DAY 1

I begin in the hexagon indoor space but after a break I move outside where my energy has been screaming to go. We begin with a 7 point checklist of neutral alignment. It's a way of standing for your life, but for actors it's called the *sats*, or ready position. The Canadians, all theatre-focused, have studied it with me before; they lead by example. The Greeks, who like theatre but are really here for the psychoanalytic journey Depi guides them on, struggle with the discipline. They are all physically lacking in strength and stamina. They are also all charming, often dryly hilarious, and far more adult. It's a great mix. The challenge with the Canadians is demonstrating to them that BoxWhatBox is something they have experienced but which they do not yet know—the exercises and games and études change for each workshop.

I teach two Energy Flings, which can be used for quick and effective physical warm-ups but which are actually exercises in repetition discipline and precision. Technique is 90% of acting; something similar to that old adage about 90% perspiration. When you are tired, or uninspired, there remains technique. Then we do a great little exercise where they work in pairs, learning each other by blindly guiding a hand over the face of their partner. Rather than do a lot of the walking exercises I usually work with, I opt for a single, concentrated one, the Over-Meditated Walk, where each movement of the body must be consciously ordered internally by the walker. It isn't easy, and it produces a revelation about the body; each step prevents a fall.

Out of the Over-Meditated movement I create a Variation in which each individual must repeat an accentuated part of the movement they have developed, over and over. They do not know when the exercise will end; they must discover how to husband their resources while maintaining exact precision, using their bodies in the most economical way. Ryan chooses a big, energy-sucking motion and repeats it without complaint. Alex produces a characteristically beautiful movement with her legs and is soon trying to cover the mounting pain of repeating it. Christina produces a small, poetic movement of wistful grace.

I bring out my balls and the group splits, the Greeks asking for Winnie the Pooh, the Canadians for Mickey Mouse. So we go this time with Winnie and play a simple toss and catch variation where they say their names as they prepare to toss. They must say their names in a way that communicates fundamental information about themselves they wish others to know; this is not so straightforward as it may seem for those who dislike their given name or who have long ago forgotten their relationship to it.

It's a small number of exercises, unusual in my work, but very much what is needed. A solid grounding in fundamentals, particularly in introducing the principle of *rhythm* and *JO-HA-KYU*; a demonstration of reassurance to the Greeks that the physical demands will not be beyond them; a clear set of diagnostic analyses in which the participants have revealed themselves, enabling me to concoct and create for the next session.

DAY 2

We revisit the neutral position to get it ingrained in their approach. Ramona asks how long it takes before it feels natural, and that's a difficult question to answer, since I use it all day, every day and have for years. It's good to be reminded that many things that are now second nature to me are not immediately comfortable to those who associate unbalanced, non-aligned posture with a natural feeling. Though I sense the trepidation we also revisit the Energy Flings, doing more of them and using both sides of the body. Sweat pours from all of us, though the work is brief. Water bottles are seized and greedily squeezed at every opportunity.

Then we do Sumo Walks, designed to open up the pelvis but also to help them experience the rare sense of heaviness and lightness with precision movement simultaneously. They do them poorly in the confined space and I truncate the exercise. On a hunch I try a series of walks in 4 and 6 beat variations; asking them to perform tasks to different beats such as stomping or clapping or touching the ground in an airplane spin. The Canadians cannot lead the Greeks into any kind of sustained shared rhythm, although they try. Rhythm, a key to my work, will clearly take several different approaches before their confidence builds. I decide to wait another day before hitting them with the rhythm work I'd planned, and instead we move into some ball work, revisiting Toss and Catch (without names this time) and then introducing them to the BoxWhatBox foundation game, Ball Basic, which encompasses every core acting principle and which reveals the passive/active default tendencies of participants. Surprisingly, given their lack of success at the rhythm work, they are able to keep the ball in the air relatively well. Considering there are four sizeable pools of water in corners of the room, plants at the edges, little light and a low ceiling, they do well.

I decide it's time for Études and we move to the outdoor space. There was a time when with a mixed group of theatre and non-theatre types I would never even get to non-linear image creation work, focusing on games, precision and play. Increasingly in the past few BoxWhatBox workshops I have moved the players into *targeted improvisation* more quickly, to give them a sense of the tangible or material uses of the work.

The first étude is a simple one, no less difficult for its simplicity, for it is in simple play that our deeper fears are laid bare. I ask pairs of players to begin lying on the floor in a position of their choosing. They must awake, rise, dress, dream of the future, undress, and lie down to sleep. Their actions must parallel each other as exactly as possible. That's it; that's the whole story. Sam Beckett made a play out of this narrative, once. It's a fiendishly difficult exercise, especially as I pair Greeks and English speakers and give them as little time as possible to work out movements. This is deliberate, as I want them to be forced to act decisively and then focus on their instinctive ability to sense the other.

Some of the work is really gratifying. There is a dramatic dynamic to the way some of the pairs turn away from each other or turn towards an imaginary window when dreaming; they eschew the easy road of having each other in view. The hard part, of course, is the dreaming, which is why I add it to the physical tasks. Can the actor dream even while focusing on replicating learned movement and trying to sense the other?

The second étude we do is one I created in Croatia and have refined. It involves antagonistic actions

in pairs. So, for instance, one pair features someone digging a hole while the other is covering the hole. A second pair is packing and unpacking a suitcase; a third pair dressing and undressing a baby (this is actually a trio, as we need a baby); the final pair, also a trio, locks and unlocks a person behind a door.

Apart from the fact that all of these actions are fun, it's instructive to see what style of playing the players select and whether they choose to work imaginatively or to follow the orders as they are given. The pair digging and covering the hole, for instance, could, if they work together, create a Beckettian sequence where one is never aware of the other and they remain in a mystery as to why their work is never done. What I expect, however, is that most of the pairs will choose to compete directly with each other and play in a realistic manner. The players tasked with locking and unlocking the door only lock the person behind a door once, and after much fighting between the "locker" and the "unlocker", finally unlock the door. But the instructions were given in the continuous present: locking and unlocking is different than lock and unlock. It seems like an exercise in semantics but it's much more significant than that in indicating how people listen and apply what they have heard. In the "scene" the players develop the fight (which is quite physical and a bit dangerous) over the key becomes the key part of the narrative, as opposed to the repetitive locking and unlocking. It could still make an interesting scene, but of the American kind: realistic, focused on the "HA" or explosive action rather than the pre- and post- actions, directly competitive rather than indirectly. They also end the scene arbitrarily after the door has been unlocked; but no task was given to finish the action and end the scene. They have "solved the problem", a common error actors make when they become unsure of themselves. As my old clown teacher always told me, actors must "stay in the shit". It can be a decidedly uncomfortable place to be, but out of that discomfort comes creativity.

DAY 3

The thunder and rain which intermittently featured in the past two days has disappeared. At the outdoor space, I move the group through neutral standing alignment with spinal rolls and then ask them to begin to move throughout the space in slow motion. This has an interesting effect; after some time it becomes quite mesmerising to watch and quite difficult to maintain. I instruct them to move to someone and touch them on the shoulder. If that person is still, they begin to move; if they are moving they become still. Sometimes, because of the conflation of intentions that is a result of slow motion movement, people are being touched twice in rapid succession (if you can call anything rapid in slow motion). So they must decide whether they are becoming still or starting movement again. If they are in the act of touching someone else the decision-making process becomes even more complex. This is a basic of BoxWhatBox work; the responsibility of the artists to make creative decisions based on the information they gain from the immediate circumstances, rather than talking through instructions or adhering rigidly to prescribed rules. When we finish after more than ten minutes the group is exhilarated. There is no more talk, as there has been over the past three days from the Greeks, of being exhausted or wanting to curtail the exercise.

I take them through a game created by Augusto Boal that I haven't used in ages, one he calls "Fainting at Frejus". First I have teach the Greeks how to fall without hurting themselves, and once again I am reminded jarringly how even the simplest things actors do are quite magical and inaccessible to ordinary people. The game, involving my calling out persons' names and having the others sprint to them to catch them before they fall—is a huge success. There is much laughter at

the various dramatic falls employed by people who are reluctant to hit the floor. Finally, the group is all laughing together.

We begin the percussion work. The Greeks are notably arrhythmic, but we manage rounds of various beats—4/4, 6/8, 5/8, 2/4, 3/4–the purpose being to get them used to the three spheres of rhythm that are present in all creative activity. There is doing your job with concentration (private), then listening to your partner and synchronising your beat to theirs (public), and finally there is this dual production in the context of a larger set of sounds, of which you must become a contributing part (global/universal).

The vocal work is always challenging, as so many people lack confidence in their ability at holding notes. It isn't really about singing well, though; it's about believing in the sound you are producing. We begin with children's songs, because they are simple, easy to repeat, and in some way they bring a kind of purity and innocence back to the singer. I ask one group of three Greeks to come up with a Greek children's song. No one knows Frere Jacques, and I have to teach one group the lyrics to "Bells of St. Clemens", though "Row, Row Row Your Boat" still seems current. It's not quite a fiasco, but not quite a success, either.

It's time to try something simpler yet more profound to restore their confidence. I ask them to repeat the name of their hometown, over and over, following my conducting, which can increase or decrease the volume, lengthen a sound, or cut it out entirely. Each time they say the name of their hometown they must have a picture in their mind, an image from their experience there, positive or negative. The image can change from one repetition to another, or it can stay the same. The way they say their hometown's name should in some way communicate the effect of that image on them.

It sounds esoteric, I suppose, but we overlook the emotional impact of proper nouns because we use them so often without being conscious of their associations. All words are just codes, after all—and for a code to truly be effective it should be a code for what a person feels, rather than merely for the fact of a place name. This is true with people's own names, as well; they can be rediscovered when you are asked to say your name to another in a manner that communicates something essential about you.

If a person's relationship with their home town is complex, as it almost always is, with strong negative associations competing with nostalgia and associations with family, you have a recipe for a gradual transformation in the sound that can be picked up by others. Alex's relationship with Hamilton, Ontario; Kat's with small town, conservative Peterborough; and Janice's with the nearly unpronounceable Truro leapt out in the first round of repetitions. Ryan's opinion of Plimpton, N.S., on the other hand, was unambiguous. Two of the Greeks said "Athina" as their homes, in entirely different ways; Virginia caressed "Volos" to the degree that it made want one want to drop everything and go there; Ramona said "Vancouver" in a way that made it sound fresh and new, full of possibilities. Afterwards we discuss the images they had been working with, and the emotional landscape the mention of their home towns had created for each of them.

After this signal success I am encouraged to go back to some singing. Alas, their work on the African chant I like to use returns them to an acute awareness of their vocal limitations. With the positive energy still lingering in the air from the previous exercise, I get them on their feet for their first étude of the day. This is a fiendishly simple étude that I call "Building A Story". Two teams each

have a central character they create of their choosing. One person plays the character as a puppet; the rest of the team take up positions as puppeteers. They must choose how to manipulate their character in the most effective way. The only narrative I give them is that they must enter, move with purpose, and then exit. There is no time length suggested, no tasks beyond this simple frame. I do not tell them that their character is going to encounter the other. For the subversive point of the étude is twofold: to learn the mechanics of building a story for the stage, and to learn how critical the function of *discovery* is in that process.

This étude, which I try in this form for the first time, is fascinating to watch. How actors love to run away from depth! One character is an astronaut walking on the moon; the other is a medieval knight walking…somewhere. The teams struggle to control the movement of the character, and with regard to this challenge, the choice of characters who move in an odd, mechanical way is inspired. The knight marches towards the astronaut, apparently aiming to do battle…but where? In the middle ages or on the moon? The first decisions would have to be made in rehearsal at this stage. The astronaut keeps floating around, not really manifesting any purpose. It's all quite funny, but with a lot to absorb—the actor discovery has been skipped altogether. The knight moves towards the astronaut as if he had always been there, as if the knight expected to see an astronaut (!), with no change in demeanour that new information virtually always demands. This step is crucial for actors (and writers), and furnishes them with much of the information and choices they needlessly agonise over. The astronaut makes no discovery at all, which could be contextualised, one supposes (they could be on different worlds), but generally spectators need to either witness the discovery or know why it hasn't happened.

We discuss the mechanics of creating a story and how useful a knowledge of basic story mechanics can be when one is working in an environment without a stage, props, costumes, sound or lights, as devised or applied theatre often involves. This approach is also free of any rigid idea of what a story is. It's focused from the spectator's point-of-view: what do they need to understand? They need to know who your character is and what they want, right from their introduction, through its sense of purpose and the way it moves. They need to witness a discovery which complicates that intention, and the consequences of that discovery. After that, everything is, as they say, butter on the popcorn.

DAY 4 (Final day)

As the sun loses some of its sting we gather at the outdoor pavilion. I have them spend five minutes in complete silence, listening to the sounds going on around them—human sounds occasionally, the cicadas, sheep and goats bellowing with bells clanking, the wind. It's nothing I'd planned, just an instinct, to connect them to the spot, a special place at a special time in their lives. Then I conduct an orchestra made up of the sounds they've heard. Once I convince Ryan to stop making a parody of a rooster, the effect is haunting, hypnotic. I let it go on for minutes, taking sounds in and out, higher and lower. Alex and Kat looked abashed that they've chosen sheep lowing. They have no idea how wonderful it sounds.

I decide to skip a second attempt at the African chant because I am excited to try something I've just created: a chant based on tones that last the extent of an individual's breath. Each person chooses a tone and then changes the tone when they take a new breath. It sound simple, but I'm certain the effect will be powerful. And I'm right. The impact is overwhelming. It's incredibly beautiful to hear

music that lasts the length of a human breath. Each subsequent change in tone is affected by the over-all sound each person is hearing, so there is a living, supple sound to the music. They make a sound, hear how it fits into a greater whole, and then change it to fit better when they take their next breath, by which time, of course, the sound has changed. So there is a huge amount of listening, instinct, and what I call *positive anticipation* involved.

Then a variation is introduced. I have a feeling about how this will go but I want to see how it works in practice. Each individual is now allowed to make one change in tone during their vocalisation. In theory this should enable each person to accord more fully with the over-all sound that's being produced, but as I thought, what happens instead is that people begin becoming more conscious that they are "singing" with all the attendant stresses and self-consciousness this brings. The effect is less natural, less simple, less powerful, more laboured and conscious. Instead of flowing, it clunks along, although there are moments of transcendent beauty. A discussion afterwards reinforces this contra-intuitive truth: solving the problem, i.e. introducing the ability to make further changes, does not necessarily add to the beauty of a performance, which, in the end, relies on a more primal or fundamental set of truths.

Taking them out of this exalted realm of unconscious, I take them back into neutral positions and roll-downs. An actor can never forget they he or she is an actor, and that technique is the basis of performance.

Then it's time for a game of Space Invaders, a simple game I created which quickly diagnoses the strategic and attacking/defending abilities of players. A central player, with eyes closed, is surrounded by a circling group of invaders, who must poke the central player a minimum of every three seconds. If the central player hits out and touches an invader, the invader retires. The game continues until each invader has been retired.

Kat and Ryan volunteer for the first two groups. Each has played this game before, and it shows; they are aggressive, proactive central players, relying on unpredictable movement and differentiation in levels to intimidate and touch invaders. When Evi volunteers, what I call the "Discovery Channel" aspect of the game surfaces. She is more careful and tentative, more predictable in her movements, staying at shoulder-height level and reaching out only with her arms. Soon she is exhausted, but there are several invaders remaining. The game is cruel; it's not a bourgeois children's game from the west, where if a child cries out the game is stopped. Evi must keep playing. As we discuss later, it's like watching a gazelle or antelope being nipped at by jackals. Eventually the antelope just gives in to its demise. Being poked isn't fun—the invaders are explicitly told they can poke the central player anywhere they like.

We all think we're tough, but most of us are not. When one gets tired, one must, like Beckett's character, say "I can't go on. I must go on." Christina, the beautiful bourgeoise, is notably absent from the list of volunteers. The other Christina snaps away, undiscerned, in the background.

Through the workshop I've been introducing the group to Ball Basic, without relying on it as I have done in previous workshops. It's an incredible, freeing release, almost universally exciting ion its childlike simplicity, except for the rare player who decides that it's "sports" (read: male aggression) and that they don't play "sports". Generally even these unself-aware neurotics are seduced by the game's simple beauty. The object is clear: keep the ball in the air. This can be interpreted as "keep

this moment alive" or "stay alive". Players can hit the ball with one hand, it must be touched by another before they hit it again, and when the ball touches the ground the game starts anew.

Every fundamental principle of performance is embodied in the game, though few players believe that when they begin to play. I won't go into them all here—Hero Syndrome, Positive Anticipation, Alphonse and Gaston, Commentary, Making the Adjustment, True Contact, Not Solving the Problem—but the game demands the proper use of the ego—asserting oneself when required, deferring when necessary, knowing what one can do and can't do and what to adjust, learning the habits and nuances of other players, ensuring that all play a role. It's far more difficult to play effectively than it appears; most groups seldom progress past 25 touches the first few times they play, and so it occurs here. The game's success does not depend on a numerical value. Each person, if they choose to do so, can face themselves in this game and discover *alterable* truths.

Finally, it's time for our last étude. I call it "My Life in 5 Pictures". Rose volunteers. Her job is to mobilise the other players into give depictions of seminal stages in her life up until now. This she does quite brilliantly. I'm flattered that one of the five seminal moments in her life to now features her involvement in my production of **A Short History of the Blues** at Acadia. It's notable, however, that four of her five pictures are institutional in nature and only one could be called personal. Quite revealing—in its determination not to reveal—for a short history of a life. The players take on their roles well. Tableau work is underrated in its complexity and emotive challenges. Rose asks me to play her father for one tableau and we all get a lot of amusement out of that, as I might be the right age but I'm as unfatherly as a male ever has been.

We sit in a semi-circle discussing this last, very profound exercise in all its manifestations. I thank Kat, Alex and Virginia for the roles they have played in making CATT Galaxidi come to life—because it's time to finish the workshop aspect and to begin thinking of what we have all experienced together. I thank everyone for what they've brought to the workshop and how much they have taught me. There are no individual goodbyes to each other; partly because Depi has already done this in her workshop earlier in the day (and has admitted it was a mistake, as it took the workshop 40 minutes beyond its termination time). I don't believe in such indulgences—and sentimentality is an indulgence—even when all the feelings are positive. These can be said privately later, when they have meaning, rather than in public, when they take on a performative (and pressurised) element. BoxWhatBox is a philosophy, which means it continues long after the actual workshop has finished. You live your principles, or you have no principles.