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Creating Ten Years in Aberdeen: Background Information and Conclusions

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UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

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College: LIB-ARTS Department: THEATRE

Faculty Mentor: TERRY WEBER

PROJECT TITLE: Creating Ten Years In Aberdeen:
Background Information and Conclusions

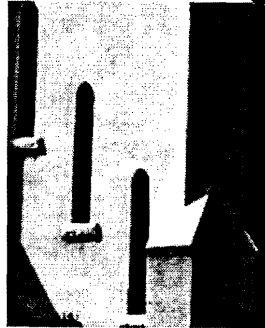
I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Date: 12/16/97

Comments (Optional):

TEN YEARS
IN ABERDEEN



**experimental
theatre**



conceived &
directed by
**SUZANNE
CURTIS**



december
3, 4 & 5
clarence brown
lab theatre
8:30 pm
free admission

Creating Ten Years in Aberdeen: Background Information and Conclusions

Suzanne Curtis
University Honors Senior Seminar
December 15, 1998

This paper seeks to explain the creative process behind creating an original physical theatre piece titled *Ten Years in Aberdeen*. The paper is not the project itself; rather, it is intended to augment the project that was performed in the University of Tennessee's Lab Theatre on December 3, 4, and 5, 1998. From this point *Ten years in Aberdeen* will be referred to as "the piece." It was as much a philosophical process as it was a creative one. The real motivation behind doing an original piece was that I sought to develop my own artistic, and more specifically theatrical, aesthetic by synthesizing everything I had learned, seen, and thought up to the point of the project's beginning and during its development. It makes sense, then, that I explain the creation of the show by identifying the seeds of my aesthetic.

I spent a lot of time during my first three years of university theatre training only believing in what everyone else intimated I should believe. This generalized acceptance had an all-encompassing range; it included the "right" plays to study, opinions of other people's performances in plays on campus, and life goals. I spent my fourth year of school abroad, an endeavor that almost immediately eradicated old patterns of intellectual (or non-intellectual, in this case) behavior.

When I was not at work while abroad, I was watching a play, training, or reading about theatre. I found critical writings I had never encountered, much to my dismay. I read about contemporary leaders of theatre-- Artaud, Brook, Boal, Bausch, Daldry, etc. These were theorists no one had ever challenged me to consider. This simple experience-- sitting down nightly to read theatre theory-- revolutionized the way I approached the art and the way I considered myself as an artist.

Suddenly I was encountering ideas I had never heard before, but they were ideas that for decades have garnered extremely strong reactions in the international artistic community. Where had I been? I felt reborn, as if I could think my own thoughts and discover my own ideas about art: what it is, how to create it, what makes "good" theatre, and why I choose to pursue a life in the art of theatre.

I began to realize, after incessantly watching plays and reading about theatre, that there was more than the American way to analyze and develop theatre. I began to compare every play I had seen in America to the ones I was seeing now in England, Scotland, France, and Spain. What was different? What was the same? How were the answers to these questions affecting my perspective? Should I reevaluate what I want to accomplish as an artist and where I should go from here?

The most pressing realization was that theatre has to be transcendent. If it is not, it is meaningless. Art is the synthesizing of everyday moments and experiences. This synthesis causes us to view life, even for just a moment, in a new way. If theatre does not cause us to look at our lives, particularly the minutiae, in a new way, it has been a waste of time. If theatre does not cause us to ask a new question about our lives or contribute to the evolution of an already existing question, it has been a waste of time. The theatre has no room for waste. Must we, the artists or the theatre-going public, apathetically accept what is handed to us? Why don't we challenge what we see? Why have we stopped insisting that art challenge and change us? Why do we allow wasted moments in a finite life of few possibilities? The more questions I asked, the more evident it became that to

be an artist is to be active in a fight to find meaning. I do not want to be someone who encourages or is responsible for wasted moments.

Theatre is not for hollow people. It is not for those who lack courage. Taking the risks that allow us to ask questions requires courage and selflessness. American theatre has begun to head toward a vacuous, selfish, stagnant place where new things, ideas, and questions rarely emerge. Why is the most selfless art dominated by the most selfish people? Must theatre be this way?

Not everyone in theatre defiles it. The people who contribute to the demise of the art form are those who love themselves, not the art. I want to work and create in an environment peopled by those who care about becoming a more selfless artist. I retain hope that it is possible to develop an environment born of a different philosophy. It is a perspective consumed by giving the audience a new idea. The hope is that this idea will cause the audience to consider life in a way that will ultimately (in ten minutes, ten weeks, or ten years) add a piece to the audience member's personal puzzle of understanding what it is to be human.

There are many other ways people can make discoveries about themselves and humanity, thereby intensifying my responsibility as a theatre artist. One of those responsibilities is to do important, meaningful, compelling work that would make the public choose theatre for that discovery. Another responsibility is to make the experience worthwhile for the audience! This is the environment I want to learn to create. And with that in mind, I chose to begin to try via this senior project.

It is not my intention to do this alone. Theatre is a collaborative art that thrives only when a team is behind it. I speak individually only because I have not heard many others vocalize their ideas about these realizations. Understanding that we must work toward a more selfless theatre is a critical one; it is the most important concept to grasp as theatre creeps into the millenium. I have seen the harvest reaped by the selfish theatre. I have lived with it and tried to learn from it. It is the antithesis of sincerity and founded purpose. It leaves everyone involved with an empty table and empty plate, starving, wondering why they worked so hard and so long only to be left with nothing.

CREATING THE PIECE: INITIAL IDEAS

The process of creating the piece has truly been evolutionary. I had no idea when I began where or how it would end up as a complete show with a beginning, middle, and end. I only knew that I wanted to develop something that was interesting and meaningful. I really only decided exactly how it would all fit together ten months after the initial phases of development. Rehearsals began 15 months after the initial phases of development.

I began formulating ideas for the project in July 1997. I started by listing conceptual, thematic questions to consider. I never used any of these, but they served as a helpful starting point nonetheless. Next I began listing images at the end of each day that I had seen that seemed interesting, challenging, or otherwise theatrical to me. Two themes that immediately began to emerge from these notes were movement and stillness in

everyday life. When are things still? When are they frenetic? When do I feel still? How slow is "slow"? What causes me to perceive it as such? What moments are perceived as movement oriented? Why? How could that be explained in theatrical terms?

At this point I began noting unusual images that would come to mind. These were images that were inspired by things I had seen in my life-- anything from an oddly shaped leaf on a tree to a word someone accidentally pronounced in the "wrong" way or context. I wrote down as much as I could, regardless of whether or not I thought I could use it in the show or where it would fit in the piece. I also noted practical observations, including overheard conversations, descriptions of people I had met, idiosyncrasies of new English friends, etc. Anything that didn't "fit" into the "norm" of everyday life was noted. This was a way of observing how details from everyday life transcended themselves, in a way; how else could we explain moments that are incredibly unusual or poetic in a situation that would otherwise seem mundane? I eventually amassed 110 pages of observations and images.

As far as practical application of ideas goes, I was certain that I wanted to use as part of development a physical theatre technique called the "movement symbol." The exercise is usually done with at least four actors. I learned this technique from James Zager, a graduate student from Arizona State University who develops performance art with young children.

The "movement symbol" is the result of a specific process. We term this result a movement symbol because it is the active manifestation of an emotional response to a

sensory experience-- or a physical symbol of one person's reaction to the experience. The technique involves choosing something to abstract. It can be anything involving the senses. Examples include a sound (keys jangling), a touch (steam rolling off hot tea onto one's face), a smell or taste (freshly cut grass), or sight (consider the proportions of a rock). Once the item to which the actor will respond is chosen, e.g., the sound of keys jangling, the actor begins to focus on that sound.

We react to everything, whether we realize it or not. The challenge of the exercise is for each actor to become aware of her reaction to the jangling of the keys. The reaction should then manifest itself in her body, causing her to move. She isolates the first few seconds of the movement and repeats the pattern.

Once that is established, a sound is added. This should be an abstracted sound, such as "Ha," "Ohh," or "Ay-yi". The actor should then let the combination of her sound and movement evolve into a new pattern. For example, she might feel the urge to have bigger motions and louder sounds, or more angular movements instead of the more fluid ones she had just been experiencing. The critical principle is that she stays receptive to whatever emotionally inspired impulse her body is giving her, directing her movement.

Next each actor meets with one other actor, continuing her sound and movement. While continuing, each notes what the other is doing as they try to combine their two "symbols". Once the two actors have successfully combined their symbols to form one new one, they meet up with another group of two. This continues until everyone participating has met up and combined symbols, resulting in one symbol from the entire group. This process can result in truly dynamic and compelling physical expression if the

actors are truly committed to the exercise. Thus it seemed appropriate to incorporate the process into my piece, a physical theatre experience which abstracts everyday life.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIMENT

I wanted the piece at first to generally address my year abroad. I thought I would create an hour's worth of interesting yet unrelated images and put them on the stage with no very definable context. But some of the "cutting edge" pieces I saw in Europe, though interesting to watch, ultimately seemed to be only a presentation of ideas-for-ideas-sake, leaving me isolated and invalidated as an audience member.

It was clear to me that it is unfair to toss seemingly random images to an audience and expect them to connect and care. How could I reconcile my audience-inclusive ideas with a piece so "experimental" that it ultimately had the same isolating, meaningless effect as every other "non-experimental" play I had ever seen? Placing as much emphasis on the end as I had the means led me to the next discovery about the project.

Once I returned from England, what I worked with was not "what happened to me that day," but very palpable memories in a very visceral, fresh context. I was considering my ideas from a new perspective. I suddenly had new questions: What is a memory? How do memories function and how do they affect every other idea I had developed to this point?

Attempting to answer these questions led me to a "thesis" that guided the development of the show. In storytelling experiences, we generally try to relate the memory by explaining the first series of details and proceeding chronologically until we

reach the final details. The final details conclude the story, and the storyteller has successfully related the memory. That is the way memory functions when the person who has experienced the memory attempts to relate it to an "outsider" who has no previous knowledge of the story. However, this is not the only way memory can function.

Let us say a person, Thelma, chooses to tell the story about her first day of school. She does this by explaining details of that day. Perhaps the details are that she dropped her Bic pen in the hallway and everyone laughed at her. This was a traumatic moment for her. In order for the listener to understand the significance of this moment, Thelma must explain buying the pen, her anticipation riding to school that fateful morning, seeing old friends and strangers in the hallway, the moment she dropped the pen, how she felt, and what she did afterward to cope.

All of these details are necessary as a means to inform. However, if it is an intrapersonal memory happening in her mind's eye only, Thelma does not have to explain all the details to herself because she lived it. The first day of school altered her association with Bic pens. Now when she sees a Bic pen, she has a flash in her mind of dropping the pen and hears the chorus of laughing voices. All of the emotions before, during and after the experience flood back to her in this image that lasts in her head for 2 seconds. It is the intrapersonal "flash" memory that I have used to shape the piece. I have termed this "Condensed Memory Narrative Technique" because the two second, condensed intrapersonal version of memory tells the story.

I isolated a series of Condensed Memory images. These were images that could be abstracted, but were concrete details from a moment in time. A few examples include the following: standing at one place in a subway for several minutes, the image I saw upon walking into a room filled with physically handicapped and learning disabled clients, and fatigue from carrying heavy suitcases.

After these images were chosen, the principle of the movement symbol technique was employed. We used varying versions of the technique to abstract the images. I guided three actors over a six week rehearsal period. During this time we abstracted those images with words, movement, and music. Though the memory-images were placed in chronological order, the story played non-linearly. It is impossible for anyone else to interpret the piece as linear since anyone else can not be sure what memory each image is recalling.

I tried to present the abstracted memories within a context that could be interpreted in as many ways as there are audience members. I was amazed that, during rehearsals, I found new ways to interpret what I saw each night. This gave me hope that the audience could have an inherently emotionally relevant context. Such a context would allow a transcendent experience as they (hopefully) searched for personal meaning in what they saw.

I stressed to the audience that the significance of the piece could only be found if they watched it as if they were watching *their* stories rather than mine.

TEN YEARS IN ABENDEN

free
admission

conceived &
directed by
**SUZANNE
CURTIS**

**experimental
theatre**

**DECEMBER
3, 4 & 5**

**Clarence Brown
Lab Theatre
8:30 pm**

for more
info:call
583-3089

A visual explication of *Ten Years in Aberdeen*

The costumes in the production (not pictured) were black knit pants and gray T-shirts. The actors wore no shoes in the production.



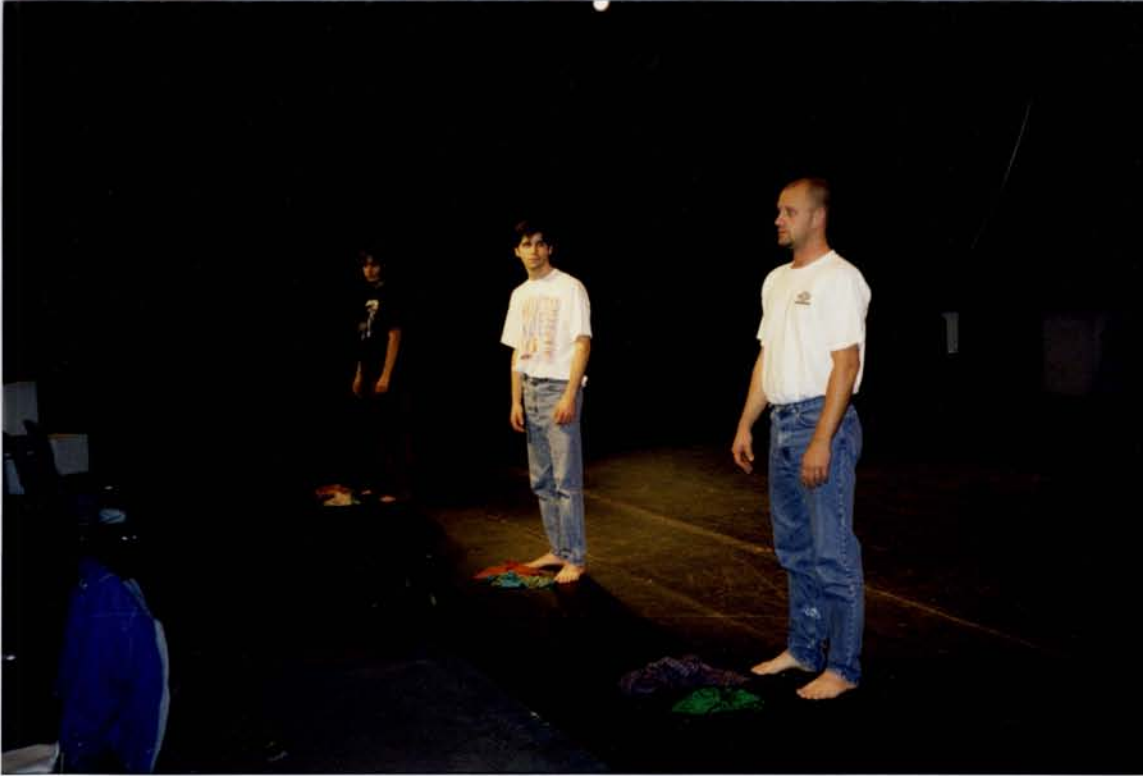
The cast—L to R: Shinara Taylor, Chris Maples, David Anderson.
Far Right is stage manger Crystal Ragsdale.



The opening image as it “melts” to the floor



The “melted” image



The actors have walked downstage—these scarves were white cloth in the production



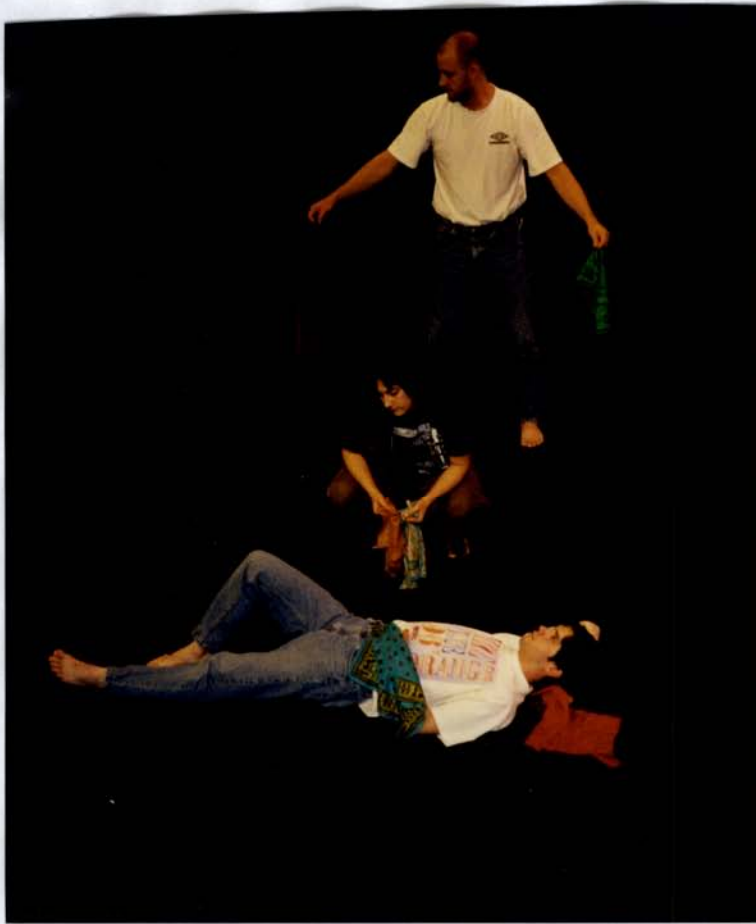
Linear image—reaching for cloth



The shape here was being “jerked” from side to side by the cloth— frenetic motion



Linear shape and stillness



From the last picture into this-- Three planes: higher (standing), middle (crouched), lower (lying down)



All stand then create this circular pattern while running



Recreating the environment of a daycare center for adults with severe learning disabilities—stillness but vocally very active



Move into reciting poetry and exploring shapes with a “blinding” object. Here it is a scarf.



A still image where she is flanked by two animal like creatures—she does not respond



Another image employing the three planes – high, middle, and low



Arms shaping a sweeping motion over their bodies—stillness juxtaposed against soft motion



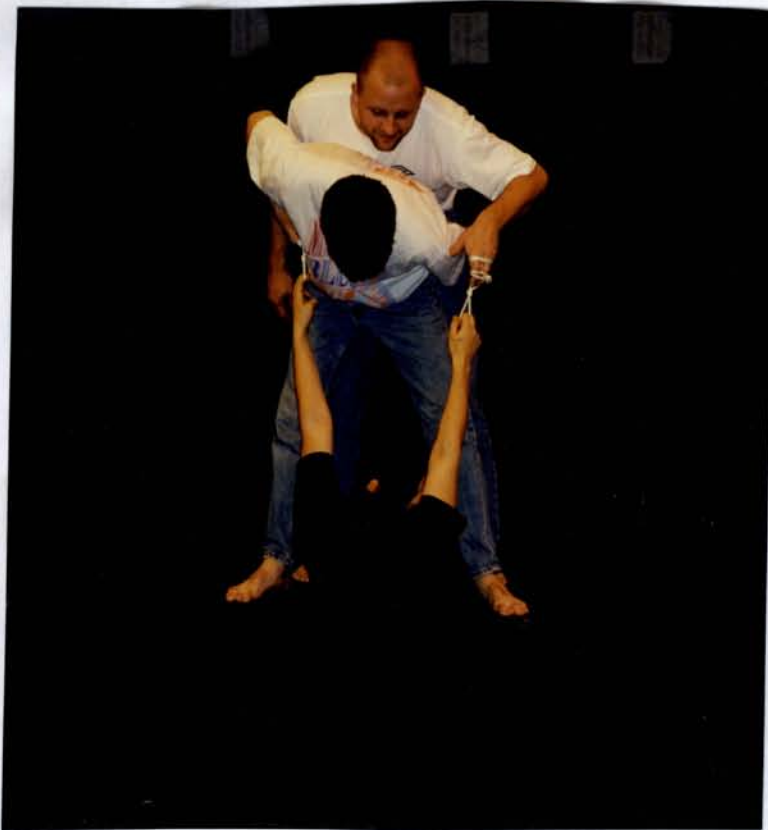
She helps them up and they produce ropes creating a linear shape



She takes hold of the rope. They move her using her arms. Here she is on her toes in the upper plane.



Next she falls to her knees for the middle plane



On the floor with a progressive visual shape—the eye travels upward, from her to the topmost head



Ropes are tied to battens above; a series of images of two people reaching for each other, yet bound by something



He reaches for her and she responds



This image was held for a moment to create a "statue"



Another "statue"



The ropes are replaced. The 2 move downstage. He moves a linear, sharp pattern; she moves very fluidly.



A third figure emerges to interrupt their fast motion with tape circles—they freeze when the circle is complete



After leaving and completing a story told by shadows (unable to photograph), we are left with this image. Dada influence—forces one to search for meaning.