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Riffing on Shenanigans

By Germaine Ingram, Guest Contributor

I had barely finished *Tapas*, a month-long one-on-one residency with flamenco artist Rosario Toledo, when I catapulted myself into *Political Shenanigans*, an intensive workshop designed and directed by David Gordon based on *Roundheads and Pointheads*, the Bertolt Brecht play with music by Hanns Eisler. This seldom-produced satire, written just as the Nazis were coming to power in Germany, is commentary on the corruptive and corrosive power of money, politics, and war. Gordon came to town (Philadelphia, that is) with a truck-load of rolling ladders, tables and racks, video and audio technology, and a small crew of New York colleagues, including his wife, dancer/actress Valda Setterfield. The 5-day- and 30-hours-per-week workshop (March 5–23, 2014), sponsored by SusanHessDance and funded by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, more than fulfilled my expectations for technical challenges, creative questions and artistic inspiration. The chance to observe and admire the remarkable Valda Setterfield negotiate this material and wrestle with the unconventional vision and style of her director/husband would have been enough return for my time and effort. Midway through the workshop I wrote a reflective essay that focused on Gordon's treatment of "gesture"—indeed, his intriguing directive that we eliminate gestures from our delivery of the text. In May 2014, about a month after the workshop ended, I looked back on the experience and captured some of the questions and reactions that were still percolating in my thoughts. Here's what I wrote:

It's been about a month since our last gathering for Political Shenanigans. Memories and ear worms of Hanns Eisler songs, Bertolt Brecht's and David Gordon's texts, dancing chairs and tables, and the mystery and intensity of the 3-week experience poke through the activities that have replaced the 30 hours per week that the workshop absorbed. I think about the lessons I took away from the experience—lessons about humility, about embracing uncertainty, and about artistic leadership and collaboration. Questions about the process also linger, indeed, have concentrated and crystallized in the past few weeks.

Rather than wrestle with them alone, I invited workshop colleague [Dawn Falato](#) to join me in a look-back conversation on April 3, 2014. It was a casual, wandering chat, as we met at Old City Coffee, just around the corner from the workshop venue at the Neighborhood House of Christ Church.

I was curious about Dawn's take on Gordon's aversion to "gesture," a topic I explored in a mid-workshop reflective essay. What does a veteran theater artist think of gesture being on a hit-list? Dawn found that Gordon's approach to gesture brought her back to what she learned in nearly two decades of studying and practicing the theater arts. Dawn said that in her training she had been warned about the dangers of what she called "parasitic gesture"—extraneous movements that betray "mistrust in the ways that we're communicating with our voice and delivery...." These movements, she said, take on meanings that are parallel to, and not necessarily illuminating of, the text. She confided that even with all her training and experience, unintentional gesture creeps into her delivery, and she has to apply an extra level of concentration to invest her trust in "the economy of my tools." She was interested in Gordon's experimentation with "gestures that don't support what the vocal message is saying."

We recalled such an experiment that occurred on the final day of the workshop, when Gordon asked Dawn to say "why?" with four different inflections. Then he asked her to repeat the four "why"s while executing four gestures that he gave to her. Finally, he asked her to repeat the four "why"s while executing the four gestures backwards, matching them with the four verbal expressions. (In relating her reaction to the exercise, Dawn noted that it was satisfying to have the movements given to her, allowing her to relinquish responsibility for making the delivery appear authentic. At the same time, she felt the pull of actor's instinct to tweak the material to make the verbal expressions and the gestures come in line with one another in an authentic way.) After that, he sat back and looked out at all the nodding heads. I suspect that there were as many reasons for nodding as there were people in the room. As there was no discussion of what had happened, we'll never know what Gordon was thinking or what was behind all those nods.

I was also interested in Dawn's perspective on the value of having showings each Saturday during the workshop. These free public events were not billed as "performances," but there certainly was a degree of performance pressure and anxiety as we spent Friday afternoons and evenings, and Saturday mornings preparing for a public viewing each Saturday afternoon. It's not evident to me whose idea it was to place so many public windows in the project—Gordon made clear that it wasn't his. More important is how the showings were envisioned to serve the objectives of the project, and how they affected the research process.

I've seen how the focusing power of performance can galvanize synthesis and a sense of collective learning in a process-driven project. One example is how, after three intense weeks in a private laboratory with flamenco artist Toledo—a time when I often felt confused and incompetent—the public showing was a glorious, affirming reveal of what we each learned in the process, and of the personal and artistic relationship that emerged from our weeks of working together in a tiny studio. No experience other than a performance event could have accomplished that outcome. Yet in *Political Shenanigans* I felt that the showings worked to limit the experimentation and compress the time and content of our explorations. I remain curious as to what we might have done had a quarter or more of our time not been spent in preparation for three showings.

Not surprisingly, Dawn had a helpful perspective on the value of the showings. She said that she feels that "at least 50% of [her] performance doesn't come until the audience is there." I understood her view to be that the purpose of theater is to put a product before an audience, and therefore you can't know whether you really have "theater" until you've got an audience in the house. Her response was enlightening for my perpetual questions about "what can performance do?," especially when process is the stated aim of the project. Perhaps performance, by whatever name, has its value in a process-driven project because it can be a way of testing the purpose and rigor of the process: Does it raise meaningful questions, does it inspire new perspectives or build tools and competencies, does it create a sense of artistic community? But if that can be the value of performance in a process-focused project, I still have questions about how much and when.

I raised with Dawn the topic of "theory of action," a concept that I first encountered when I was knee-deep in education reform as deputy superintendent of the Philadelphia School District in the late-1990s. This strategic thinking process—identifying a critical goal or objective, and stating the essential hypotheses or arguments that will define your course of action for achieving the goal or objective—is a device I've used in all types of situations since then. I've found it very useful in designing arts projects for myself and others. It's a way to translate a compelling idea into an actionable plan, to identify what's essential to a desired outcome, and to avoid "capricious

complexity,” as architect Moshe Safdie calls ideas that might be clever and engaging, but don’t serve a critical need or purpose.

Dawn and I speculated about how mounting *Political Shenanigans* in Philadelphia fit into HessDance’s theory of action—explicit or implicit—for achieving its organizational goals and having desired impact on Philadelphia’s arts and culture environment. We wondered how bringing *Political Shenanigans* to this community served David Gordon’s theory of action for accomplishing his artistic and career goals. (We debated what Gordon might have meant when he said on the final day, “this is the last version of **this** for me.”) We questioned how holding weekly showings, or having different compensation arrangements among ensemble members addressed the project’s theory of action, stated or implied. We gained much from *Political Shenanigans*, but the experience seems strangely incomplete in that, a month after the workshop concluded, we can only guess at the answers to these lingering questions.

Political Shenanigans: dancing w/ Brecht & Eisler, Workshop with Choreographer/Director David Gordon, Christ Church Neighborhood House, March 5-23, 2014, dgwkshp.hessdance.org.

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