

I ... BEGIN

SETH COMPTON

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As a professional actor working for the last ten years I have had a wide set of influences. My craft has undoubtedly been developed and broadened through exposure to many different theater practitioners. These influences have created a vast playing field for my work and have invited me into a deep process of creative discovery. In the pages of my workshop journal one can see how I aggregated and interpreted these influences and offered them for participants to explore. That journal focused on what I had done as a leader of a group. The aim of this contextual essay is to provide insight on where I have been. More specifically, where my heart has been in my work as an actor. I hope to share what has been going on in my inner landscape. Insight: seeing within.

The final semester the MA course began last April after the student ensemble performed "Drawing On Schulz." I was then invited to continue training with the professional company at Teatr Pieśń Kozła with the hopes of performing in "Songs of Lear" and eventually "The Cherry Orchard." While it seemed like a fantastic opportunity it was not easy. Personal transformations and occasional revelations were surrounded by constant struggles and recurring cloudy thoughts (or "snakes on my mind"). After six months, I was not invited to continue training or working on any project. I am left with many new ideas, a new understanding of my body, and quite equally the pain of a deep artistic loss.

In his book *the Quantum Mind*, Arnold Mindell talks about quantum particles which, when being observed, sometimes behave strangely. They jump through walls or disappear. Certain experiments are designed to observe a certain type of behavior. Observing one behavior means that scientists often discount others. Quantum physicists report on the probability of a particle's behavior and the unexplainable events are discarded.¹

I personally relate to these particles. If I did something in the training that was “transformative” it was eventually disregarded as an anomaly, a freak occurrence. If I was singing with joy, inside the music, and on key, it was a surprise to others and not counted as normal. I entered the work with an enthusiasm to be with others and a heart brimming with joy. Yet I began to feel lonely in this process. I was singing to deaf ears and trying to relate to bodies that could not feel my presence. To be in an ensemble and so lonely really hurt. It was a dark place.

It meant that I had to hunt. Hunt for entry points into what was already being created by the group. Hunt to find joy. Hunt to really listen. After only a few weeks of the training, I knew that my research had to be about figuring out how to open my heart. I felt that if I could give expression to what was inside and unveil my strength and ability then surely I wouldn't be so alone. What started to take shape and come out of this was an awareness of a great depth inside me. To my total surprise what began to be illuminated in this inner depth was a spirituality and a mindfulness.

From my journal on 9 June, 2012

As I create and listen I will be led. I, Seth, have a wide range of emotions. My body is powerful and expressive. There is a divine plan of goodness for my work. I am allowed to nurture my artist fighter.

This became my mantra for the year. I felt a great need to further develop imagination, loving kindness, serendipity and connected energy flow through my work. I grew into a daily practice of accepting these ideas and welcoming their presence. I consider this a spiritual growth because how these ideas manifested in my life, I cannot describe exactly. They are like the dancing particles that scientists cannot define.

Here is an example that might illustrate this growth. In the midst of battling my “snakes” and having my own survival and self-interest on my mind, I would observe colleagues and be overwhelmed with supportive thoughts. I would watch some action and in my heart, set jealousies aside and wish for that action to blossom into its fullest form in

the most beautiful creative light possible. Some days this would be all I was able to do in the space. I began to accept this sort of inner prayer as a small win for the day.

Of course there were days that I was heard and my presence was felt and my work was pushed into new directions. With the rare opportunity to continue training with the company, principles from the MA became more deeply rooted in my work and continue to form what kind of actor I am. Many of these are principles to explore over the course of one's life. There is no mastery of listening or of being with others. It is always a search—a hunt. The gift of this summer is that principles from the MA have started to anchor themselves in other parts of my life. Opening my heart became a matter to consider outside the studio. As I wrote in my workshop journal, I felt there were many times that I was hiding in the work. This year I have been asking myself if I am hiding in life.

From my journal on 6 March, 2013

What I am most fearful of is that I can't do it in my real life. Somehow in the search for love I know I have hurt people. I have been deceitful and I have been unfaithful. I have misused people's trust and when the vibe was wrong I cut people out of my life. All this has changed in Poland.

The same goal I have for my work as an actor- to open my heart- is something I want to change in life.

It became interesting to see if I could experience the same sentience that I began to feel in the studio in my daily life. I became fixed on the notion that I can locate all sorts of emotions to a particular part of my body: jealousy in the gut, sadness in the throat, loneliness in the shoulders, anger between the eyes and in the neck. But I cannot locate the feeling of love. In the past I have felt buzzing with affection, bursting with passion, and burning with reciprocated love. These are all associated with love but not the thing itself. My body memory seems to have recorded the feeling, yet I can't remember what part of my body felt just simple love. I know that I have not felt the power of any emotion as strongly as being heartbroken and without love. I remember my stomach being coiled by a snake whose cold scales pressed against my bottom vertebra. I began to wonder if I would

ever feel that again. If I can't feel love, how will I know when I am in it? If I don't know if I am in love, am I even capable of it?

From my journal on 26 March, 2013

These feelings [jealously, sadness, loneliness, anger] are like breadcrumbs. But Love is like a fluxion, a dance, pure resonance. How do I search more for this resonance? How do I tune more? ... Am I on holiday? Have I revealed my true self?

This year instead of following breadcrumbs to navigate through emotions (like Hansel and Gretel), I have taken a more process-oriented psychology in my approach. Today, my intuition tells me that love is not a feeling to be pinpointed. It is better understood as movement, with time it becomes a rhythm, and with a harmony it can be thought of as a song.

I applied this new process approach (that I made outside the studio) back into the work. I set out by shifting the focus of my research. I left the workshop project and decided to enter into the theater by myself. I began to unlock many questions in my personal life, using them to “fill the tank.” I needed new inspiration and if I was going to reenter the studio my questions had to be fresh. I did not begin with a thing to do or create. I just went into the studio and began.

My approach to this research paralleled my experience in other ways as well. I view my time in Poland as an evolution. As a scientific concept, evolution isn't a series of steps (or breadcrumbs) but a survival process. The development of a species is an unfolding process without aim towards a final destination.² I didn't know where my questions would lead me or even how to give form to them. It felt wrong to aim for a performance. I set out with the following intentions: to give expression to all my feelings, to amplify and square these feelings, to search for the root of these feelings, to give myself the physical challenge of staying fit, and to re-introduce language and text into my work.

This notion of evolution had been on my mind all winter and it led me to discover for myself the paintings inside Chauvet Cave. They are the oldest surviving example of artistic

expression. They mark human existence and predate all written and oral histories. With just a few lines and strokes, an artist from over thirty thousand years ago was able to capture movement, form, and beauty. It wasn't until I saw a documentary interview that described the moment when apes began to walk on two feet that I had a corporal understanding of how this curiosity fit with my research. As the climate was changing, apes needed to travel greater distances for food, and they stood up to be more efficient travelers. Thus, the entire pelvic structure began to radically alter its shape. I completely relate to this crucial moment. Physically my body has undergone a radical transformation. In order to survive my shape has been altered and my movement has been re-calibrated. Just like these prehistoric species I feel as though my abilities have expanded along with this dramatic shift. Tracing the lines of the cave drawings gave me the idea that I would trace the lines and shape of my own body; habits, blocks and all. Not for anyone or any purpose; but as a measurement of where I am. A marker in time.

I would sneak into the theater early in the morning and begin slowly. Stretching and moving. I would be with my thoughts about "Cherry Orchard," "Songs of Lear," "Drawing on Schulz;" reflect on questions of my own origin, and weave together bits of text and poems. Always coming back to the intention of opening my heart in the space and letting it carry significance in my life. Intention has come up a lot over the last year. The word comes from Latin *intentio*: stretching purpose.

In those mornings I discovered that the Yoga and ballet that I had been doing with the Kozła ensemble, to literally stretch out, reminded me of too much of my limitations. However the kalaripayattu training that I had been doing since December became a foundation for the active kind of movement that I needed to wake up and engage my imagination with my body.

From my journal on 16 February, 2013
[Kalaripayattu] is precisely what I want to work on in terms of physicality. Grounding the feet. Not blocking the chest. Opening the hips. Strengthening the legs and bringing the arms into

significance (relation to the feet).

This is a benefit of having a wide playing field. When one set of practices or points of references are disruptive, I have another structure to support me and keep me strong. It was a lonely process. Some mornings it was just me, the walls, and the floor. All of my professional experiences have created the field on which I am playing. Even in my darkest mornings, that support was healthy and vibrant. So I just kept hunting for moments of openness.

That is the shape of what I did. But I want to talk about where I was in that process. How I came to find those words. What that quality of movement meant to me.

This odd curiosity about evolution, which intersected with my own reflections about my body, then continued to open an area of even greater significance. I started to think deeply about my origins, my heritage, and my father. I know very little about my father. Just fragments really. A few brief descriptions have conjured a faint portrait in my mind. He has not been a part of my life at all. This rekindled interest became the bulk of my personal questions. But I struggled with these feelings in relation to this project and this research. Is this interest feigned to serve as a made up mythology for this work? Or are the cultural associations of what a father is and what he can mean to his son real? I certainly don't feel like half a person. I grew up with an amazing woman and always had friends' fathers, coaches, or teachers onto which I communally transferred my need for male role models. Why did my father come to my mind now? This summer two women reached out to my family introducing themselves as being my cousins who were put up for adoption before my aunt and uncle were married. My uncle is not alive anymore and these women will never know their father. Also a colleague recently lost her father whom she didn't know so well and I began wondering if it is too late. I began asking questions I had never asked before. Who is he? What is he like? Is he an alcoholic? What's his drink? What does he believe in? What are his gods? What is our sign, our crest? I began to find that if I

amplified my curiosities by putting them into words and then speaking them out loud into the space, that they grew into some significance.

Not only did these words become full of content once I put them into the space but the experience revitalized and animated my spirit, questions led to more questions, and deep feelings were present. My activity then took shape by tracing the lines of my own evolution- my own body- and reflecting on the roots of my feelings. The psychology exercises of Mindell (of unfolding and finding the square root) collided with text from classic American writers Henry David Thoreau (Walden) and Walt Whitman (Leaves of Grass). I brought my personal journal into the studio and unpacked many thoughts and ideas that I had never said out loud. All of it came together through the expressive ability of my body and my voice.

After working in the space for three weeks, I still felt aimless. I still had strong feelings about being cut from the project. I didn't know how I would be staying in Poland and I still had some doubts to the authenticity of exploring the questions of my father in the studio. I wasn't sure of how to allow my experience to manifest in my behavior and body in my daily relationships. It seems obvious that I had just begun to examine my feelings of abandonment and anger towards my father because I felt abandoned by the ensemble. Yet here I was at an edge uncertain of my next step.

Then I was invited to join a workshop on Zigmund Molik's Body Alphabet taught by Jorge Parente. After being in the studio alone for so many weeks, this opportunity was like a glass of water. Very simply, the Body Alphabet is a series of actions intended to engage and open the body and connect the voice. Being led by a teacher who saw me with fresh eyes and in the context of this young group, I felt powerful, masterful, resonant, vibrant, and rich with all sounds. My voice was rooted and confident in this workshop. I cleared space with the precision of my action and stopped time with my song.

The overall approach of the Body Alphabet is quite gentle which is an idea that I explored both in my workshop and in my solo research. A unique potential exists by working delicately. The physicality isn't dynamic. But by being slow and precise, the Body Alphabet training quite powerfully rooted my voice back into my body. The work during this week in particular felt like it wasn't a struggle at all. My bones felt alive and there's was no turning it off. Others felt it. The simplicity of each task and the ease in which each improvisation and meeting occurred indicates to me that I can find my own way and it can be with others. The strength that I developed over the year has prepared me well. But this workshop provided me with the space to do some very deep research. It wasn't until the Body Alphabet that I felt the range of my voice and found an expressiveness that let my body sing.

With clear eyes and a full heart, I can't identify the feeling of really being with someone. I cannot place the feeling in my body and there is nothing for me to grab onto. Yet when I work with novices or beginners I have a firm grasp and feel powerful. Perhaps because they endow me with strength, perhaps because we can be gentle, or because we can genuinely explore and not have the pressure of creating any result. With a demand to create something dynamic, with explosive climaxes, it becomes an endurance game. We all have habits and some habits are reinforced in the Kozła work. That ensemble already has clear ideas about what to explore and how. I would constantly disrupt my work in the Kozła studio with staccato movements and collapses to the floor. Physical theater practitioners diagnose these patterns as indicators that I was preventing my own flow and didn't trust what is in front of me.³ Yet when I work gently, I am quite sure of what it is I am doing and the Body Alphabet workshop reminded me of that.

The survival, the fight, and the act of performing for someone else all muted my real power. Looking back it seems the constant struggle was really with myself. The Open Your

Heart workshop for example was an internal battle of a desire to bridge and unify the distinct training that has fed my artistic life. I tried to articulate Kozła exercises that made me feel connected and replace the ones that didn't. I was digging through different approaches that made me feel at one time as though I was in relation to someone or something. It wasn't always successful in its execution but the workshop had a profound effect on some of the participants. "I felt a total freedom with the body... I had the feeling that it can express everything you want. I understand now that the body is a beautiful form to be used on stage." Freedom, expression, beauty; these are more than small wins.

My search has been for an experience, a wholeness, a voice, an identity, a character. In my life I don't often feel my relation to others. When you sing or speak you can hear your voice in the space as it bounces back to you. But how do I do this with my heart, my love, my passion? Is it possible to trace an expression of love with my body?

The experience has re-formed me in many ways. There is a whole new set of questions to unpack. In being reformed and free I don't have to fit into anyone else's mold. I can animate my own body with its unique habits and limitations. I can fill space with my own voice and I can remain in this process of opening myself, experiencing my heart in relation to others, and looking for a more complete picture of who I am and where I come from.

From my journal on 18 February, 2013

What am I doing here? Why do I try to abstract my feelings or what I want to say with movement? Can I truly connect with anyone? Am I capable of love? What is back there? What did I leave? Why did I leave? What kind of effect do my actions have? What impact did I have on people's lives? What have I really done in this world? Why can I not make any decision? Why am I jealous? Why not do it for myself? Why runaway? Why hide behind money? Can I ever get out of this debt? Is Kamila the one? Is she a queen? Will she grow with me? Will she drown in doubt and fear? I saw her as a princess this weekend. Beautiful and the one. But I felt outside her love. I was jealous of the others seeing what I could see and being closer to her. Why can't I speak Polish? Overcome fear! Walk with power into the future. Look always at what is to be seen. Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer. Read Your Fate, see what is before you, and step into futurity.

Confront yourself. Your presence is required. Your vision. What are these racing thoughts in your mind? Limits? Guides? Genius? Distractions? Poison? Visions? Can you hold the music? Can you keep the rhythm? What lies in these questions? What lies in these answers! Fear and doubts? Yes. Hope? Hopefully. Holding the rhythm is the job of the drummer. Am I

a drummer, musician, or a conductor? Or the marketing guy connecting the work with the community. Who am I doing this for? If I stay in Poland who can I truly talk to? Who will benefit? It can't be just for its own sake. It needs to direct me towards my own peace. My own understanding of my love. How can I be myself and in love? Am I afraid of myself? Do I have any time to know myself anymore? How can I nurture my own strength? Is spirituality something that I am craving? Am I looking for prayer but too afraid to pray? Am I looking for a great blue heron? Will I find it with a camera in hand? Find nature. Find creative space. Find a quite space. Find a place to grow. Listen to her.

I don't think I need answers anymore. Each experience is a sign and if I read them properly then I will be on my way. As I listen and create I am led.

I had a dream recently. I almost never remember my dreams. I was on a baseball diamond (which is strange since I never played baseball). I asked the coach if I could play short stop and he agreed. (Usually lefties are not allowed to play on that side of the field.) Brian Segal (a high school bully who used to push me around and was kicked out of school for using steroids) was already in the position. We then had an awkward exchange where I never got ready to play. I didn't prepare myself at all. I just tried to stake out my claim to the coveted position. As I tried to intimidate Brian from the spot, the coach was taking batting practice and the balls were whizzing past me. I missed or dropped every ball that came at me because I was so determined to have that position. I began retreating out into left field, essentially giving up- regressing- but still without preparing or getting ready to play. Then I was in the coach's house and he was picking up and twirling his son above his head. His son was small and had long blonde hair, like Jude, (a boy I took care of from the age of 3-6). As the boy was flying in his father's arms the child said "The last thing is drive." He repeated it over and over until I woke up.

While the entire dream carries significance for my life and art, the part of this dream that interests me the most is the final moment: a father twirling his son in the air; making his son feel like he was flying. I would say it is a duty of a father; to make his son feel like anything is possible. I also read into this fatherly moment encouragement to explore, to challenge gravity, and to connect with the body holistically. These are all things that I am in

some way investigating and could use expertise to assist me. When I reflected on this part of the dream a shadow was covering the face of the father. Upon further meditation, I lucidly experienced the same moment with no father at all. Just a boy floating in the air as if he were swimming. "The last thing is drive." A lesson that I need to fly for myself. No father figure will do it for me. I can't transfer my anger onto coaches, or teachers, or directors my entire life. Over time they won't be there. And yet, somewhere in the shadow, I do have my father's support. We have an expression that when someone talks about you your ears are burning. I believe my father's ears are burning. I don't know if he knows I exist. Or if he has heard that my mother is trying to get in contact with him and rekindled some suspicion. But I know my work on this project has made him sentient of my presence. He has felt a silent prayer from me.

All of these artistic practices, Kozła, kalari, and the Body Alphabet have provided a foundation for me to be in a process and invited me to reflect on that process in my life. Now I am faced with another question of survival. Over the past two months I have been working with Kamila; my best friend, my love. After meeting with lawyers and filling out paperwork we have decided to become business partners. We are establishing a non profit foundation in Poland. I have been intensely interested in managing, producing, and developing an organization for some time. So I am starting one. I hope my organization will give support to emerging artists, give them a framework to amplify their ideas, and help them feel like anything is possible. It will also serve as a foundation for me to continue being in my own creative process. This new project is somehow grounding and freeing at the same time. It is both a reality and a dream. It is a major step and a moment of true growth – or more accurately, it is the continuation of the unfolding process which is my survival. I wrote in my journal "being outside of a process is worse than being denied some result." There is a divine plan of goodness for my work and I feel as though I am at the

beginning of the beginning of something big and meaningful. The last thing is drive.

The name of the foundation is Aardvark Arts. In some African cultures it is believed that aardvarks can walk through walls. Like those particles, like my best days in the space when I would surprise everyone, we're all capable of doing things no one expects. Sometimes words are only approximations of what our body and spirit can do.

* * *

“As if any man really knew aught of my life, Why even I myself, I often think, know little or nothing of my real life.” Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855.

“Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity.” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854.

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855.

“I - now thirty-three years old, in perfect health - begin.” Seth Compton, journal, 2013.

Notes

1 Mindell's book is a study that compares mathematics and psychology. In counting, we discount things like group diversity, individual diversity, process experience, and non human qualities and identities (p.39). Mindell claims that "By describing a process, by saying anything about nature, you lose a certain degree of contact with it." Later he relates that physicists stop at the "Edge to the Significance of the Process" when they rely on statistics and averages as opposed to one time events and phenomena on which they base their scientific conclusions (p.67). Nobel Prize winning physicist Niels Bohr once wrote: "You cannot discuss what you cannot test" (p183). The best tools available still limit our vision and scientists discount what they cannot see.

2 Richard Dawkins, the author of *The Ancestor's Tale*, warns readers in a chapter titled The Conceit of Hindsight, not to view evolution through "the vanity of the present." Scientists often say that evolution took steps and leaps to bring us to the present day. Dawkins would recalibrate this thinking. His view being, there was no purpose, no aim, no intention behind these "steps and leaps" other than survival. He is also the author of a book titled "The God Delusion." So clearly he's not a creationist. The particles in Mindell's quantum physics scenario can not be measured until they are measured at the end of a journey. The path of that journey is unknown to us. Mindell argues that perhaps the particles want to make themselves known in our measurable reality so that we will trace them to their imaginative reality, the dream state. I think I agree with Mindell. Our dreams are trying to show us something about ourselves. Everything around us has consciousness. I believe that although I could not measure my direct aims in the beginning of this process, this is where I needed to end up.

3 Anne Bogart says in her Viewpoints Book (*emphasis mine*): "We have noticed that certain fallback positions occur with individuals as they begin to learn Viewpoints... All of these weak habits occur as *a substitute for trust in what is actually happening*... Forcing a *predictably rhythmic pattern* while stamping one's feet or clapping... Limiting your kinesthetic response to *falling on the ground*" (Kindle Location 1221).

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