

## Home from Home

by *The Blue Stocking Social Club (BSSC)*

Vincent Cacalano- 2013

A brief Introduction-

*'Home from Home'* is a performance that reflects a dialogue that began in 1993 between myself, and Dr. Sharon Smith. At that time, we were part of the original cast of performers working with Katie Duck on the scores that later established Magpie Music Dance Company. Duck's influence inspired us to explore and develop our own ideas about 'choice aesthetics', a mode of performance that approaches space by asking the performer to primarily focus on establishing a clear sense of experiencing time passing, where terms like 'choose' or 'choose time' or 'choose in time' become mantra-like questions when performing in improvised situations. Duck's ideas about choice aesthetics are a development of her exploration of chance procedures, or *'the aesthetics of chance'*. (Duck in Buckwalter, M. *Composing While Dancing*, page-112, 2010).

From this influence and after decades of working with Duck and Magpie, through several shared projects and in our own work, Smith and I have had time to develop ideas about performance, and audience, space and action that came to fruition in the collaborative project *Home from Home*. This writing creates an inclusive space for readers to access that dialogue. At times in this writing the ideas of theorists Barthes and Irigaray are used to help us articulate ideas.

Smith's text for performance–

The resuscitation text... (it's like doctored wikipedia text...)

Will you stand on me – it's a visual thing – standing on a female in order to subdue, restrain or even kill her, might lead to her releasing scores of eggs from her abdomen, which may continue to grow and eventually hatch in your carpet.

(so this is based on wiki knowledge - googling how to kill a cockroach)

Will you lie on top of me? Please, what's your name?

Put me in the recovery position. Place my mouth downwards, so that vomit or blood can drain from me.

You might need to resuscitate me, do a little rhythmic press on my chest – oh please, my heart is breaking... this process usually involves exhaling into a patients, that's me, you're the doctor ok? Into the patient's mouth. I need more oxygen, your oxygen. I need it to flow into my brain so that I can keep thinking, keep my head straight, so that I don't forget about you. What is your name? And we're here, aren't we?

(so basic first aid mixed with lonely lady - just made up)

Take me in your arms, hold me tight, don't let me go. It's dark out there and lonely. I don't want to leave you anymore I've been alone so much.

(this line is a quote from the film *Farewell To Arms*).

Keep my chin well up. This keeps my epiglottis open; do you know what that is? Is it important to know? Do you know that there is a false vocal chord in the larynx? A tiny fold of mucous in the larynx. The false vocal chord separates the ventricle of the larynx from the vestibule of the larynx, also called the false vocal fold.

(wiki fact)

False, a false friend, not faithful or loyal, lacking in naturalness or sincerity. False sympathy, not essential or permanent. A false structure, a hard shell for example, that fits over a main part – to strengthen it. To protect it – or disguise it's appearance. Don't make any false moves.

(dictionary definition of the word false)

I think that's how I work on text. I'm constantly perusing the inter-net finding bits of information that I like then collaging them together through a situation, like resuscitation, or comparing myself to a cockroach, then making a collage. I like this, then the text isn't really authored either, not written out of me, but assembled by me, put together from bits and scraps of other things. I rarely used prose or poetry, only 'facts', although the farewell to arms text had been in my mind and just snuck in. Sharon Smith

The text above, devised by Sharon Smith, also includes comments on the authors approach to writing. These are in parenthesis, offering insight into the method of writing. The text was rehearsed but was never performed in the work. At the last minute, before the performance where the text might have appeared, the text was abandoned. The only remnant of the text was the 'Hat' Smith wore in performance, which was designed to replicate a cockroaches' head. Events are assembled and rehearsed, but may or may not actually appear. This choice is a way of "committing to confusion", as I like to call it, or sabotaging ones own structure, as a way of creating performance challenges.

The text above also demonstrates a relationship to the audience where the performer reciting the text switches from direct engagement in a performed act, which in this case involves resuscitating another performer, then switching to a commentary on the action, which is directed to the audience. These are aspects of how *Home from Home* was devised. The writing below discusses this further.

### The Approach

*Home from Home* is a performance that looks and behaves like a social club. We host the event alongside Smith's family forming the company "The Blue Stocking Social Club" (BSSC). The company spans 4 generations including Smith's father, mother, grandmother, their neighbor, Smith and myself. The cast for *Home from Home* includes other invited local artists. The project seeks out the presence of a range of performers. Some have formal training and are critical of it. Crucially, some don't. These performers have not passed through the filters of technical or critical languages of (post)-modern art or other formal academic doctrines. The process for creating the work involved a minimal amount of

devising sessions, where scores were written but not fixed, abandoned or included, with the idea that the testing ground for ideas would be in performance. The research process explored blurring the boundaries of high art and popular culture, the professional and amateur, through the transposition of Smith's familial living room to the stage.

As well as an eclectic cast of performers the cabaret format invites mixed media where music, dance, poetry, film and skit style acting appear. This interdisciplinary approach has offered a way of looking at and questioning our performance presence by forcing us to reconsider what might be beautiful in the fragility of the untrained or inexperienced performer; rather than a glossy, blow dried, more manicured approach, as theorist Roland Barthes explains "*Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security;*" (Barthes R, Music Image Text, page-155, 1977)

Instead, *Home from Home* works toward the carnival, at one moment a revving up of the adrenalin of a space, while letting down our high art hair. The purpose here is to allow for spillage, mistakes, disruptions, both in terms of content and structure. The piece falls apart, and the narrative collapses, because the work does not stick to the script, but exits the script in order to admit the imperfection or unpredictability of live-ness. The work is also about bridging the worlds of high art with the traditional forms of entertainment and socializing. It can challenge conceptual and intellectual work by emphasizing the ever-present reality and possibility of human error.

Smith's family are an integral part of the company (BSSC). They co-host, perform, make and serve hot pot. There is a very special family atmosphere. There is no way we could construct this artificially. Margaret McDonnell is 86. She is Smith's grandmother. She sings, serves, chats and is simply there in the situation. Her presence in the work taught Smith and I so much about facilitating, or how to support her in the best way. This defined a way of working that supports and facilitates, without over-controlling via direction or dramaturgy.

In the most recent performance of *Home from Home* Margaret McDonnell decided she wanted to sing Amazing Grace. Smith and I decided for that evening's performance to place Amazing Grace at the beginning of the end of the show, a first finale. We imagined that this choice could make or break the evening for a variety of reasons, the style and content of the song, placing the song at that point in the score, whether Margaret might change her mind about performing that song, or performing at all that evening. These choices and our insecurity toward the material created a tension with the public and that is something we want to invest in.

Margaret practiced her song so much before the show that she began to forget the words. Due to nerves she decided to write the words to the song on a piece of cardboard that she then wore around her wrist, like a bangle. When it came to that point in the evening, she did indeed forget the words but could not read the words off her cardboard bangle because she was not wearing her reading glasses. Instead she told the audience this, she laughed with them and colluded them in her moment. They lit lighters and waved their arms joining in for the choruses. There is simply no way we could ever have written or 'produced' this moment.

This is the kind of moment that emerges from the framework Smith and I set up. Many theater artists do try to manufacture imperfect and surprising moments like this, however 'the set up' is almost always readable because it is actually not authentically unpredictable.

As mentioned previously, Smith and I have made a choice to use a very loose score, which we can, and do change at any moment. Essentially the score tries to open up the possibility for anything to happen, and our challenge as performers is to be prepared for anything. We try to make choices in the absolute knowledge of the risk that is involved, when staging something that is not fully understood, or even, that we think might be awful.

We ask ourselves, where is the rigor to leaving things open to chance or without structure? Considering what structure is, it always exists. What is really open? You have a room, a space, a public, and a history. You find rigor in becoming aware of what is present in a moment. You have to find rigor to accumulate an order of events, to build in real time a beginning, middle, and an end, all in a moment. When improvising one is composing and performing at the same time and in *Home from Home* we try to not over control our compositional choices.

We want to emphasize the performance experience, and performance phenomenon, as a celebration of the humans' ability to adapt to change. The quality of performance, and affect on the audience, that emerges from what is unscripted, which threatens to unravel and undermine our 'score', offers us the opportunity not only to experiment with structure but also to experiment with being present in the politics of a moment, where we need 'choice' to be able to respond. The score tries to obliterate itself as it happens, and with this death we respond in ways that we choose in the moment, due to the subjective, reactive, emotional presence of the artist being, by dint of its very nature, difficult to impossible to pin down. This is our political-artistic position.

Smith explains:

How information is let-in by the subject who is making choices in real-time, is quantifiable if that subject has spent time practicing awareness of her conscious and sensual processes. If we wish to invest only in critical theories of a 'me' as a cultural signifier and not in a 'me' that is of my body and in the room, in time, out there becoming you, infected by and infecting an-others, then why do we gather a crowd? Why do we make particular investigation into the live, into a public, social site, if it is not to momentarily make positive the negative space of experience; of presence: of the live? In the live domain 'what' we do is only as important as 'how' we do it. "

This opinion postures Irigaray's feminist project because it functions on the premise that a conscious, imposed autonomy is destructive as it is agoraphobic. A singular 'I' in the consciousness of the contemporary performer reflects a fear or a mistrust of site and it's unpredictable, irrational possibilities. The singular 'I' emits defensives, as though against humiliation of being exposed, soiled. The present tense is always site-full. When space-site is treated as a force to be reckoned with, to conquer, we could playfully imagine the defensiveness of the site. I am entertained by a writing of presence into the feminine

imaginary. When we continue Irigaray's theory, as an analogy, penetration, or activity will never fill in space, only divide space into more spaces (shifting and multiplying and overlaying the holes). The phallic implications are humorous to me. The phallus, the point, can only divide into more and more. It cannot fill. This is the politic of presence that I prefer.

Smith is discussing a politics of presence that is supported when one develops structures which allow the performer to constantly exercise choice, the choice to edit the set material, change the set material, develop a new material, or proceed as planned, at any given moment. Even when executing set material, by opening up time structures, asking the performer to primarily focus on the experience of time passing, rather than managing the immediate execution of material, a heightened awareness, and access to the information a performer can take in, is developed. This alongside exercising choice creates the present tense performance mode that Smith is interested in. The phallic implications for Smith are the performer penetrating a space, primarily focused on executing, as a means of engaging with space and audience.

Smith continues: Treating the body as an object can create an "agoraphobic" space. The agoraphobic space is created by a performer and/or maker who either is insisting on some sort of body-as-an-object delusion, or is simply so scared of the exposed, real time situation they are in, that they deny that they are in it, deny the feeling of what is happening to them. One can approach making work considering that the body is an object, but it isn't - in the end it is a real live subjective breathing feeling entity. The paradox, or indeed a self-contradictory state of performance is described through autoeroticism. As Irigaray asks, "*how, in the classic representation of sexuality, can the perpetuation of autoeroticism for woman be managed*"? (Irigaray, L. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, page-24, 1985) When I perform I must enter, and I must be entered. I enter space and I become it. I touch and I am touched. I am part of the (w)hole that I enter. In this moment I decrease, by conscious choice, through my own politics, my ability to 'speak', or I relinquish a state of autonomy as soon as I enter because I refuse to penetrate as much as I desire to dissolve into the (w)hole space of site.

## The Audience

In order to dissolve into the space or site we also discuss how the audience is essential in figuring out the work, and as a way to rehearse. In most live work the public should be an important factor. But some work demands more consideration of the public-performer dynamic as part of the rehearsal or formation process. In some work you may want to leave something unknown to try in front of an audience in order to figure it out in front of them. Throwing material into the performance space when you do not yet know exactly what you are saying, but you are going to put the ideas out there, and you rely on how you perform or show the idea, to make it tolerable or interesting to a shrewd audience. You are not always going to know why, and this affects the dynamic of a live moment, when you leave something unanswered or unknown and you do that in front of an audience. Or you think you cannot find out how to set something without the public present. This sets up a certain dynamic in a piece.

While difficult for some of the audience to understand as theatre, through the confusion of the loose score and social club atmosphere, several seasoned performers did recognize the challenging performance situation that was created and energy foregrounded by the danger of spontaneity. Some audience, however, were not sure how to respond, which was a consequence of exploring this performance context: the work was presented in a theatre, but simulated a social club, which, alongside the somewhat chaotic disregard for extensive pre-planning created confusion for some.

Nancy Reilly, formerly of the Wooster Group, describes the work from her perspective as an audience member.

#### The Social Club . . . Home from Home

As the audience we could be watching the social club, watching Andy Warhol's famous red couch in the factory. He hung a camera to catch his 'Factory people' as they randomly inhabited an unsanctified performance space. This form of 'art glimpsing' within a milieu as confusing as a jumbo sale is the unique method of approaching honesty in Sharon Smith and Vincent Cacalano's performances. Here is the narrative, no narrative and no alternatives. It looks like an old fashion town hall get together or a group of socialists come in for shelter. Sharon's genetic web distinctly un-post modern and ununiformed, with singing cousins, grandmas and singing relatives. Good-natured and others watching for mistakes, without the realization that it was made intentionally as a mistake of jumbled formations. The rambling interaction and clashes of materials and people, cleverly replaces ones we are familiar with. Girls pop dance., watch the man in the wig he is alarming in his vacantness, in his lack of guile. Something bubbles up like cooking. It is actual cooking, big pots of soups and things to eat, which each, and everyone, of the audience members will be served. There is only such a thing as a free lunch in this political juxtaposition of the different walks of life interjecting their intermittent realities. Kiddy boy relative sings his party piece. As the audience we are getting familiar with world-class performers genetic web. Watch the man at the instrument he may turn into a film, or a back projection, or offer you a picture entirely different to the one I am painting here. The Social Club is a riveting hybrid between socialist meeting, family gathering, and performance art sampling. The sophistication of the work emerges from a complete debunking of the magic of theatre, contemporary or conventional. As the great man, Richard Foreman said... Here is the magic, no magic.

Smith and I want to propose a question in contemporary performance about presence, in order to generate more discussion about the 'performance moment and live-ness'. We look at the bad actor as a model, as a goal, rather than a mistake, bad acting in the positive sense of the term, soap opera acting. For example, the actors know they are performing, and they forget lines, often with little time to prepare. So they look for the lines on a screen, while still attempting to maintain an earnest emotional engagement in the scripted-acted situation. That which should replicate intense and real life emotions but through acting, however, while simultaneously doing the real time- and -place functional task of reading a

screen to remember the text, or signifiers of the acted situation. They make mistakes, and these moments can be the high light of a performance. This creates a structural shift in the performance, and *“this unease in classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation.”* (Barthes, R. Image Music Text, page- 155, 1977)

The performers’ mistakes provide a spontaneous moment whereby an unscripted mode of performance presence appears. This mutation or shift of expectation is what we seek out, what Barthes might call the punctum, “ a little hole- and also the cast of the dice” (Barthes, R. Camera Lucinda, page-27, 1980). We also work this way in an attempt to develop an aesthetic of, to cite part of Sara Jane Bailes book title, 2011, or ‘poetics’ of, failure’. (Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure- Sara Jane Bailes- 2011) The project challenged normative expectations of entertainment and experimented with mistakes and misunderstandings as a strategy for performing, with the desire to create a disruption of expectation for the audience. The work explored developing performance virtuosity by applying Barthes’ language of punctum, obtuse meaning, and carnival to a theatrical context. The work seeks to spill, to over signify. It flirts with the obtuse, the carnival. Barthes describes obtuse meaning as “a multi layering of meanings, which always lets the previous meaning continue, as in a geological formation, saying the opposite without giving up the contrary” (Barthes, R. Music Image Text, page-58, 1977)

## To Conclude

The direction toward the carnival is a choice, it is intentional and direct, it exposes us, asking the performers, our bodies, to witness with the audience the confusion we have chosen to create. Smith and I want a politics of presence that emphasizes ‘choice’, and to have that reflected in how the work is structured, as well as, in the content of the performance. And if that demands a confused craziness full of chaos and cracks and spillage then so be it. But Smith and I don’t want to write that. We want to wind it up and let it go – if you let it, stuff happens that again one just couldn’t write.