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Changing the Space: An Interview with Ben Spatz of Urban Research Theater by Lane Pianta

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Performing the Soul:
Observations on the Practice of Ben Spatz
and Urban Research Theater
An Introduction by
Lane Pianta

In August of 2008 Ben Spatz and I sat down to record a conversation about his ongoing work under the moniker Urban Research Theater. Over the course of ninety-plus minutes we discussed his background, the ethics that guide his performance practice, the social context that motivates him and a number of other relevant topics. Urban Research Theater (URT) originated in Poland in 2004 and while its projects have incorporated the talents and energies of a number of participants over the last four years, those persons have orbited around a single nucleus: Ben Spatz of New York City. The centrality of the term "research" in the moniker he has chosen should be borne in mind to understand the methodology, purpose and even the aesthetic of Spatz' work. Owing much to the song/action research of Gardzienice Theatre and the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, Spatz has nevertheless plotted a singular course for himself. Whether the fact that URT has struggled to maintain a fully committed company of performers has hindered or liberated Spatz, it has certainly not deterred him from pursuing a singular vision and the interview that follows represents an attempt on my part to understand the guideposts by which he navigates.

Exactly one year prior to interviewing Spatz, I had the pleasure of participating in one of Urban Research Theater's "Another City" projects. I already knew something of Spatz' work in practice, but I was wholly unprepared for the sheer delight of that experience as I and about seven other project participants joined him and his full-time partner Michele Farbman for a truly mind-bending tour of the Big Apple. The "Another City" project incorporated elements of movement improvisation, group singing and dramaturgical choreography into a twenty or twenty-five minute work of guerrilla theater that we performed in fifteen to twenty locations around the city over a three-day period. This work prioritized the experience of the performers (those of us engaged in the performance structure) over that of the spectators (the accidental assortment of strangers and passers-by whom we encountered on the streets), insofar as our performances did not seek to elicit a specific response from the observers.

Our performances functioned on many levels, but seemed perfectly designed to challenge a fundamental assumption of most theatrical performance: that empathic bonds between performer and spectator must

function homogeneously. Personally, I have always doubted that assumption, as it encourages the actor to emote when they should be engaged in the performance of cold, hard action. In practice, however, I understood how as we opened our own minds to a changed perspective, the mere fact of our presence in public necessitated a change in perception for those around us as well. While we held no intention of eliciting a specific emotional response, our actions catalyzed individual responsiveness in all those we encountered that day. The experience seemed at once to re-affirm this basic principle of empathic response, while at the same time opening a door to another possibility for theater as an art, one charged with the potential to affect change on a city-wide scale. I found this to be a result almost unique in my experience as a practitioner or spectator.

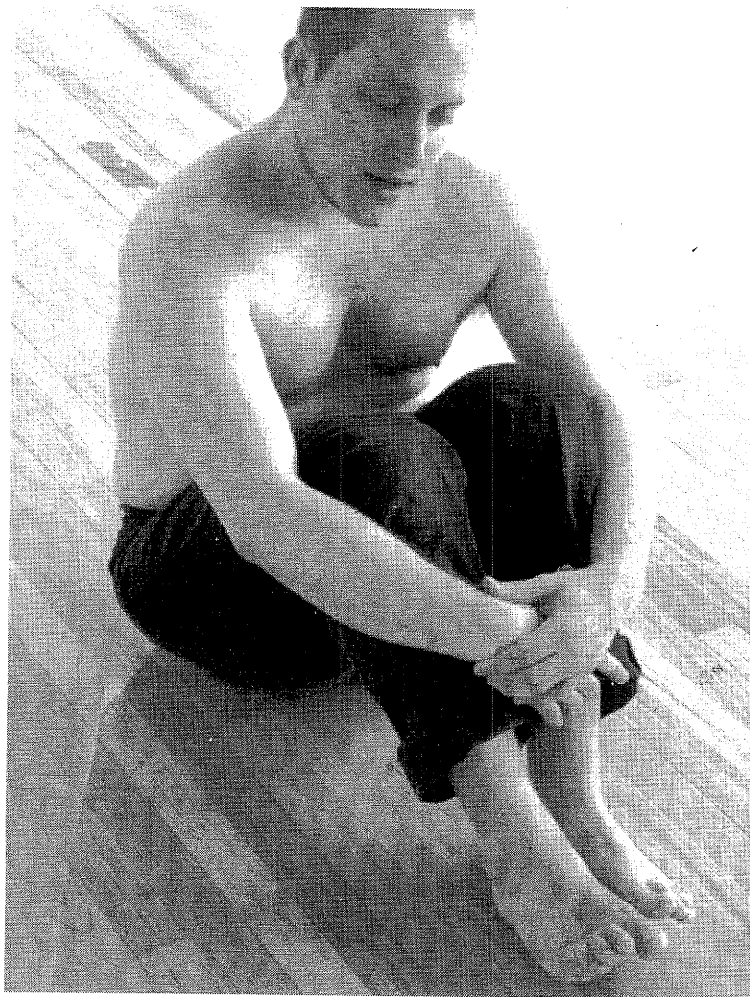
URT's methodical and rigorous investigation into song as a vehicle for purposes beyond the demonstration of pure virtuosity seems to lie at a pole diametrically opposed to the typical use of song in theater. While Broadway and regional playhouses may produce box-office successes, they have failed miserably at sustaining a culture of meaningful artistic investigation. Add to this the fact that in colleges and theater departments across the country faculties choose to emulate the failing modalities of the theater industry in lieu of cultivating a new generation of theatrical innovators and it becomes easy to despair for American theater as an art-form. It is against these trends and against that very pessimism that the work of Ben Spatz and Urban Research Theater asserts itself. Theirs is a mission, not to transmit the known, but to embrace a set of known principles in search of the new; not to describe a form, but to fulfill authentic technique. Their exploration of song as psycho-physical action, incorporates traditional acting techniques and improvisatory movement, but elevates those tools into mechanisms that pierce the quotidian.

This very active and living investigation into performance practice leads URT to the verge of something quite new. Any attempt at categorizing the "Another City" project from 2007, at least according to established genres of non-traditional theater (street theater, devised theater, invisible theater, theater of place, ecological theater), however applicable, inevitably fail to capture the totality of the event. Likewise, the totality of Spatz the performer evades easy categorization. Part soloist, part ensemble member, part auteur, part autodidact, part teacher, part student; his role as leader of and co-participant in Urban Research Theater transitions fluidly to meet the demands of each discrete project, from moment to moment, always in service of understanding, embracing and celebrating the total human being, whether in himself or in others. As Spatz himself discusses, not every purpose can – nor should – be labeled in the name of process. The words in this interview that Spatz has chosen to represent himself and the nature of his work with careful accuracy, apply the nomenclature of performance craft to what I perceive as a

fundamentally spiritual endeavor, the search for a meeting between individuals that is rare in art, of a performance that unfetters the spectator's perception, and reveals that which surpasses description.

While he might hesitate to name it thus, I would posit that the methodology he employs enables him to represent for a group of witnesses the performance of his own soul.

The work that URT brings to fruition now in a series of invited showings taking place from 2008 to 2009 may be understood as the culmination of several prior years of investigation, and at the same time as the beginning of a new phase of research, one in which the spectator's presence is, at last, essential. How many other artists are working in this way? If they are pursuing as ascetic a practice as URT in the frantic density of New York City, it may be impossible to ever know. Besides, Spatz goes on record here as feeling more kinship with yoga and the martial arts than with the vast majority of theaters. While I suppose that all forms of performance have the potential to embody the active spiritual search of the performer, I have encountered few individuals or companies whose work manifests this quality so palpably as that of Urban Research Theater.



Ben Spatz

Changing the Space

An Interview with Ben Spatz of Urban Research Theater
by Lane Pianta

Part One

LANE PIANTA (LP): Ben, you lived in Poland from 2003 to 2005. Can you tell me about the projects you worked on in NYC before going to Poland?

BEN SPATZ (SPATZ): When I first came to NYC, I worked on a number of shows in various technical and other capacities. With Ruth Wikler on *The Circus of Vices and Virtues* and with Yelena Gluzman on *I'm So Sorry for Everything!*, for example. I also worked for a couple months with Brad Krumholz and Tannis Kowalchuk of North American Cultural Laboratory. After that, I began to make pieces of my own. These were what I called "unscripted." Essentially they were structured improvisations. I was unwilling at that time to set a script, or to determine precisely what would take place. I was looking for a certain quality of realness – that it be alive every time. I could not accept the idea of setting the text or anything else. So it was invented every night, with very uneven results: sometimes fantastic, sometimes boring, sometimes fantastic when no one was there to see it. And sometimes with the actors floundering around not knowing what to do.

The first piece of this kind, called *neverland* (at ABC-No Rio in 2002), was based on combining the characters from *Peter Pan* with a short story about amateur terrorists – "Elegy for a Freelance" by Angela Carter. This piece managed to be successful despite its lack of structure, because of the quality of the performers and the sheer energy that we poured into it. The second piece, called *the desert* (at ABC-No Rio and HERE Arts Center in 2003) was also fully improvised but less successful. The actors struggled with the lack of structure, yet I still refused to set the text. I resisted the idea of using improvisation and then playwrighting to devise a play and then perform that play. I simply could not accept that as a way to produce a more structured product, even though I knew that structure was crucially lacking in these works. Again, I wanted this quality of *realness* that seemed to me impossible to keep once a narrative text was set.

That's when I began to look for where, who to train with, how to get some more training and figure out what it was that could set. I was asking: is there a way to set text that would not kill the realness? Or can something other than text be set? I also did not want to set choreography and movement. I looked at some possibilities for training or apprenticeship in the United States, but they were not satisfying, or they didn't have an opening for the kind of apprenticeship I wanted. I ended up going to Poland to find these answers.

LP: *What was your experience in Poland? What did you do there?*

SPATZ: At first I went and apprenticed with the Gardzienice Theatre Company, near Lublin. I joined their academy of students, and I also joined the ensemble as a performer. I was with them for eight months. I toured with them and performed in the ensemble in two of their pieces. Then I received a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct my own research at the Grotowski Institute (then called the Grotowski Centre) in Wrocław, Poland. There I was able to work with a number of amazing artists who came through that institution during the year, all of them connected in some way to Grotowski. I also led a six-month research project in Wrocław, called *Badawczy Teatr Miejski* or "Urban Research Theater."

I did workshops with two of Grotowski's former actors during that year: Rena Mirecka and Zygmunt Molik. I also participated in Eugenio Barba's International School of Theatre Anthropology. Peter Brook came and I got to work with two of his actors. I did a two-week workshop with *Song of the Goat* Theater. I saw the performances of Theater Zar several times. Finally I went to Moscow for a three-week session with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. All of this was like a trajectory for me. Gardzienice was a very important eight-month-long starting point, and then I passed through these smaller workshops with other people, until finally that three-week encounter with the Workcenter at the end. When that finished, I came back to the United States. Everything had been turned on its head. I started from scratch.

LP: *Why the name "Urban Research Theater"?*

SPATZ: While I was with Gardzienice, I was always thinking about what I would do when I returned to NYC. I was very interested in Gardzienice's history of "expeditions": going to small villages in order to both research and present their theatrical performances, and to give them a life in a setting where communal song and communal festivity were still alive and not uncommon. "Urban animal" was a phrase that I was using at that time to think about human life in the built environment of a city. Almost all the theater work I had done in college was about the interface between the human being and technology. I used multimedia projections, television screens, and interactive video channels. But then I moved completely away from that. I began to care more and more singularly about the human organism and its possibilities, and its place in the city. I didn't feel a need to bring technology into the theater, since technology is all around us every day. Now I think of the relationship between the human organism and technology as analogous to the relationship between live performance work and the urban environment.

"Urban Research Theater." It means that there is a kind of research using theatrical techniques that can be conducted specifically in an urban context. It means that I am asking: what place can this kind of work find or make for itself in the city? What place does communal singing have in the city? How can these techniques be useful in the world I come from? The word "research" names a practice that is considered respectable in science and academia. However, the applicability of that concept to work in the performing arts is very significant. It's not just a question of throwing that word onto the performing arts because it's a respectable word. You can't just say that anything in the performing arts is automatically a kind of research. That's too easy. There is a specific angle on the performing arts, a specific approach to performance techniques, which can be called research in a rigorous sense. This kind of research bears the same relationship to the performing arts industry as scientific research does to technology industries.

LP: *What is the role of song and singing in Urban Research Theater?*

SPATZ: Almost all of the companies that I worked with in Europe have dedicated, long-term relationships with specific groups of songs, with song traditions. Most of these song traditions are still alive somewhere. Some of them are not. Gardzienice's current work is on reconstructed ancient Greek music, so that's not a living song tradition, but it is a very old song source. In an earlier period Gardzienice worked with Ukrainian and Polish folk songs, and on medieval chants. Teatr Zar works a lot with Georgian liturgical music, and *Song of the Goat* has worked with Bulgarian mourning songs and also with Mozart's Requiem. The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards works very extensively, and in a unique way, with African and Afro-Caribbean songs.

I was looking at those ways of working and asking a very American question: "Which songs could I work on?" Maybe the most obvious answer, especially for people familiar with Grotowski's work, would be that I should work on Jewish songs because I am Jewish. But I don't want to do that, at least not right now. One of the issues I wanted to investigate – maybe because I'm American, maybe because I'm secular, maybe because I'm Jewish – is the question of whether one can do a related work on songs that are not so old. In other words, can a research work be developed in relation to songs that don't have the weight of folk traditions? What would that work look like?

LP: *Do you mean that a contemporary song, in theory, could function as well as any other kind of song?*

SPATZ: In Poland, with that first six-month project, we worked on the beginning of the *Saint John's Passion* by Bach. We worked on a piece of

electronica by a group called Emergency Broadcast Network. We worked on an ancient Aramaic song performed by a French woman on a CD. And we worked on a beautiful melodic track taken from a Puff Daddy song. We took these four pieces and it was an experiment, asking: "What works?" It was an interesting experiment, but none of the pieces really worked in the end. The Bach was too melodically complex. The electronica was too fun and too funky. The Aramaic song worked, but it could only be performed in solo.

I was very much resisting this feeling that one has to somehow "choose" between all the incredible existing song traditions that are out there. The idea of choosing – that didn't make sense to me. In order to go deeply towards a specific song tradition, you must have some clear inner directive telling you to do so. I've never felt that way. I've never wanted to be a "song collector" like Alan Lomax. The idea of "collecting" songs gives me a bad feeling. The clear directive for me was to find something more pure, more simple, something that could not be traced to any particular source or tradition.

LP: So you began to invent your own songs.

SPATZ: Yes. With this group in Poland, we began to invent sections of songs. For example, the melody that came from the Puff Daddy song – we started by singing that melody in a hip-hop rhythm, with beat-boxing, matching the track that it came from. But slowly it moved away from that. We took out the hip-hop beat and it became like a dirge – or even like some anonymous Jewish folk song, depending on how we sang it. Also, the Bach song was completely unrecognizable by the time we were done with it. It became a complex two-part harmony with made-up vocables. That was the first time we made up syllables to put into the melody. We sat in a circle, and everyone took a piece of paper and wrote out random syllables that they liked. Then we went around the circle, and any syllable that anyone didn't like was crossed off. We were left only with the syllables that everyone could agree on, and we put those into the song.

These were a beginning attempt to invent songs that could be used in a theatrical and fully performative context. When I came back from Poland, I ended up working alone for quite a while. I felt an incredibly strong need to sing in the studio, because I had been singing the whole time in Poland. I found myself singing the songs from my group, and also Gardzienice songs and Workcenter songs and other songs from the groups I mentioned. I felt: these songs are activating something in me that's important. I need it. But I can't build my own work on these songs because they're not my songs. Even if they were directly from the Afro-Caribbean sources by themselves, without the Workcenter as intermediary, still it would not be proper to build my work on them. But especially since other theater artists have been working on these songs for so long ... clearly I can't build my work on these songs.

So I started to look for ways of tapping into the same activations that were happening in those songs. I began to look for song fragments that could activate those same things in me, and it was surprisingly not too difficult to come up with these little song-fragments that worked in this way. They just seemed to be in the air with me, in the studio. I didn't feel that I was composing them. I never sat down and recorded them, and I never really wrote them down either. I was looking for the most organic process of song generation. This is how I imagine most folk traditions to have originated. You just have some people, and they're doing something, and someone starts to make up a song. And if it's a good song then everyone will pick it up, and it might even be returned to on another day.

LP: Can you elaborate on what is being "activated" by these songs?

SPATZ: The act of singing involves many aspects. I've never formally enumerated them, and I don't want to do so formally, but of course you can talk about the melody, the formal rhythm, the tempo, the overall pitch or key, the syllables and articulations. And then the many subtle kinds of dynamic and rhythmic shifts that produce the emphasis of the different parts, which is almost proto-verbal. These are some of the ways you can talk about singing in technical terms. And then you can also talk about the quality with which it's being sung, which is extremely important, and which, as Grotowski pointed out, can't be written down.

LP: By quality do you mean tonal quality?

SPATZ: The quality of the resonance, the type of vibrations and where they're coming from in the body. And something like the "depth of engagement" with the song, the actual depth from which the song originates within the body. What is it that's activated? It's a very good question. What is it that *can* be activated? Because to produce the sound, you have to activate the body. The making of the sound is the making of vibrations in and with the body. And then, the musicality of the song immediately begins to have some kind of meaning.

Let's say you start to sing a song, you make up a song, and it has a certain kind of rhythm. Immediately it has some kind of way of being. It does something to the space. Immediately you know that this song is fun and could be sung at a party, whereas another song is more personal and you wouldn't necessarily want to sing it at a party. Immediately you know that there are songs that can give you energy, that can energize you in a general way. And there are other songs that you probably shouldn't even try to sing unless you already have a lot of energy to work with, because they require a more subtle touch. So these kinds

of meanings are immediately present in the song, in the technical details of the song.

What I've found is that, when you make up a fragment, those kinds of meanings, those things that are activated, they just come with it, they're right there for you. It's no problem. The difficulty is in keeping the song alive over time and in returning to it later. And then in figuring out how it can not only activate those same parts again but also, in time, go much deeper. So, the initial meanings that come up – like, "oh, this is a fun song for a party" – you can go much deeper than that over time. It's not that it stops being fun, but the fun becomes deeper and richer. It's deeper in you, it's a deeper way of producing the song that happens over time, so that what was initially, "oh, this song is fun" can become a song that's so powerful that you can – I want to say: you can bring that particular and precise moment or action of "fun" into any room with that song.

LP: Which comes first? Is it the feeling of something that needs expression through song, or is it somehow being receptive to whatever song is available to you and then just listening to what that song represents, or what that song embodies, or what emotional resonance the song already carries?

SPATZ: I don't think I have ever started from a specific meaning and intentionally tried to incarnate it in a song. The problem with that is, in my way of working, the technical rigor associated with the songs is very important. The meaning, the territory of meaning, is also very important to us, but we don't talk about it in technical terms. That's why I took the example of fun. Even the word "sad" I would shy away from. Because it's never that simple. I never approach it in that way. So, when a meaning arrives, it's not necessary that it's less specific, but it's less articulable. It may be less specific. It's the *song* that arrives in a way that can be captured, and then can lead back towards a meaning. We don't usually speak in a technical way about the meaning side of the equation. It's the technical side that we try to capture and repeat, at least in the beginning.

LP: Do you consider yourself a songwriter?

SPATZ: No. To be a songwriter or a composer means that you make songs. I don't really make songs in that sense. That's why I call them "song fragments." They're not really songs. Some of the songs that I'm singing are so simple – it would make no sense for someone else to say, "I'm going to sing that song." It's just a few notes. If you just take the melody – it disappears. It evaporates. One of my songs is just five notes, or even just four notes in repetition. The melody is so simple. There is nothing there, unless you are going to follow the more delicate aspects of the singing. So maybe each of the four notes has a

specific vibratory quality, and a rhythmic quality that is inside the overall rhythm of the song. And maybe it's also linked to a very small line of actions. But then you are really talking about the act of singing and not what we usually call a "song." The word "song" doesn't usually include all of that. It could, but if it does – if "song" includes "action" – then it isn't something you can write or compose. It has to be developed or discovered or brought forth in a different way. Not what I would call composition.

LP: The songs you create are not sung in English – they're not sung in any known language. I will not call them gibberish because that suggests that the words that are chosen have no meaning. I'll call it an invented language. Can you talk about that? What is the source of this invented language that you use?

SPATZ: The groups that I mentioned in the beginning – they're all working on songs that are not in their language. And they don't make an effort to learn the meaning of the words. It's not like in opera, where you learn the meaning and the story behind the words even if they are in Italian or German. In the groups I'm describing, it seems that they purposefully avoid focusing on the linguistic meaning of the words. I find this very significant because what it does is point away from the discursive content towards the embodied or "non-lexical" content of the vocables.

Our songs have precision at the level of articulation and syllables. The way that this is arrived at is the same as with the rhythms and melodies. It's a process that at the shallow end is simply "making stuff up" and at the deep end is the arrival of a technical element linked to a territory of meaning. So the fact that there are no words is the same as the fact that we are inventing the melodies. I'm simply trying to avoid putting in any misleading discursive content that could lead the performers or the witnesses away from the immediacy of what is taking place. I don't want to be looking outside the room for the meaning of the event. So for that reason it should be nonsense – it should be just a tune that I made up – so that it's clear that whatever happens is not the result of any external or referential content. If anything is going to happen, it's just because of whatever is inside the room with us. It's just because a human being is present.

Part Two

LP: Talk about how this work operates when it's occurring in tandem with another performer. And generally what that experience has been like, of bringing in another performer into this process that you yourself are discovering.

SPATZ: I've been working with a woman named Michele Farbman, who did not have a performance background prior to working with me. We started

working together less than two years ago, and for much of that time I have been giving her basically a very intensive introduction to what I know of movement, song, and acting techniques. The reason I'm working with someone who did not have a performance background, rather than someone who already was a singer or an actor, is that Michele happens to have a very unique background in a non-performative spiritual technique. This gives her a perspective from which it makes sense to work in an extremely long-term way. She has wanted to meet regularly, at least four times per week and throughout the whole year, but with no production frame. Simply meeting and developing our techniques towards the greatest possible depth. I haven't found anyone in the performing arts world who wants to work in this way. So Michele has been an extraordinary partner. I can't conceive of what would have happened or what I would be doing without her.

Early on, we passed through a period in which I introduced her to a number of movement techniques, to awareness of the body and my approach to movement. To embodied activity and play. And we were able, after months of work, almost a year of work maybe, to find a certain kind of contact in the physical work. It was a contact that could include our challenging each other in athletic ways, but it could also include more subtle interactions. Then we passed through another period in which we returned to the songs we had been singing together in the beginning and began to look for that same kind of contact in the singing. This is very different, partly because the songs in our work are set rigorously, whereas the movement is very open. But also, I think, because of the fundamental differences between singing and movement.

Acting techniques are yet another domain. In fact, this whole working process, I understand it as a question about the relationship between song techniques and movement techniques and acting techniques. When I talk about acting techniques, I mean "internal" acting techniques. That is: associations, imagery, relationship. I don't mean physical acting techniques such as clowning or commedia – anything where the emotions are indicated through a form. I am talking about acting techniques where real things are contacted somehow in the person, and it can't be predicted exactly how they will manifest in the body. So we can set what the person is thinking about, we can have them put their attention towards something that interests or is significant for them. That is what I would call an "internal" or "acting" technique. And then on the other hand, there are song and movement techniques, which are external. In other words, they can be very precisely regulated on an external visual or auditory level. So, investigating the relation between external techniques and internal techniques is where we're at now. And this means that when we work together, we're looking for something that is not only "singing well" together, and not only a playful contact as we've had in the physical work, but which can also involve acting techniques.

The question of how to work on that in a partnership is very open right now. In my experience, this kind of contact is usually monitored by an outsider, by an "outside eye." When we are doing individual work, one person is sometimes able to go quite deep into something because the outside eye is holding the space. The question now is how the two of us can go into something like that together, without an outside eye. That's a current question for me.

LP: *You've talked a little bit about this work and its effect on the performer, and you're beginning to talk a little bit about the song and its effect on the space. These are ideas that connect to the Objective Drama and later work of Grotowski. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what you are looking for in terms of the song's impact on the space?*

SPATZ: At this moment, I wouldn't distinguish between the person and the space, the performer and the space. When I say that the song affects the space or affects the person ... let me try to give an example. We all know how it is when you're having a conversation with someone on a relatively mundane topic, and then one person says, "Oh, and what about X?" – and suddenly the other person changes, and the whole moment and the whole space changes, because X is more serious. Or because X is so exciting that the person becomes enthusiastic and the air becomes electric. Something has been pointed to using words, and that something arrives and changes the people and the space. The moment suddenly becomes somber, or nervous, or enthusiastic, because of the meaning of the thing that has been pointed to. That thing is not physically in the room, but suddenly it is in the room, in a way, because it's part of the people who are in the room. And the rhythm changes, the rhythm of the people and – you could even say – the rhythm of the space. Of the moment.

That's what I mean by changing the space. It's not something compositional, like changing the arrangement of the furniture. The people in the room make the atmosphere, the human atmosphere. Its rhythm or its energy, so to speak. So, what I am talking about is a process in which you develop a structure that is made of songs, and each of the songs functions in the way I just described. Each song points toward a specific territory of meaning. So you have a line of songs, and each song – or each part of each song – directs the focus and the attention of the singers. The song says: "Focus on this aspect of your life for a moment. Work on this project. Work in relation to this thing, or to this part of yourself." Then, as you pass through the songs, you are passing through parts of yourself, different aspects of your consciousness. You are putting your attention on different aspects of your life. And the space manifestly changes – if you in fact pass through those territories of meaning.

LP: *Describe the "Another City" project.*

SPATZ: "Another City" is the name of a particular kind of work session. I originally envisioned a work-session of five days, or even seven days, that would be designed like an Outward Bound program for urban singing. The participants would spend all day with me from dawn until dusk, sunrise to sunset, and we would spend some of that time in the studio and some of it out in various parts of the city. In this way, the participants could experience a change in their relationship to the city. A kind of ecological change. Because they would be spending all their time during the day working on embodied contact, on singing, on listening to the human voice, on group perceptivity, and on the kind of searching-for-meaning that I've been describing. And we would live this process for about a week. It's a kind of para-theater.

I also related this idea to vegetable co-ops that bring organic food into the city, and to rooftop gardening, and to urban bicycling projects – and also to martial arts studios, yoga studios, and dance studios. All of these are places where people are asking: What kind of ecologies – food ecologies or body ecologies – or in my case perhaps ecologies of song – what kind of *human* ecologies can we have in the city? In a city which currently is so dominated by cars, by recorded music and video screens, printed imagery, and buildings. What kind of place can we find for these other things, which are also part of human experience – such as people singing together in a group, people walking, people not being inside buildings all the time ... I envisioned that the presence of our small group, in the "Another City" workshop, could somehow alter urban space – even just slightly – by having a different relationship to it. So we are looking for a different way to *be* in the city. Like a rooftop garden, but through embodied action rather than through actual landscaping.

In the city we are living on top of and inside a very recent crust of urban technology. This is not to say that urban technology is bad, or that there's something perfect underneath it at all, but simply to say: Let's not forget what is underneath this urban crust. Who are we? Are we still animals? Do we still have a use for communal song in this era?

LP: *In the literature for "Another City," it says: "to discover another city, another self."*

SPATZ: Yes. To discover – or rediscover – the city as it is ecologically. Because we don't live in that perception of the city. We live inside a lot of illusions and falsehoods about the city. By which I only mean that the city as it stands is completely unsustainable – in terms of the amount of garbage that it exports, for example. And we don't navigate the city, on a daily basis, in a way that acknowledges that profound unsustainability. We don't think about the city as a wild, irresponsible, kind of adolescent escapade. Just think: To build these ridiculously unsustainable cities, to produce thousands of tons of plastic, and just throw it out and put it in a big hole. It's this wild party that we're throwing,

and we sort of know it is going to collapse and become impossible to maintain. But we can't admit it to ourselves. We don't act like: "This is so wild, oh my god! I have indoor plumbing on the fourth floor! That's certainly not going to last, so I'd better enjoy it for now!" We act as if the city is sustainable, and as if the whole system that built it is sustainable.

So the "other city," for me, is the city where you stop and you say: "Wait! From the perspective of the ecology of the planet, which is the ecosystem in which the human organism evolved – what is this thing that we're in? Who built this? Why did they build it like that? What is this material? Will this building still be here in 200 years? Will it be functional? Or will it be totally derelict, and everyone is gone? Or will it have been knocked down to make a new building, in which case where did all the trash go?" What could it mean to look from the place of the organism – to be in the city the way a dog or a cat, or a rat or a roach, is in the city. What is all this stuff? What is this Coke can? What is this piece of metal? What does it smell like? Who made it and where is it going?

LP: *And what is so sublime about the "Another City" events, at the same time, is that while the stated purpose is to impact the participants, the doers – by the doers going forth and engaging in the performance structure, they are observed by hundreds of onlookers who had no expectation of witnessing a performance. While they're on their way to work, or while they're sitting at a restaurant, or while they're waiting for a cab. And yet, from the look on their faces it's very evident that they themselves are having a 'changed' moment. So while the emphasis is the effect on the doers, there is also an empathetic factor. There is the fact that it reaches out to these strangers and perhaps gives them pause about the assumptions they had, about what they were seeing, about the city that they occupy at that moment.*

SPATZ: If it works that way, then that's exactly what I meant about changing a space by changing the people in it. Like when I say: "What about X?" – and it affects you in a certain way, and I didn't know it was going to affect you in that way, but suddenly the whole space is different and I feel that. If you become serious when I mention X, then I become serious too. I follow you. I think: "Oh, that was serious." And maybe also: "I didn't mean to bring up something so serious!" So the question is – it's an open question – how to bring people into the "other city," that is the actual city, the city as it is, as this bizarre and particular landscape that has been created by human beings over the past few hundred years. How to accomplish this shift?

In "Another City," we exercise a lot of restraint in the outdoor work. I don't want to create a street performance that tries to change the space in an aggressive or invasive way. I am very sensitive to this. I don't like the feeling that street performers are attempting to change the space without changing themselves. Trying to change others through volume and intensity. That isn't my way. It doesn't feel sustainable, and sustainability is the key for me. Not to

do something crazy once, but to really discover and open a different possibility. Not to declare that there ought to be another relation to the city, but really to find that relation, in practice. Otherwise it is just a performance, not a real event. The space is not really changed. So from my perspective, there's no need to think about who you are performing for, who will see your work. It's rather: What is your way of being in the city?

That's why it is a research. Because you are not making noise about what you want but actually looking for the way to get what you need without disturbing others. It takes time. You have to try out different things and discover what meaning is brought along by each possible technique. So it isn't an indication of freedom, but an actual search for freedom.

Part Three

LP: *We've talked a little bit about how the effect on the doer doesn't have to be the same as the effect on the spectator. Is that accurate by your sights?*

SPATZ: I'm not sure what that means. In a certain sense, it couldn't possibly be the same. The song is not a machine that "does" something to you. It's more like, as I said before, a conversation in which the song reminds you to approach a certain meaning or a certain task. Clearly this meaning or task won't be the same for people in the audience, or even for your partner in the work. No one else will be having exactly the same task or the same association.

Could the audience understand something completely different from what the performer understands? I suppose they could. Of course the audience always invents their own stories and associations. But for me, that isn't really the point. Because, let's say there is a moment in a song that evokes in me – and I intentionally have it evoke in me – a specific memory. This is very important: That memory is *not* the content of the work. The content of the work is what *happens* in me as a result of the memory, of having that memory called up or referred to. Another time I might use a different memory. Or the same memory might have a different affect on me. The event in me is what alters the space and what can be shared – as a single event – with the witnesses. Not the image in my mind. Someone could guess what that image is, but it doesn't matter to me whether they get it right.

The song and the association work together to *activate* some part of the person. Now, what is that part of the person? It can't be named. The only way we could name it is by naming technically the elements of the song. We could also maybe name technically the elements of the association. But we can't really name the "territory of meaning" in the person – the thing that is being called through those technical elements. But *that* unnamable thing is the content of the work.

So, I'm not trying to communicate to anyone else the content of my association. That is irrelevant. That is private. It's rather that I'm using that association, in connection with the song, to bring forth or to work on, or to call up some part of myself – and that part of me is the content. So there is no intended "effect" on the audience, except that they are present to that part of me. It's neither more nor less than a witnessing of the person. Some part or fullness of the person is revealed that is not usually shown.

LP: *Is the experience of sharing that song or that aspect of yourself with witnesses fundamentally different than practicing alone in the studio?*

SPATZ: It is. It's hugely different. And so we have a real question: When do we show this, and to whom, and in what way? This is not a rhetorical question, it is a re-asking of the basic theatrical premise. Let's say you're doing this as an embodied practice, as a practice to contact those aspects – but there's another aspect, which is mysterious: You want to contact these parts of yourself, but not just for yourself. You also want to share them. It's a paradox. It's part of the mystery of being human. Because without other people we are nothing, and yet as soon as someone else is present, we are limited and not fully ourselves. Our possibilities are closed off. So we're always looking for privacy in order to rediscover the vastness of ourselves – but then, at a certain moment, that vastness becomes meaningless if it is not shared.

And so, to do alone is one thing. To do alone – it must be that you need to go through these places in yourself, and you simply use the tools right then to do it. And that would be a very full doing, I would think – if there were no thought to an audience at all, and you are just alone, doing it out of the need to do. And the paradox is that this is the doing everyone wants to see – the private doing – but they can't see it because you won't do it unless you are alone. For this reason we develop a sharing with a partner over a long term, where you develop intimacy and trust and so maybe you can approach that fullness of doing that you would have alone also when you are with this other person. And if you can do that, then maybe together you can find a kind of safety and support so that you could together go towards this fullness to a greater or lesser degree even when you invite some other people to come and sit and watch. I think this would be a very special kind of sharing. Not the same as what we usually call theater.

LP: *For someone who may be reading this conversation and feels inspired by what you are describing – what quality is most important for them to possess? What quality should they work on first, before the other qualities can fully arrive?*

SPATZ: I don't think I can answer that question. All I can do is put a piece of language out there, and I can't possibly know what language will activate another person who I haven't even met. Perhaps I could answer it just for

myself. I could ask: "What is the quality that I am looking for most directly?" And for me the word *honesty* would have a lot of power here. Honesty in terms of: What are my actual desires? What do I want to do, why do I do anything at all? Why go into a studio space when nobody else cares and sing? Why organize a workshop? And also, honesty in terms of: What am I doing? What am I actually doing? I don't want to be saying that I'm doing more than I'm doing. But I also don't want to be saying that I'm doing less than I'm doing. I want to find a way to be *honest* about what I am doing.

In the singing work, it is also very often about honesty. Being honest about where you are as you are singing, and not trying to pretend that you are where you were last time. And also: knowing what the structure is and engaging with it honestly. So both in the larger picture and in the smaller picture, it's a search for honesty. Or you might say, integrity. It's a recognition and acceptance of reality – which means that you are both lesser and greater, in different ways, than you think you are. And to get through those illusions is just work. So there is a circle of language: How do you get to honesty? You work. What is work? It's when you engage in a process that makes you honest. So the words *work* and *honesty* orbit around each other. But I wouldn't prescribe these words for others. These words are in orbit around me. With another person I would ask a different question.

LP: *Is it fair to say that honesty is the quality you look for in yourself first and foremost?*

SPATZ: In this moment that seems fair. I wouldn't want to bind myself to a certain word, labeling it as the thing I look for in myself. But I would say that this move away from theatre towards something that employs theatrical techniques, where I'm using theatrical techniques but I'm not making any theater per se – that for me is about honesty. It's about what those techniques were for me, what I believe they're capable of, what they can do, what can be done with them, what I believe is valuable, what their place is going to be in my life. That's about honesty. It's about tracing a continuous line between the inner and the outer. Finding my place in the world.

LP: *What is on the horizon for Urban Research Theater at the end of 2008 and going into 2009?*

SPATZ: We are still developing our craft and our practice. We intend to have a series of showings in the coming year, perhaps just one showing each month for a year or longer. Each time inviting a small number of people. In order to find out, at the current level of what we do: Is this work visible? Is it useful to people? Is it interesting to watch? Does the work invite people and do people want to watch this? Usually people don't want to go and just watch a yoga class. And you certainly wouldn't invite ten people to watch a yoga class. Unless there

was a visiting master, someone who had been doing yoga for many years. What we do is more theatrical than yoga, more theatrical than a meditation or even a martial art. At the same time, it is less theatrical than theatre. So it's a question of finding the proper framing for it and finding the right people who want to see it for what it is.

My sense is that there are many people in the performing arts who would like to have more time for research on craft – more time for exploration – more time for what's sometimes called workshoping or devising. A slower, more patient process. And they don't have to go and be fanatic about it, the way I am now. They don't have to exit the entire frame of production in order to find something useful or helpful in what we are doing. I suppose there is a kind of *permission* that I want to give. I want to say: "You people who are doing dance and theater – this already is your practice. You already can think of it as your long-term practice. You can give yourself permission to approach it in that way." You don't need permission to do slower, process-focused work. You don't need a production timeline in order to begin a research process. You don't have to do things so fast necessarily, or be so concerned with showing results within a predetermined time frame. Maybe you can let go of some of that, and find a more honest and more patient work.

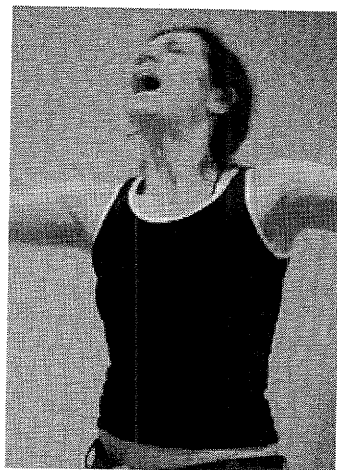
I perceive a lot of rushing – especially in New York – a feeling that things must be done fast. If you are going to workshop something, you should do it as fast as possible – and you have to justify your research periods as soon as possible with a production to show the "results." I have the sense that a lot of people would like to slow it down. To slow down the process of working – and maybe also the process of living. And just to be able to think of one's work as a continuous work rather than a series of discrete, disposable productions. But at the same time, people seem very nervous about the prospect of slowing down. There is so much pressure from external sources – from the theatre industry and from the grant-makers. So it's like: "Well, if I make a slow project, how will I find people to work on it with me? Who is going to be willing to make that kind of commitment?" The dance community seems to be much further along than the theatre community in this regard.

I'd like my work to be a weight on one end of that scale. And this is what I have found in my amazing partner, Michele. She doesn't have that same sense of being in a hurry, because she doesn't come out of a performing arts background. She comes out of a background of serious yogic practice. Not a physical yoga, but an internal yoga – in which, she has said, it is understood that maybe you'll start to see some visible results from the practice after ten or fifteen years. And of course, in that context there is no such thing as "putting on a show." I want to take my own theatrical techniques all the way in that direction, because that's where I need them to function for myself. I've left the

theatre in a certain sense, and I'm looking to reconnect with the origins of performance as embodied practice. And maybe that can be useful for other people, too. Maybe I can offer the possibility of a kind of relaxation. Not relaxation in terms of quality, but in the realization that quality does not have to depend on putting on a show. There are reasons to be disciplined and to push for higher and higher levels of ability that have nothing to do with putting together a performance for an audience.

I'm not saying that everyone should work more patiently or pay more attention to these "other reasons." I'm just following a hunger and a need in myself. Of course it's perfectly valid to make quick work. I'm really just proposing that it's *possible* to work more patiently. It's *possible* to have a slower process. It's *possible* to go more deeply into the techniques that you already have. It's not your obligation as a performer to learn more techniques, or to stack up more productions on your resume. Everything you have is already enough to begin the sustainable practice that you want your life to be.

LP: Thank you.



Michele Farberman

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