really stay in it. What I came to realize is that a smaller house makes the piece more intimate and as a result full of more personal exposure. Fear of personal exposure was one of the things at the heart of my creative challenge. I pushed through it and came out on the other side. It was a valuable exercise and something that I needed to do in order to prepare myself for not only

small houses in the future, but also to work towards replicating that feeling of intimacy with a larger audience.

Something else that occurred to me while working on stage hearkened back to a note that Tanja Jacobs had given me about the idea of resistance: that only with resistance can we have drama. On the matinee I found myself reaching for emotion with John and trying to capture what came so easily in rehearsal. But John's journey is one of resistance; he doesn't want to feel the emotions. So for the last two performances I allowed myself to fight it and when the emotion finally poked through my resistance I felt it much deeper. In those moments there was truth and authenticity. It was a discovery that I will not soon forget.

It seems for me, and I suspect for other creator-performers that the most meaningful discoveries can only happen on stage in front of an audience. I have often heard it said that a performance is simply an extension of the rehearsal process and that the audience is in fact your collaborators in the creation of the work. The biggest lesson I've learned in this process is that a piece of art is never finished. Even if a script is in its final draft, or a sculpture finished, or a painting complete, the experiences that the viewer brings with them will change and affect the whole experience of that piece of art. It's all about context and context is constantly changing; what I perform today may change tomorrow based not only on my individual performance, but also on the viewer of that performance. It's an exciting thing and really highlights the fact that theatre is a living and breathing art form.

The creation of this piece, from my early improvisations in mask class, to the final performance at The Commons, was an exercise in discipline. Working mostly alone in the studio

I had to develop ways to keep myself on task and motivated. While every piece requires a new or different approach, I was able to develop a set of skills that I believe will help me in my future solo work. Warm-up, meditation, and cleaning the studio space enabled me to de-clutter and claim ownership of the studio as I worked. Breaking down my script onto index cards aided me in memorization and calmed my nerves when I felt I wasn't getting ahead fast enough. Recording my sessions and watching the playback gave me the opportunity to attempt to be objective with my own work. I believe for the most part I was successful.

As always there is room for improvement. There is a moment in the play when John is re-enacting his work as a filing clerk. The motions in that scene are still stilted and uncomfortable for me. Likewise there are some bits of script that could use smoothing out. Unbelievably I found myself once or twice editing on the fly in performance when I found that the text did not support the moment. I would have also liked to have found some more specificity in Catherine's movements by exploring her topography. As she moves with her eyes closed this is a tricky thing, but I think with a director it could be accomplished and would lift the piece further. In a few weeks' time I go back into rehearsal with director and theatre artist Berni Stapleton. I am elated to continue to work on this piece with the addition of a full-time director and to build on the work that I've already done.

The last two years of writing, exploring, and practicing, culminating in the showings at The Commons, have left me full of inspiration and motivation. It's already got me thinking about my next solo show. As I came to York as a director, I am leaving with a passion for solo creation and performance. It's not at all where I expected to be, but perhaps a journey where

you discover a new destination is much more exciting than landing where you have already aimed. That is indeed the biggest and most important lesson I've learned in preparing my thesis and I hope to continue to discover new destinations in my work in the years to come.

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Appendix A

All The Birds in Their Bird Houses

By Kevin Woolridge

Production Draft

March 18<sup>th</sup> 2017

I, Icarus

There was a time when I could fly. I swear it.

Perhaps, if I think hard enough for a moment, I can even tell you the year.

My room was on the ground floor at the rear of the house.

My bed faced a window.

Night after night I lay on my bed and willed myself to fly.

It was hard work, I can tell you.

Sometimes I lay perfectly still for an hour before I felt  
my body rising from the bed.

I rose slowly, slowly until I floated three or four feet  
above the floor.

Then, with a kind of swimming motion, I propelled myself  
toward the window.

Outside, I rose higher and higher, above the pasture fence,  
above the clothesline, above the dark, haunted trees  
beyond the pasture.

And, all the time, I heard the music of flutes.

It seemed the wind made this music.

And sometimes there were voices singing.

- Alden Nowlan

Characters

TREVOR

JOHN

CATHERINE

*Lights up on TREVOR sitting in a chair center stage. TREVOR speaks with a slight stutter.*

TREVOR: I drive a lot. I spend a lot of time driving. I have a clicker that I've taped to the dashboard next to the steering wheel. A clicker to keep track of things, that type of clicker? You click it with your thumb. No one, no one knows how and when to use their signal lights. To use their indicators to indicate. People have to indicate where they are going. They have to. Lives depend on it. The car behind you needs to know. Are you turning left, right, going straight? Pedestrians need to know. They are walking! They need to know where you are pointing your three thousand pound weapon of destruction. Because that's what it is. It's a big fucking piece of metal and some idiot gave you a license to drive it. So I've been keeping track. It's official. Every time I see someone who doesn't indicate, or – and this is sometimes even worse – someone who has it on and hasn't turned it off, I click the clicker. I click every time I see an infraction. And when I get home I take those clicks and I write them in a book. I compile the data on a monthly basis. I'm very good with license plates, and when I notice the same plates coming up, I record that information.

I've got books and books full of entries at the house, but I drive so much that I'm not there a lot. I eat, I sleep. I keep the oil topped up in the car, and the windshield washer fluid. Whenever I have a few extra minutes, like in a parking lot, or in a drive through, I use some spray on a cloth on the dashboard and all the panels and the wheel. I like the smell of it. I eat in my car a lot, but I don't like the smell of food. Sometimes I like to smell the rugs at Winners.

I'm getting to that point now in my life, where I want a motorcycle. I want to have a motorcycle and just drive and drive and drive. I want to get on a motorcycle and drive across the country. And I would write, and draw, and see things, and talk to everyone and talk to nobody, and take pictures. I would sleep in a tent, and in hotel rooms, and motel rooms, and eat breakfast at odd hours in gas stations. I'd meet a girl, a waitress, and we'd fall in crazy love in 24 hours, and I'd convince her to quit her job, because she hates it anyway and her boss treats her terribly, and she would leave with me and we would drive my motorcycle to the Yukon and pan for gold.

*He sings the chorus to Country Road.*

Anyway. Nobody knows how to use a signal light properly. Some people use their signal light too early or too late. It's not illegal. I can't click on it, but I'm watching. I'm watching those people. If you're planning on turning right, don't put your indicator on when you're three rights away from your turn because that's being a douche. And then if you do it too late, like if I'm waiting to turn left and you're coming from my left, and you turn your right signal on really late that's awful. Like, I could have went if I had known you were turning, but now I have to wait. These should be clickable offenses. But they are not. It's just people being fuckwads. Like people who drive trucks in the city. Big trucks with tractor wheels and a hundred little stick people in the back window. Are you planning to drive through any flood waters on your way to Starbucks, you dick? Get off your phone!

When I'm driving I'm in complete control of my life. Literally. One mistake and I'm dead. One decision and that's it. Complete control. That makes me feel like an adult. Like me. Like, I'm me when I'm driving. That's a big responsibility. To be you. Do they teach that in driving school before you get your license to drive a huge ass truck that I can't see around, and that takes up two spaces, you dicksmack? I don't even know what a dicksmack is. Somebody who smacks dicks I guess.

Someone I went to high school bought a big truck. Huge wheels. He won ten thousand dollars on a scratch ticket. So he bought a truck, an ATV, and a skidoo. So he could be a dicksmack all year round I guess. I don't know.

JOHN: I was sitting in the traffic on the way here, and the thing about traffic is that it's time you can't do anything about. You're trapped. It's kind of freeing in a way. Because there's nothing you can do about it. Just sit there, you know? So I was sitting there and there was this woman in the other lane. Thirties. Dark hair. Well, she was singing. People do that. Nothing new. I do it. I couldn't hear what she was singing, but at one point she made a gesture with her hands, like she was hitting a drum. And I knew right away it was Queen. I started laughing and laughing.

I was laughing not because I was making fun of her, but because I love Queen. And for a second it felt really good to make a connection. Even if she had no idea I was there. It was nice. And then I hear a car horn and realize traffic was moving and the guy behind me was pissed. Flat out on the horn. And I'm one of

those guys who's not paying attention. I never used to care that much about what other people thought... But I think I'm missing layers of skin. I gave him the finger. That's a new one for me.

Yesterday a dog ran out in front of the car. I stopped in time, but I was shaking. Nerves shot. I yelled at it. A dog. As if it was his fault that there was a road there. And cars and trucks. As if he had made the decision to jump out and get in my way, personally. When I got home I started thinking about all the people on the street. Who is this guy yelling at a dog? And the dog, just doing what dogs do.

*CATHERINE steps forwards with eyes closed. Her eyes remain closed throughout the play, even as she explores the space.*

CATHERINE: There is no one here but me.

*Breath.*

There is no one here but me.

*Breath.*

I am here alone. These arms are not my arms. These legs are not my legs. They belong to something else.

*Breath.*

I see my house from above. I hear the sounds of flutes. I don't know where it comes from.

*Breath.*

I see a tree full of bird houses in different colors. Each little house is different and they hang all over the branches. And only the ones with birds in them are homes. And they shine from the inside.

*Breath.*

Sparkling lights. Are you okay? The sound of rain. I hear, and I am, the sound of rain.

*Breath.*

There is no one here but me.

JOHN: We thought about getting a dog. When we first moved in together. I met her... I'm talking a lot today.

*He laughs. And smiles.*

She. She. She. She was the girl with eyes like owls. And a laugh like a bicycle bell. Bright and high and full of children. Her smile was the ringing of summer bells. And when she moved it was the zodiac. It was the northern lights. It was... Her heart was the heart of the world and her face was the face of god. And I loved just being her passenger. That's it. Summer nights. Looking out the car window. The streetlights reflecting off the wet pavement. And the sounds of cars on that pavement, going by. You know that sound?

*He makes the sound of a car passing.*

*He makes it again.*

I could be weak with her. I didn't have to hold myself up all the time. That was pretty crazy. One night I was showing her some old school books – Always Ask for a Transfer, Bartlett: The Great Explorer, God I hated that one – anyway, we found my junior high diary. She bugged me to read it and how can you say no? I started to read, and we laughed and laughed, and then...I knew. Look, I know it's cliché, sentimental. But it's real. It happens. You know that. Right? That it's okay to be sentimental? It's what makes us human. A lot of people don't get that. But it's normal. Everyone moves too fast, talks too fast, wants their experiences done and over with so they can move on to the next one. Nobody takes the time to have the time. She could do that. It wasn't mystical or new age-y bullshit, it was just...her. And it was us. I can't do that anymore. I try. I try a lot. I try here. I try at the park sometimes. I like it there when it's rainy. Keeps the couples away. I like looking at the ducks. Way they duck under the water to get food. Seems like a pretty simple life. Except for the mating. Never look up how ducks mate online. It's scarring.

Okay, so the apartment smelled like cat piss. Ever since we moved in. It was above a shoe store on Water Street. I always wanted to live downtown. I think she did too. On Friday nights we could go across the street and get hot dogs straight from a vendor, and bring them home. I liked the works, but she only ever wanted ketchup. She'd always give some to our neighbor's cat and I used to

make this joke about a cat eating a hot dog. She hated it. (*He tries to recall the joke*). Umm. A cat is...I don't remember how it starts. A cat is walking? Jesus. How come I can't remember that? Shit. I told that joke a lot. She hated it. Damn it. That's the worst you know? Forgetting things.

The apartment. Ah. Sometimes we'd forget our keys, so she'd shimmy up the fire escape and get in through the bedroom window. I couldn't do that. I couldn't even watch *her* do it. She didn't care about danger. I mean, she was safe, but she never...she didn't have any fear. Could talk to anybody. Didn't even matter.

We were at the park once. It was really early in the morning. And we're sitting on a bench and this guy sits next to us. He was wearing burlap. Big dirty burlap robe or something. He smelled really bad. And I'm about to get up and she says 'hi.' Hi. To a guy who is definitely crazy. He had a pillow case full of birdseed, a pillowcase and a crucifix on a wooden staff or a branch or something like that. Well he starts talking about the visions that he saw. Visions. All about God and aliens. He had quit his job. Started to walk all over the city. Feeding birds and talking to people. Real Francis of Assisi. He smelled really bad. He could have been serial killer. Or a rapist. And there she is talking to him. I just wanted to leave. She always did that.

Someone told me later that he poisoned the bird seed that he hands out.

*Pause.*

I don't know if that's true.

TREVOR: My car is a 1985 AMC Eagle. American Motors Corporation. Wooden paneling on the side. Nobody uses wooden paneling on the side of cars anymore which is terrible because it looks really good. Like really slick. They don't make Eagles now. It wasn't new when I got it. Used. Lady driven. As if that makes any difference when nobody knows how to drive anyway in the first place. Sometimes I scream out from the car window at four way stops. People don't know how to use four way stops, so while everyone is trying to figure out who has the right of way, I help.

*(screaming and pointing)* YOU BOTH ARRIVED AT THE SAME TIME BUT SINCE HE IS TO YOUR DIRECT RIGHT HE HAS THE RIGHT OF WAY! AND THEN IT IS YOUR TURN! I GO LAST BECAUSE I ARRIVED AFTER THE BOTH OF YOU!



I think motorcyclists know what they are doing. They've got a code. They say to each other to always keep the rubber side down. You know, like the tires. Keep them on the road. And they wave to each other when they pass each other on the road like this.

*He waves with his hand pointed  
down and out away from his body.*

They do that because if you wave the regular way that could be taken as a hand signal, for turning. But most drivers wouldn't get that anyway even if they got slapped in the face with it. Because they don't know what they are doing. Like I've said a hundred times.

People thought we'd have flying cars by now. Years ago people thought that. But that would be even worse. People trying to fly around each other. Birds can do it because they're born to it. A hundred birds all flying in one direction and if one of them changes then they all change. I've seen that. They just know. And they know where their home is. They know it even if they have to fly hundreds of miles. If they have to leave it, they know when to come back. And they know where it is. They know because they're born to it.

CATHERINE: I am alone. I am still alone.

*Breath.*

There are parts of me that exist. I can feel it. I know this. I know it.

*Breath.*

I see the old duplex! Number 74. The wooden front patio. The yard where I played with my dolls and lost them in the grass. The driveway where I played dinkies with my younger brother. His brown hair. His smile. Wide. Always. Laughing. Somehow I am his laugh. His brown hair in the wind. That warm wind.

*Breath.*

Am I that wind as well? Am I that wind and my brother's laugh?

JOHN: I was working fast food for a while, but the noise, and the yelling. With everything that had happened I couldn't handle it. So I quit. Someone told me you could get office work pretty easy if you didn't mind repetitive tasks. So I got

a job as a filing clerk for an insurance company. Lots of stapling. Photocopying. And filing. You don't really have to talk to people much when you work as a filing clerk. I'm in a basement most of the time. I don't know if that's good for me. There's a lot of time in my own head. It's quiet. That's good. But the thinking...what did I do right? What did I do wrong? Would things have been different if? If? If? If? The worst question to ask yourself while you're alone in a basement. My hands are busy, but that kind of work doesn't occupy your brain.

I read a story once, about this guy who lived alone for years and he dug tunnels underneath his house. Huge tunnels. For years these tunnels. Eventually city workers found out about it, the tunnels had spread out all over his neighborhood, and it was really dangerous. Sinkhole type stuff, you know? He was charged with mischief or something or other and fined, and the city spent thousands of dollars filling those tunnels. To make it safe. They called him the mole man in the news. Why did he do it? What was he trying to forget? All those tunnels, all those years with a shovel and a flashlight and his own brain, filled in by strangers.

And that's his legacy. A bunch of filled in tunnels and people calling him *mole man*, I mean, if you're really lucky someone will name a park bench after you, cause then you've fucking made it. But *mole man*? I don't even know his real name.

CATHERINE: I am alone. I am older now. Was I younger before?

*Breath.*

I see the blue house. The house with the tree. And I see a record player in the living room. The carpet is warm. I know this. Dusty rose. My Dad's albums. The Everley Brothers. Stars on 45. The Turtles. I write down the lyrics to Hey Jude in a ringed notebook, moving the needle back and forth on the record as I go through each verse of the song.

*Breath.*

I hear birds. Are you okay? The world is sparkling.

*Breath. She sings.*

Remember to let her into your heart. Remember to let her into your heart. Remember to let her...

*Breath.*

TREVOR: Yesterday I was behind an ice cream truck. I didn't even know they still had those, but I guess they do because I was behind this one and it was playing music. So it must have been a real one. With ice cream. And it was driving really slowly. Which is okay because it probably has to stop a lot. Like a bus or a mail van. My favourite ice cream had bubble gum at the bottom. That's the kind of thing that you think might not be good until you think about it and you realize that's probably the best thing ever made. Ice cream with bubble gum at the bottom? Because it's not like you're trying to eat the bubble gum and the ice cream at the same time, because it's at the bottom. So all the ice cream is gone by then. But you still have the taste of the ice cream while you're chewing the gum, and since the gum flavor doesn't last long, then that's the best thing to have. Really. I get ice cream at drive-thrus sometimes. Chocolate fudge sundaes with peanuts. The peanuts come in little packets now because some people are allergic to peanuts now.

I don't like using my bank card at drive-thrus. I like to pay with cash so I can get change for parking meters. You never know when you might need to park at a meter, even if it's just for a few minutes you still have to pay because you could get a ticket and that's pretty much the worst thing. I've never gotten a ticket. And I've never been pulled over. I have an impeccable driving record. Impeccable. I know exactly what I would do if I got pulled over, I've rehearsed it exactly a million times. It's all based on the weather that day because I would say something about the weather and then tell them where I was coming from, and where I was going. I wouldn't lie. If I was going over the speed limit, which I never do, I wouldn't lie about it, because I think that the police appreciate honesty. And I wouldn't bother them with the clicker because they have to stay focused during a pull over. It's an important job.

Some police officers drive motorcycles, but you see those more on TV. You don't see those here. I don't know why because a motorcycle is a versatile vehicle. It can get places a car can't. You wouldn't be able to take anyone in on a motorcycle I guess. The RCMP only has 34 motorcycles for all of Canada. Maybe because of winter. I don't know if people drive them in the winter. Maybe very short distances. Because it would be pretty cold. I wouldn't mind it. I could wear a warm coat. And a wool hat under my helmet. And gloves. I could do that. I could do that no sweat. If Evel Knievel could jump a motorcycle over fourteen Greyhound buses then I can wear warm clothes and ride in the winter. Really.

*He yawns.*

I can't sleep sitting up. Like, I'd sleep in my car if I could. If it came down to it. But I can't sleep sitting up. Or even like this.

*He demonstrates a half reclined position.*

Or like this.

*He demonstrates a more reclined position.*

I need to be on my back. Flat. That's why I'd never fall asleep while driving. Because I can't. I could do those long hauls probably really easily. Like a west coast turn around. I could do that. Without sleeping at all. If I really wanted it. I could have a Class 1 license by now. Drive right across the island. I've read all the material. I know the codes like nothing. That's nothing to me. I've read all the literature. I've got manuals in the glove box.

*Suddenly he sees a man on a motorcycle driving slowly by. His eyes follow the bike and his hand moves to his side, imitating in a small way the biker's wave from earlier.*

1997 Harley-Davidson Dyna Wide Glide. Harley-Davidson. Leather saddlebags. 21 inch front wheel. Bobtail fender.

Why not? Just take the test. Why not? I've got responsibilities. I've got a lot of important responsibilities. I can't use the clicker if I'm on a motorcycle. I can't do my job. Where would I even put a motorcycle? I've been driving this car for a long time now. I've got responsibilities. I've got responsibilities here. You can't ignore those. What would people say?

*Pause.*

They wouldn't say anything, would they? They wouldn't say a thing. Harley-Davidson. 1997.

*He watches it until it disappears in traffic.*

JOHN  *rubs his eyes.*

JOHN: My eyes have been bad lately. It could be from work. It probably is. They fall out of focus really quickly. I might need glasses. Maybe. I haven't been to a doctor or anything. Medical doctor. And I don't like eating anymore. I'm just eating now because I have to. I don't have any cravings. And that's really strange. I don't care about food. I feel like I'm on a tightrope and if I fall off or stay on, what's the point?

We were driving through the Codroy Valley. The Table Mountains. It was the last time I really hung out with people. Road trip. The greens are so dark they're almost black. Mist and fog. Stubby trees. And grey. Beautiful grey. I'd never been that far south west before. I suddenly wanted to test myself. Get out there in it. Build things. Eat berries. Davy Crockett. For the first time in a long time I didn't feel the need to check my phone. When we reached the ocean it was a punch in the face. Gigantic. Impossible blue. Can't even see the other side. I've seen it before. Of course. But this time...How could that even exist? How? I became so small. The smallest thing in the world. Nothing. An ant. Awed. It's how I imagine astronauts feel when they first turn their eyes to the void of space. All the hate of the world disappeared, because faced with that, why does any of it matter? Why does anything we do here matter? When we stopped the car I got out and ran. I couldn't get my seatbelt off fast enough. I was claustrophobic and hysterical. And I wasn't running for the ocean, I was running back to the valley. And those dark trees and the grey. I was running and running and a lady started yelling to me. I could barely hear her. Something about my shoes. I didn't care. I was hysterical. The world was too big for me. And I couldn't fix it. Nobody could. And it didn't even matter. Trying didn't even matter.

When I reached the highway I broke down. My feet were bleeding. My chest was tight. I couldn't focus on anything. My hands shaking uncontrollably. I think I heard the car coming. John Denver was playing on the radio. There were other voices. *Not again. Not again.* And crying. Someone handed me my phone and I opened Instagram and took a picture of my feet. My breathing slowed. I felt an arm underneath mine. And then the backseat. Full of dog hair. Someone had brought their dog. He licked my face. The next day we drove back east. I took about a hundred pictures of the valley. And just stared at them the whole way home.

CATHERINE: There is noise. There is noise now. Music. People. But I am alone. I can hear them! And lights. There are lights. And a house with stairs in strange places. I know these stairs.

*Breath.*

This is where we met.

You. You. You.

*Breath.*

I said hi first. You said you liked Star Trek. I laughed and said I did too even though I didn't.

*Breath.*

The crinkle of your nose, the lines of your eyes when you smiled.

*Breath.*

But I am alone here. I am just a house. Yellow walls. Brown kitchen. Two floral couches from the 1970s. A clock on the wall that doesn't work. I breathe and the house breathes. My lungs fill with you. And the sparkling. And the rain. And the sounds of birds.

*Breath.*

JOHN: Do you remember – this is gonna sound weird – do you remember the first time you saw yourself? Like in a mirror? Your Mom or your Dad points you out and says “that’s you.” And you’ve never seen yourself before. But there you are. Wide eyes. What is this thing? It moves the same way that I move. What is it? Are these my arms? My legs? And you can’t even comprehend it, but part of you kind of knows. This is me. I don’t remember that. Maybe nobody does. But I think that’s what’s happening to me now. I don’t know. I mean is this how it goes? You spill your guts? And then you’re supposed to feel better? Why? Why would reliving it make any difference? At all? I know what happened. I was there. I know it. I remember it. Saying it out loud to somebody else isn’t going to do anything. It’s not. It’s not going to do anything. It’s not going to change it. Nothing can change it. This just fucking... I don’t know. I mean, what else am I supposed to say?

You know I thought someone had bought me a new stapler at work this week? I got really excited about it. A new stapler! Maybe this one wouldn't jam up as much as the old one! Where am I that that is the kind of thing to get excited about? And it wasn't even a new stapler. It was the old one. With a sticker on it. They've been stickering the supplies to curb theft. Yeah. I'm going to steal a stapler so I can go home and...staple.

Deep breaths, right?

*Breath.*

She used to knit. Did I tell you that? I'd make fun of her, like she was a grandmother, but she wasn't very good at it. I'd watch her. Lying on the couch. It would put me to sleep sometimes.

*Breath.*

The longer you go without talking, the easier it is not to. It's like the wall gets bigger and bigger, you know?

*Breath.*

Fuck it.

*TREVOR is laughing.*

TREVOR: Today. Today was a big day. Today was a really big day. Because I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Because, why not? Why not? I can't even believe that I did it. Sometimes you do things, and you just do them, and then afterwards you're like "did I do that?" Like, you just have to take the first step and then everything else kind of takes care of itself. You get in there, and then you have to deal with it. And I dealt with it. I dealt. And I nailed it. I nailed it like you wouldn't even believe how I nailed it. Every question. Every single one. And the balance test. And the road test. I was like Peter Fonda. I was Peter Fonda on that thing. Class 6. Level 1. Peter Fonda. Wow. I can't stop laughing. I can't stop laughing. Ahh! This is the greatest day! Why did I wait so long for this? It was easy. Really. You just go there and get it. And then you have it. And I have it. It's in my wallet right now. I want to show it to people. I want to take it out at a stop light and flash it to the cars waiting in the other lane. That might be strange. But maybe they would see it and give me a thumbs up. Because they'll see it and they'll know. And then I can tell them to always keep the rubber side down. I can tell people that because I have a Class 6, Level 1 license. And it's got my name

and my picture on it. I'm going to get a sundae on my way home. I'm going to get a sundae for sure. With a little bag of peanuts.

CATHERINE: Where are you? Where are you? I am still alone. I am above a street. There is a hot dog cart and a shoe store. A building and an apartment. I know this place. A set of car keys on a hook near the door. A ball of brown wool on the couch with two knitting needles poked inside. It smells like cat pee but it is comfortable here. I remember this. Where are you? Are you okay?

*Breath. CATHERINE becomes more frantic and yet joyful as well. Her memories are becoming tangible.*

The back of the apartment overlooks an alleyway. With a tall fire escape up the back and from the living room I can look down at the street below and watch the cars go by. The windows are tall and wide and I know that in the morning the sun will shine through them and cover the floor in light.

*Breath.*

You'll be home any minute. I know you will. I know it. I don't want to leave. I want to make chicken curry and watch television with you until we fall asleep. The sounds of birds. And I am that sound. Just as I am these rooms. These floors. These windows.

JOHN: It was loud when it happened. Okay. It was loud and fast. Screaming. Screaming loud. And then really quiet. I heard birds. And rain. The world was upside down.

CATHERINE: We're going to go for a drive. As soon as you get home. I love these nights. I love how distracted you get by the rain on the window.

JOHN: I looked over to her. Her hair spilled down over the ceiling of the car. There were drops of red around her ears. And something wrong with her eyes. She couldn't open them.

CATHERINE: The way you would hold my hand as I drove, and let it go when I needed to use both hands on the wheel. Or how you would feed me french fries and I'd insist that you put ketchup on each one.

JOHN: She was like a broken piece of porcelain or beach glass. She spoke. In a really tiny voice. Are you okay? That's what she said. To me. Couldn't even move. Are you okay?



CATHERINE: And then the wetness of the pavement. And the glass sparkling like a thousand little lights on the road. Each one a star. Or a life. My arms are not my arms. My legs are not my legs. I am the wind here as well.

TREVOR: I'm getting a motorcycle tomorrow! Wow! (*Laughing.*) I'm actually getting a motorcycle tomorrow. Like a real one. It's a Honda CX500. 1992. Perfect shape. Like, absolutely perfect. It's red and black. It's got leather pockets on the sides. There's room for a rolled up tent. And a sleeping bag. I'm getting a Honda CX500. It's going to be mine. Tomorrow. It'll be parked in front of my house tomorrow. And I can drive it. I could go west, like the guys in those movies. I could go west. As far as I wanted to. I could go tomorrow. Super easy.

JOHN: I remember looking outside for help. There was a man. I could see him through the smashed windshield. Lying on the ground next to a bike. Wrecked pretty bad. He was moving I think. His helmet was off but he was smiling. I remember thinking that can't be right, why would he be smiling? But he was. Maybe he was smiling when it happened. Maybe he'd smile for the rest of his life. But she...she. She. Are you okay? That's what she asked me. Are you okay? And I didn't answer her. I couldn't. I was frozen. Shock I guess. I couldn't tell her the one thing she wanted to know. I couldn't say anything.

*Breath.*

I'm glad I'm alive. Is that what you want to hear? Yeah. I'm glad I'm alive. I don't know. It's a step anyways. A step. That's the important thing, right? Just a step? Maybe it's good that I came today.

TREVOR: It's going to take some planning. I can't just go. I've got to prepare. I've got to make sure I have everything I need. Plan the route. You can't go unless you're ready. You have to keep the rubber side down.

JOHN: I think I might get a dog.

*Breath.*

I think she'd like that.

*Breath.*

CATHERINE: I am young now. So young. I was older before this. It is raining and I've got a pillow case tied around my neck. I am running outside in circles. The rain hits my face. It is cold and I am laughing with my arms out in front of me. The door to

our basement apartment is open, and I know that just inside my mother and my grandmother are watching, ready with towels for me and my brother when we get tired of playing. But I never tire. I could never tire from this.

And tomorrow I will run again. And yesterday. And now. I will never tire. I am rain and sparkling lights. And broken glass. The sound of birds, and cars on wet pavement. And I am my brother's laugh, and tall cool grass in summer. I am alone here and I am not alone. I am the tree. And it is full of bird houses in many colours. Every one of them shining from the inside.

*Breath.*

You are okay.

*Breath. CATHERINE opens her eyes and starts to laugh.*

I am home.

*Music. Lights down.*

## Appendix B: Selected Journals

These selected journal entries represent a period of creation, self-examination and rehearsal starting with my summer research in 2016 and culminating with my final performance in April of 2017. They are presented to provide further insight into my work—my challenges, questions, and explorations.

May 16

So far Artaud is blowing my mind. I can see why David loves it so much. The idea of the poetry of the senses really strikes me. I wonder how Artaud would have responded to Bogart's Viewpoints?

More and more I am unsatisfied by what I see being produced, including my own work. Once again I'm chomping at the bit to be finished the program and to get back at it. But if one year is making me feel so inspired, I can only imagine what the next will do.

Heather Lebonte, an old acquaintance of mine that I directed many years ago, recently posted on her Facebook wall "Prolonged dedication to detail is what dance is, for me." Prolonged dedication to detail. I love that. I think it serves as a motto for theatre practice as well as dance.

May 25

I recently discovered this fascinating group called the Mechanical Cabaret Theatre. They make these little automatons that tell a little story. They are so fascinating and simple; like little miniature theatre pieces. It got me thinking about fascination in the theatre. What makes an

audience interested? How can we as theatre artists, fascinate them? We need to make them curious. And we have to be curious ourselves. When I got in my car the other day there was steam on my sunglasses. Instead of wiping it off, I just sat there and watched it slowly dissolve. Why? And why is something like that more interesting than some theatre I've seen? I'd rather listen to the rain, or watch a storm outside then see some plays again. Why is that?

July 21

Something that often annoys me about Uta Hagen's work are the questions 'What do you want?' and 'What are you trying to get?' People are much more complex than that. People often don't know what they want. They are confused, lost, and indecisive—they become emotional based on responses that they can't explain. While Hagen's work is excellent as a tool—and that's all that any acting technique is, a tool to be used or not used—I believe that the inner struggle of a person can't be ignored. If I were to ask an actor 'what do you want?' and they weren't able to tell me, I would not be able to admonish them. If they have done their research, and are living the life of this person and they cannot answer that question then it is reasonable to assume that the character hasn't figured it out yet. That struggle is fascinating and much more real than any invented objective.

Today I spent a little time just staring at Mom and Dad's backyard. It's a beautiful day out there, not too bright, with a little breeze—one of those kinds of days that I love. I was looking at the garden, and the plants, and thinking about normal life. Growing things, making things, raising a family. It started as another day of doubt in my chosen career and in doing this MFA, but once I sat down to write it quickly turned into something else. A renewed interest. A

stronger sense of purpose. Just because I've made this choice, to dedicate myself right now to theatre, doesn't mean that everything else has to be sidelined. Everything that makes me who I am feeds my theatre practice. I am a musician, a writer, a cartoonist, a maker—all of this is personal and part of my life. I think it's important for creators not to let go of themselves, but to embrace themselves, and be open to new things at the same time. This thesis journey has turned into a serious period of self-examination. At first I thought it was being harmful, but today, at least, it's filling me with clarity. Nothing is sacred, and everything is sacred. And there are a thousand doorways to creation to choose from.

Aug 3

I'm more distracted than ever, and it seems I'm doing my best work while driving—improvising characters and dialogue for the piece.

When it comes to creation, I find myself most comfortable at my piano or working in clay. There is immediacy in emotional expression without any go-between getting in the way. One could argue that the clay itself is a go-between, or that the piano is a go-between, but that would be incorrect—at least in my case. It's immediate, visceral, and feels like a pouring out. I imagine it's the same in dance or movement. I never trained as a dancer, and despite the movement training I've received so far, I still have a lot of walls in my way towards that type of expression. I think that may be one of the reasons I am attracted to mask work. It creates a physical barrier, something that I can use to conceal myself with, while at the same time and ironically allowing me a greater range of physical expression. It hides me, and allows me to be free. Something about the anonymity of it.

I find myself moving farther from my initial plan for this summer—developing and examining my own creation matrix. I start to think that there is no magic formula for creation for me. There is no set path. There is no daily ritual or habit that moves me forward. I have to come to things in my own time. I can use exercises as a catalyst surely, but a standard matrix is not necessarily how I operate. This journal, and this process, has been the closest I've come in years to a regular creative exercise. Ideas come when they come. And you have to be ready to go along for the ride. Late at night. Driving in a car. Sitting at a piano, or at a lump of clay. That is how I work. At least, that is how I am feeling at this moment. Art is always changing. And perceptions of creation are constantly shifting, for the audience as well as the creator. It can't be stagnant. The moment it is then the creator will likely feel that the work is empty and emotionless.

Dec 2

Got some notes from Erika, Eric and faculty on the reading. And had a few brief chats with some other faculty. In general very positive. Tempo, stakes, and joy are the three things I feel (and from the notes) that I need to work on. Tempo may be fixed as I start rehearsing, but there are definitely some things I can do in the writing in the 3rd draft to help with that. Trevor needs to be more joyful, happy with himself and proud of his work. I'd also like to add a moment when he actually sees someone riding a motorcycle. I think it would be great for the audience to see him like that, and maybe it would give him a push to actually get his license. Catherine's stakes need to be much higher. She needs to struggle in being lost and fight for what she wants. It's been suggested that she needs more poetry and I think I'm going to really

push her text in that direction. If I'm still dealing with the 'home' metaphor, then her text is a great way to push that and make it really clear. I'm excited about heightening her poetry. I love writing in that kind of language and have been avoiding it for a while in my search for realism. John needs a bit of work. I think he needs to be more of a storyteller, in order to avoid telling the story of the accident. The Codroy Valley story still comes too early for my liking. Maybe starting with him arriving at the office, and telling a story about what happened on the way. So far his stories are about people that are on the fringe of society: the mole man, the bird feeder... I like that as a through line because that is how he is feeling.

Faculty feels the climax takes too long. I'm still unpacking that comment, and will look for clarification from Erika. They also feel that the show is about 10 minutes too long. I like that it is an hour so maybe it's not a matter of length, but tempo within the piece that needs to be addressed.

Feb 13

I've identified in myself over this process a need to make things work out, to make the correct choices, to be rational. I think that need comes out in the characters I write. They tend to be measured and logical, because that's in a way how I often try to view the world. But it doesn't necessarily make for compelling characters and drama. That's part of my challenge as a creator.

In many ways, everything I write is a tribute to my family.

Feb 20

So far most of my work has been at home, or in the library of the grad lounge. Not really conducive to big explorations. This should be fun and informative. I've only got a two hour slot, but I also want to work the next few monologues after the first three, so I can start to get a better sense of the lines, as well as any edits I may do. I'm very anxious to get a production draft in hand.

Post-rehearsal – Once I started in to work it felt liberating to be in a large, free space. Trevor was much harsher as a result, and John much more relaxed and open. Going against my own advice to my younger students against video recording, I set up my camera as I worked and watched some of the footage in-between sections. Pleasantly I was able to watch without any disgust. I've concluded that perhaps these three characters, in addition to voice, breath, and physical habits, also live on different areas of the stage. Having the chair center for Trevor automatically gives me other locations on the stage in relationship to it. Left of the chair, right of the chair, upstage of the chair, and downstage of the chair. I'm curious to get Tanja's thoughts on it.

I've noticed as I'm walking on the tape a pronounced arch in my back. This is something I think Erika has referred to in my movement class with her as a sway back. It makes it seem as if my legs and upper body are cut off from each other, that the hips and waist are essentially immobile. It's very odd. So I decided to film myself walking through the space while changing my weight, breath, feet, and general posture. Each was different, but I noticed an improvement



mostly when I changed my feet, by placing more weight/balance on the mid-foot instead of the heel or ball. I may be overanalyzing it, but it's something I will continue to keep an eye on.

I decided to end rehearsal with a short meditation session; something to clear the brain before heading home. I set my timer for ten minutes. About 3 minutes in someone opened the door and then closed it. And then someone else. On the third opening I broke the meditation to ask if I could help. There was a group asking to use the room. Since I was finishing early anyways I told them that was fine and that I would be done in 5 to 10 minutes. They waited outside. I finished the meditation and told them they could come in as I cleared the space. In hindsight that was a huge mistake. It was a large group of students that came in. One started to play the piano immediately, while the others talked and laughed. For some reason it got me irritated. Even after the meditation, and offering the room to them, I found myself really annoyed. Looking at it, I think it has less to do with being interrupted and more to do with the space changing. I hadn't really given myself the chance for a good breath after the rehearsal. I should have cleared the space and then let them in. In that way I would have had some head time while cleaning, and on my walk home. The experience really hammered home how important it is to start and finish your rehearsals correctly, because it can influence the entire experience.

All in all, it was a valuable rehearsal. It turns out I know the script much better than I had expected.

March 2

Had a chance to share my feelings about Trevor's disability with some of my colleagues yesterday. Andrew said that a friend of his at the show had asked him if I actually had a disability. I explained my reservations. They both seemed to understand why I might want to pull back on it. I've got a rehearsal scheduled tomorrow and I'm really looking forward to trying that out. There is nothing in the script that tells me he has a physical disability. It mentions a stutter. And the text is written in such a way that he is likely somewhere on the Autism spectrum. He certainly has social anxiety and some sort of OCD as well. So much to think about, but it's getting there. And it's very exciting.

March 3

Quick post-rehearsal notes: The higher head voice for Catherine is nice. It doesn't feel forced or clichéd. It does have the possibility of sounding more like a little boy, but that just means some work. Trevor pulled back feels so much better. He becomes less about his disability and more about his frustration and his hopes and dreams. I'm curious to get Tanja's thoughts on it. John is feeling much more dramatic and full of questions. The new approach affected his voice, so I have to make sure to keep an eye on it so that he doesn't sound too much like Trevor. I've kept the eye scratch but moved it to the left hand. In general, pacing has suddenly become a bigger issue. I suppose it's natural as I'm exploring new ideas with these characters that I would slow down to give myself time to think and reflect, but it is definitely something I need to look at. I didn't get as far as I wanted to today, just an extra two pages on top of the TPM snippet, but it was valuable work that led to some changes and cuts in the text.

March 15

An excellent three-hour rehearsal with Tanja. Reminding me of how important it is to have another pair of eyes on a piece. We managed to work through just over half of the piece. Some wonderful physical bits that are really making the piece come alive. She reiterated how important variety is in a solo show and that I can't allow the audience to be passive. I have to constantly make sure they are engaged and never sit back into memory. Pacing and voice are improving, and the physical lives of the characters are becoming more solid. We are also playing with levels, and moving the chair. Trevor actually gets out of the car at one point to look around. What I love about working with Tanja is that she is challenging my linear, practical mind and encouraging me to break the space when it serves the piece. For example, even though Trevor gets out of his car, he doesn't mime the door, or climbing in and out. He simply stands up from the chair. We're playing with reality and it's really liberating. The audience needs to be surprised; their expectations need to be challenged. It's very exciting. I only get one or two more rehearsals with Tanja before the dress, but we're in good shape I think.

The big writing question at the moment is whether or not the Codroy Valley story is coming too early. This has been a question of mine from the beginning, and needs some serious consideration over the next few days. I'm desperate to solve that problem so I can have a production draft in hand.

March 16

Revisiting Alden Nowlan's "I, Icarus." It's a poem that has been in my head and heart for at least twenty-five years, and has been a subconscious influence on all my writing since I

discovered it. When I consider these characters it really speaks to me. I can imagine Trevor lying on his head, willing himself to fly. Catherine herself actually hears the sounds of flutes on the wind early in the piece as she sees her house from above. And John. John has turned into a very complicated enigma for me, which makes complete sense, as I'm drawing heavily from myself in his character. Figuring him out, really means figuring myself out. And that is a lifelong process. My only hope is to get close enough that the audience will see themselves in him, or will be able to ask themselves questions about his story.

I've also become inspired by the cartoonist Meredith Park. One of her cartoons in particular, that shows images of the interior of her house, as she describes how she used to live there. It captures so clearly the feeling I want to find in Catherine as she moves through her history.

March 24

Great rehearsal today. Started without any plan or looking at the script. Just dived in to see how far I could get on my feet. Made it right to where I left off yesterday. Picked up from there and started to work script in hand to work on the blocking. Came up with some nice connective tissue between the characters. At one point John says "Deep breaths, right?" and then he takes a nice deep breath. Catherine takes many breaths in the script, so I've got John emulating her style of breathing. It's a nice little connection between the two. Finding more physical things for the characters to lift the piece from talking heads. And I think it's working. I worked to the end of the show. There's still one little spot I'm having trouble with, as the characters shift back and forth quickly. It needs more work and thinking, but I'm sure I'll figure

it out. Getting to the end of the piece today I can finally see the shape. And I like it. That's a very good feeling.

April 5

Not much journaling lately as I find myself just digging into it. I've also refrained from recording my recent sessions. The work is going really well, and these characters are getting more solidified in my brain and body. I've been using index cards as a way to split the show into workable units and it's working really well for me.

An unbelievable coincidence just happened to me that I'm taking as a sign of being on the right track. I was browsing Youtube and hopped on to the channel for Avner the Eccentric. There was a video called The Zoo of Tranquility. An hour-long taped performance. I read the video description and started to watch and realized that it was in part inspired by the work of Paul Spooner and the Cabaret Mechanical Theatre. I'm kind of in shock. It's like discovering that your favorite musician used to work the sound board for your other favorite musician. The video is pretty poor quality, but I can't wait to dig into it.

A note on feet. Catherine floats. She walks more on the balls of her feet. Her center of gravity is high in the chest. John is lower in the belly and walks more on the heel. Trevor has stiff legs and flatter feet when walking. He is curled inwards a bit. His gravity is more lower-to-mid back.

April 20

Opening night. Tired. Ecstatic. Reading Spalding Gray's journals on the way down and back. Can't wait to do it all again tomorrow.

Tanja was able to email me a few notes after opening night. We had to cut our dress rehearsal short because of a technical problem, so tonight was actually her first time seeing the end of the play. Excellent notes as usual. The two big notes that I'm hoping to focus on are the idea that there needs to be more momentum towards the end (John finding finality too quickly) and that Catherine needs to be a little more pragmatic. Earlier Tanja had spoken of finding delicacy in her memories, but it's washing her out a bit and I need to look for some simplicity as well. I can't wait to try these notes out in the next run.

April 23

The last two days were a blur. It's going to take a while to fully process that it's all wrapped up. Audiences were good for the most part. The Saturday matinee was a very slim house, which I found a little startling when I came out on stage. The piece is all about engaging the audience and it took a few beats for me to really identify how to approach a smaller house. A good exercise and practice for moving forward, as I'm likely to see a lot of small houses while on tour.

All in all this experience really reminded me of how much I love performing. And how much I love writing plays. I hope to continue to work on new material and to get to perform solo work. I'm itching to get back home and get down to it. At the same time, I hope my next

trip to Toronto isn't too far off. I've got so much more to learn and experiencing new work, and creating new work, is absolutely key in my development as an artist.