

SEEKING RELEASE FROM THE ARMOUR OF DYSTONIA
AS THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN
IN SUZAN-LORI PARKS' *VENUS*

SOO GARAY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THEATRE
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

April 2015

© Soo Garay 2015

Abstract

With this thesis I have embarked on the journey to seek release from the armour of dystonia and patiently rebirth my inner artist through playing the role of The Mother-Showman in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*. I set out to rediscover an uninhibited channel of expression and melt my more recent protective nature through physical and vocal practice gained from my training with master teachers David Smukler and Erika Batdorf. I have also drawn from my twenty-five years of experience as a professional actor. In my documented scholarly research I reconnected with the artistic journeys of others to release my own focus with confidence. I believe that I was mostly successful in the artistic challenge I set out for myself as an actor. The labour disruption that occurred during the scheduled rehearsal and performance dates of *Venus* affected the flow of my process immensely, but with surprisingly positive results.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Jozefin Emilia Johnson, my daughter.
She is teaching me how to live again.

*There was an old woman tossed up in a basket,
Seventeen times as high as the moon;
Where she was going I couldn't but ask it,
For in her hand she carried a broom.
Old woman, old woman, old woman, quoth I,
Where are you going up so high?
To brush the cobwebs off the sky!
May I go with you?
Aye, by-and-by.*

Acknowledgements

To Michael Louis Johnson, my strength, my love, and my joy.

To Valerie Garay, my mother, who taught me to never give up.

To my professors Mark Wilson, David Smukler, Melee Hutton, Erika Batdorf, Michael Greyeyes, Paul Lampert, and Gwen Dobie, who all birthed me into the world of academia mentally, physically, and emotionally, and taught me how to express and believe in my knowledge.

To Neil Silcox, for being a computer wizard.

To Nicky Guadagni, Corey Turner, Jamie Robinson, Bruce Beaton, Ed Roy, Kelly Hogan, Isabelle Palmer, Eva Moon, Mary Foxley, Kimberly Mercer, and Bruce Millerd: My friends and neighbors who were there for me when I needed help balancing motherhood with the demands of an MFA.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Thesis Introduction	1
Artistic Challenge Research	3
Character and Play Research	15
Rehearsal Plan	25
Conclusion	37
Works Cited	37
Appendix A: Selected Journal Entries	39
Appendix B: Script Sample	51

Thesis Introduction

I have been diagnosed with cervical dystonia, a tremor in my neck. The medical profession says I can't get rid of it. Since I have been dealing with this physical disorder, I have burrowed so deep inside myself that my passion for the craft of acting has almost been extinguished. My artistic challenge is to seek release from the armour of dystonia and to patiently rebirth my inner artist through the role of The Mother-Showman in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*.

This challenge is important as I continue on my path as an actor and embark into the role of instructor. If I cannot be all of who I am, and work and teach from a true uninhibited place, then how can I continue to be a true contributor to the craft that has been my life-long profession? My choice to suppress my creative nature has caused so much tension and lockage in my body that my physical disorder is seeping further and further into my brain, feeding insecurity and panic. The birth of my daughter, Jozefin Emilia Johnson, is a large contributing factor as to why I must embark on this challenge now. How can I raise her to be a truly confident, creative and expressive human being if I am not doing the same?

To approach and address this challenge I will be incorporating my summer research as well as the acting, movement, voice, and text classwork I received through my training in the MFA program. I will also draw on the discoveries I made as a teaching assistant in the first-year courses in introductory acting at York University.

My practical research has been in vocal and physical exploration, working through muscular dynamics, spinal undulations, Linklater exercises, Yoga, blood/breath/gravity connection, and organic release. To guide me through the vocal practice I have read *Freeing The Natural Voice* and *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*, both books by Kristin Linklater. I have reacquainted myself

with the artistic journeys of Athol Fugard, David Mamet, Peter Brook, and Keith Johnstone. I have examined other works written by Suzan-Lori Parks, in particular her novel *Getting Mother's Body*, and the plays *365 Plays/365 Days* and *Topdog/Underdog*. In further research I have delved into classical Hungarian text suggested to me by my father, whom I went to visit in Budapest in April of 2014. This journey was taken to dive deeper into my heritage, a dormant territory of my soul. I have read the novel *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn to research the psychology of people with physical deformity and disorder, and *Women Who Run With The Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes to research the Wild Woman archetype. Other research includes many articles and books on eighteenth-century England, with the main focus on Piccadilly Circus and sideshow freaks.

My intention with this research and the path I have drawn for myself is to rediscover an uninhibited channel of expression. I hope to let my energy flow freely and to move my dystonia from a primary cause of disorder to a secondary concern. I can no longer remain dormant. I can no longer hide behind my role as mother and housewife as I have these last six years. I played this role very well, but that's the point: I "played" the role. I limited myself to this solitary experience because I believed that I was not capable of anything else. I love being a mom and a wife, but I need to let myself experience the freedom and joy of every moment fully instead of hiding behind my insecurities and misgivings. I need to incorporate my domestic role with the love of my craft and my need to be working in it. This is what makes me whole.

I hope to release my prejudice against my own "freakish" self and celebrate my entirety. As I work on *The Mother-Showman*, I will strive to inhabit the role to the point that the role disappears and my inner artist, all of who I am, is present on the stage.

Artistic Challenge Research

My artistic challenge as an actor is to release my body from the armour of cervical dystonia, or spasmodic torticollis. The fact is I have a tremor in my neck. This could be hereditary, or from an accident or trauma. I've been like this for fifteen years. The medical profession says I can't get rid of it and it's not my fault. I don't believe them; I don't believe that I am disabled. I must accept or overcome this diagnosis.

My twenty-five-year career as an actor has been shut down around me and inside me like a wild horse captured from freedom and confined to a stall on a gentleman's farm. I need to reawaken the living, breathing artist inside me who had things to discover, explore, and share. I have burrowed so deep inside myself that the passion for my craft has almost been extinguished. The anger at my situation, which I have been denying, has grown into a nervous, tense energy that I can't control. My confidence, which was never great to begin with, has withered like a flower in the desert during a drought. I must find rain. I could probably use a bit of humour as well.

My goal in coming to York was to expand my horizons: to take what I know, to learn from academia, and to marry the two into an expanded profession as an acting coach or teacher. I would also like to continue to work as an actor in the professional stream in which I was established before I began to deal with this problem. I learned quite a lot about integrity, patience, and clarifying my thoughts during my training in the Graduate Program. I have reopened the vibrations in my body. As I continue my process through The Mother-Showman in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* I hope to release my anger and allow myself the freedom to celebrate my craft.

The problems created by this challenge became clear when investigated through reawakened vibrations. I have found that I need to let go of many things. I strive to let go of my anger, to let go of my determination to always be perfect, and to live life for each precious moment. I strive to let go of the never-ending competition within myself to appear physically normal in any given circumstance. I need to accept the state of my body in order to calm my nervous system instead of hiding my tremor by creating more tension.

Physically, my desire has been to bring my body into a state of relaxation and not be preoccupied about my condition. My focus has been to bring movement into my deep muscles while in turn releasing my larger superficial muscles from needless work and tension. My sternocleidomastoid and my trapezius (the larger muscles of my neck) have been in battle against my dystonia. These muscles have seized, hoping they can mask my tremor. For the same reason, I have tension in my breastbone area and a lock in my solar plexus and diaphragm. This is best described as a protective armour I have built to deal with my problem. Throughout my process, I studied techniques that work with connective tissue and the intricate layers of the spine.

I worked with practitioner Rucsandras Mitrea of the Mitrea Wellness Centre. Working with her has made me more aware of my habits and I have started to release the armour I have built. The exercises are very small and very focused. The work is based in isolations: small intricate stretches to awaken the interior muscles. The results are a lengthening and a release of pressure.

On the recommendation of David Smukler, my voice and text professor, I have worked with spinal undulations twenty times a day. As I roll up and down, I imagine my body as having an inner and outer tube: my spine being the inner tube, and my ribs, hips, and shoulder girdle being the outer tube. Neither tube can hold the other one up; they balance each other out. I imagine

the tubes as separate but always working together. This balance is enough to hold my body upright, and the imagery has helped me realize where I misuse muscles. I have a small scoliosis in my upper spine; I believe this contributes to the dystonia as well. I have been rounding and lowering my tailbone to elongate my spine while letting my hips be grounded. This way, my spine can stretch and flex back into its natural curves.

I've realized that my physical habits are rooted in my formative years as a competitive swimmer and my career as a very athletic Yoga instructor. In *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Kristin Linklater states:

“The purposes of professional swimming or serious Yoga practice demand the development of breathing control” (44).

She compares this to the actor's breath:

“The actor's breathing musculature must be able to pick up rapidly shifting thoughts and feelings: breathing control must be diverted from muscle to impulse” (44).

In other words:

“Changing the goal from muscle development to that of energy flow” (3).

In the 2014 fall term of my graduate degree I worked with movement professor Erika Batdorf. This was an enlightening experience for me. She could easily read my body and spoke in a language I could understand. She talks of finding the healthy animal of the body and letting the body move from this energy. The main dynamic of the work is awareness of blood pulsing, feeling and moving with gravity, and letting breath flow freely while working with this imagery. At first I was overly physical, I let my body do all the wonderful things it has been trained to do,

moving from my larger superficial muscles, but in time I came to a deeper connection. Erika suggested that I stop, wait and listen, that I exercise organic release from small interior muscles. This work discombobulated me: I became dizzy, I went through an array of emotions, and my eyesight literally became clearer. I found that my body went naturally into muscular dynamic action, that it would tense, then release, and then tense again. This was one of the most valuable things I learned from this studio work. How can I find a relaxed released state if there is no contrast from which to find the release?

When we moved into character bodywork (by which I mean creating a character from physical energetic impulse instead of intellectual rationale), this approach isolated my challenge. I worked from a frozen layering-on of muscular tension instead of letting the tension release itself into a living, breathing character. As a result, as I swim, practice Yoga, ride my bike, dance and play with my daughter, or walk to and from the subway, instead of moving from my athletic strength and flexibility, I am now experimenting with moving from my deep muscles and letting my breath flow freely. I believe that dystonia is a block in my energy flow. It is the war between control and impulse, athlete and artist, and deep and superficial muscles.

Dystonia has also manifested itself as a tremor in my voice. This is especially apparent when I am nervous. I have been compensating for this (or trying to mask it) by tensing my throat in hopes of gaining control. Vocally, my focus has been to find an open channel from my core and trust it through ease and breath. I have been stripping away years of hard intensity and have begun to find softness and lightness; instead of pushing I have begun to give.

In the text classes of the MFA program, David Smukler took us through much practical and intellectual theory: from understanding and speaking the King James Bible, to experiencing the

rhythm of Beat Poetry of the 1960's and noted authors and playwrights in between. Learning this process has given me new confidence. Now when I am faced with a text, I can break it down. I am not just working from my actor impulse; I can breathe freely because I have an understanding of what I am embarking on.

My vocal confidence has also grown from my teaching position. As I worked through the process of articulating my experience for young actors, guiding them to understand and explore their own physical and emotional presence, I was rewarded with a greater understanding of my own progress. These young actors really understood my teachings; they were transforming right before my eyes. This gave me confidence that what I have to offer may have some weight and integrity.

In his introduction to *Conference Of The Birds (The Story of Peter Brook in Africa)*, John Heilpern starts with this quote from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*:

'We could start all over again perhaps.'

'That should be easy.'

'You can start from anything.'

'Yes but you have to decide.'

'True' (1).

As I free myself from striving to be what I once was, letting go of the anger of knowing that I must start again and not look back longingly, each and every day is a new beginning. The images that I work with now are very different from when I was a young actor. Brook went to Africa to find a universal emotional truth, but realized after the long journey:

“The spiritual life we wanted so much to experience cannot be found in a special place, a church, a strange city, a country of secret traditions or in anything or anyone except ourselves” (Heilpern 295).

The medical profession’s answer to dystonia is to numb the nerves and muscles with drugs. Over the past fifteen years I met with many specialists. I was prescribed many calming and antidepressant drugs. I was injected with Botox in the nerves and muscles of my neck and I went through lengthy therapy sessions. The treatments masked the tremors, but did not deal with the root problem. The root of my anger is inside me; only I can reawaken my spirit. Only I can heal myself. Perhaps as I keep going deeper, I will find the root of my tremor and accept it as part of my spirit, and no longer feel it is an alien that has inhabited my body.

I have been working with the exercises from *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice (The Actor’s Guide to Talking Text)* and *Freeing the Natural Voice (Imagery and Art in the Practice of Voice and Language)*, both books by the renowned voice teacher Kristin Linklater. As I work I have discovered a disconnection between my lower and upper resonators. Between my heart and my mouth there is a locked chamber. What am I protecting? The images come out, the sense is there, but when I reach this area, I feel weak and out of control. Why do I feel the need to be in control?

In the fall term of the MFA voice class, David Smukler took us through two specific exercises: “The Battle Cry” (a piece of Shakespeare text spoken to rouse the troops to war) and “How Dare You” (a personal confrontation spoken to a specific person). The object of these exercises is to build vocal quality while keeping emotion out of the way. I had no problem with the Shakespeare text, but when it came to the personal text David observed that I was tensing in

my neck. He asked me why I was doing this. I answered that I was afraid that if I let go I would be too strong and that would not be acceptable. When speaking written text, I can be emotionally and physically open because this is a safe place where these dynamics are not only accepted, they are expected. I have years of practical experience as well as the vocal and physically training to arrive at this place. When I am myself, I hold back.

Years ago during an intense training with Anusara Yoga guru John Friend, he took one look at my neck and asked me, “What are you afraid of?” I now come to the conclusion that I am afraid of myself. When I visited my father in Budapest, part of this came clear to me: he is a man that can’t abide expressions of emotion. I believe I have spent my life suppressing my natural ability to be physically and emotionally present because I was raised to believe that it was not an acceptable way to behave. Could it be that my dystonia is a result of this suppression? Perhaps this is why I turned to acting, to have an outlet for my capacity.

Before humans could articulate what they wanted into words, there was only the impulse of sound, the need to communicate:

“When a baby is born, breath is its life. The connection of survival impulses with the baby’s breath and voice is essential to its life, and a baby’s voice communicates essential information long before words are learnt” (Linklater 5).

I have blocked my natural path of expression. I am working to patiently release my habits of muscular control while communicating vocally, and to let the sense of what I am saying carry my sound instead of labouring vigorously to make the sound just right for the emotions I feel.

From a film of Picasso at work, Brook observed:

“The tip of his brush, in one lighting stroke captures his entire imagination. The brush is his thought process. For actors there should exist no time lapse between inner and outer reaction: impulse and action are one” (Heilpern 147).

He goes on to say,

“Shed useless skin like a snake” (Heilpern 157).

Through my practical work, I am working to cut to the bone, let the bone breathe, and find the centre of impulse. As I allow my breath to open frozen areas, I am gently beginning to play. Working with imagery, color and physical sensation, I feel lighter, less tense and less worried about what I am projecting into the world.

In my scholarly research I wanted to find a way back into the artistic world, to stop hiding and release my focus out with confidence. In my first-year text class, I was able to make a true connection with classical text. In my first-year voice class, many images came up connecting me to my Hungarian roots. I melded these two together and experimented with Hungarian classical texts, challenging myself to explore deep into my soul and work with these images that ground me.

As an actor I have always questioned my worth, always strived to be better, but since I have been dealing with my physical dilemma I have become too internal. I have forgotten that my work is for an audience and my focus should be out rather than in. The practical studio work is how we get our bodies ready and open for the performance, but how do we calm our personal nerves, fears and doubts? How do we walk on stage with confidence and integrity? We need to take the attention off ourselves:

“If your objective is only to do a good performance, the feeling of failure can only cast you into an anxious state of self” (Mamet 119).

The audience comes to the theatre for an emotional journey. They are not there to watch my process but to see a living being onstage. I realized how much endless work I do just to gain the confidence to go onstage. This was apparent to me in the Shakespeare project at the end of my first year, in which I played Queen Margaret in *Richard III*. In rehearsals I spent much time trying to find my character: I brought in endless props, I played physically with being bent over and withered, I wore high heels, I pulled a suitcase behind me, I made my voice old and caught in my throat, and I covered myself in pearls and rags. These were all useful experiments and kept me busy and confident in my process and work ethic, but in the end all this was stripped away. The clarity in my work came from simply being truthful to the text and working with the objectives and actions of my character.

What perplexed me was that in the moments I was offstage, waiting for an entrance, I was horribly self-conscious, my neck tremor was uncontrollable and I could not breathe. I wanted to hide. I was afraid. The confidence I lack as an artist is in trusting my own instincts and believing that what I have to express is worthy. How can I teach young actors to be true to themselves if I am a bundle of my own self-indulgent neuroses?

When I am onstage, I am confident in the roles I play. When I have a character to play, my imagination takes over, I live in the moment and I have no fear of fighting to get what I need. What became apparent to me in my neutral mask work during my first-year was my inability to improvise, to follow an impulse and trust my instincts when relying on my own personal character. Through my second-year acting classes, as we worked with farce and layered in

character bodywork, I had the same dilemma, I could not trust myself enough to let explosive character choices land in a natural place. I could not trust my body to simply breathe and be present. I have also lost this ability in my daily life.

Through most of last summer I was alone with my five-year-old daughter. As I took the time to do my ‘exercises’ and ‘work’, I pulled myself away from her and moved my focus inside. As John Heilpern observed Brook’s acting company working in Africa, he noticed that when they became intense, they became small. I have become small. Instead of breathing in my life and experiencing the wonders around me, I have been focusing on what’s wrong and how to fix it. I am searching for answers, but can’t find them because there is no outward action on which to focus. So, to move my focus out, I played with my daughter and experimented with vocal maps. This idea came from *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice*:

“Eskimo tribes used to find their way home after hunting treks by ‘singing the landscape’” (Linklater 12).

My daughter and I challenged each other not to form fake words to describe what we saw, but to find a true emotional connection, to have our brains in our bellies, just for the fun of it!

“Can art change a man or a woman? No. That is what life does. Art is no substitute for life. It operates on top of life – rendering experience” (Fugard 59).

I had become lost in searching for my art and had forgotten to live in the experience of my life. I had been trying to find my worth instead of just being.

“Character is the ability to act, to resist, to ascend, to assert, to proclaim, to support, to deny, to bear. These are the components onstage and off” (Mamet 39).

If I am to teach acting and to communicate with young actors, my personal character needs to be just as strong and confident as my stage presence.

As I reflect over what has worked and what still needs work in regards to my research and practical work, I feel that having had this opportunity to be retrained as an actor has helped. I have developed a vocabulary in order to clearly state the root of my challenge and it has given me the confidence to proceed along this path. I have started to find ease within the work, which is letting me dive deeper into self-realization and communication.

“A Man who resists

The spell of the moment and will not allow

His spirit to be swept off by the tide

Is good for nothing and should stay at home” (Madach 91).

Since my diagnosis of dystonia, I had hidden my voice. Before I entered the MFA program, I hid in the domestic life of housewife and mother, forcing myself to believe that I was unable to continue on an artistic path. Inside me there still lives a creative being. I had suppressed this being while convincing myself of my unworthiness. In my relationships with others, I had given the bare minimum of connection, feeling embarrassed about who I am.

Throughout my process, my hope is to find an uninhibited channel for expression and melt the armour I have created. I believe if I can address this challenge in the rehearsals and

performances of *The Mother-Showman* in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, my energy will flow freely and my dystonia will become a secondary concern instead of a primary cause of disorder. If I can patiently follow this path, I believe I will once again fully rebirth my inner artist. I will open the gate of the stall on the gentleman's farm. I will breathe in the fresh air and stretch my legs.

Character and Play Research

My thesis role is that of The Mother-Showman in Suzan-Lori Parks' 1989 play *Venus*. First produced in 1996 at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York City, *Venus* is based on the true story of the exploitation of a young African woman brought into the freakshow world of 1810 Piccadilly. In Parks' play she becomes the main attraction in The Mother-Showman's "Chorus of Human Wonders". At first glance The Mother-Showman can be seen as the female villain of the play, the exploiter profiting from the unique attributes of the young Venus. The challenge as an actor in playing this role is to find the heartbeat that makes this character three-dimensional and not merely "the villain".

My research falls mainly into two categories: the world in which The Mother-Showman lives (the time period and the culture of sideshow freaks), and her personality (archetype, ethnic heritage, and personal history). For added insight I investigated the playwright and her other works, and productions of *Venus* both on stage and in film. With this research I will create the back-story, aesthetic characteristics, and relationship choices that will bring The Mother-Showman to life.

My first choice for research was *African Queen, The Real Life of The Hottentot Venus* by Rachel Holmes. Her factual account of the young girl's life was rich in knowledge about the period. Early 19th century England was experiencing a resurgence of neoclassical aesthetics in its art and design, harkening back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Piccadilly district of London in 1810 was a vibrant marketplace full of every class and race and was a destination for entertainment. This was three years after the Abolition of the Slave Trade bill had been passed

in the British Parliament (Parks 36). But the exploitation of “exotic” people still continued. These elements of the period have all helped to feed my process in constructing a character.

“Piccadilly was the heart of London’s brisk trade in natural and artificial human freaks, curiosities, wonders, and popular entertainments ... Many acts were straightforward exploitations of human variation ...” (Holmes 37).

This directly relates to The Mother-Showman, for she is the exploiter. Although *Venus* is based on historical fact, the character of The Mother-Showman is not (Anderson 60). Historically, two men, Dunlop and Cesar, brought Saartjie Baartman to England from South Africa. Cesar disappeared from England shortly after they arrived and Saartjie, later referred to as ‘The Venus’, was left in the care of Dunlop (Scully and Craig 20).

Parks transformed this man, Dunlop, into a female character: The Mother-Showman. Who is this woman in a man’s role in 1810 Piccadilly? Where did she come from? How did she get there? The fact that she is fictional gave me free rein to make compelling and personalized choices in the direction of my research. In my actor’s imaginative “what if” scenario of this character, I needed a clear plausible idea of the environment in which she grew up. I followed the character research work detailed in “Scoring the Role” from Chapter 24 of Uta Hagen’s *A Challenge For The Actor*.

In conversation with my director, Jamie Robinson, we decided to play with a historically correct background that would give the character weight and specific intentions. I was also hoping to expand upon and integrate the images I have been working with in voice, movement and text classes that connect me to my Hungarian roots. Why not make The Mother-Showman a Hungarian gypsy, tough and street savvy, who has fended for herself for decades on the

Piccadilly scene? This choice to make *The Mother-Showman* from the background of an oppressed people, namely the Hungarian Roma, offers more complexity in the relationship of the characters instead of the typical dynamic of the white oppressor/black oppressed. My research into Eastern European gypsy nomads backs up this choice as an historical possibility:

“The most customary forms of nomadic gypsy music are performances at circus shows, fairs and shows with tame animals” (Peycheva 193).

Though she is not a musician, I feel *The Mother-Showman* comes from a family of performers. Via tragedy, she came to a life fending for herself in Piccadilly, entranced by the fascinating environment that it offered:

“The artificial illumination of central London; the city’s newfangled experiment with gas streetlights provided a vivid white brilliant light, and gave the streets of Piccadilly by night the luminosity of a dream” (Holmes 34).

Perhaps this tough young woman found Piccadilly a place full of possibility for someone with her one and only talent: the ability to read people and know how to best profit from them. This idea comes from Suzan-Lori Parks’ novel *Getting Mother’s Body*, in which the character Wille-May Beede believes that:

“Everyone’s got a hole - in the heart, the head, the pants, or the wallet” (Parks 179).

Wille-May teaches her daughters how to see these holes and how to work on people to get what they want. It’s like a sixth sense. I believe that *The Mother-Showman* could be an extension or

expansion of Parks' earlier fictional character. In this reincarnation, she becomes a gypsy woman with a strong sense of how to take advantage of these holes. She has traveled; she knows what the people want. In *Venus*, after purchasing 'The Girl' from her male companion, The Mother-Showman says "God. He wasn't lying. You got enough here to make em come running. Today's my lucky day" (Parks 38). The Mother-Showman was well aware of what would sell:

"Britain was a nation obsessed by buttocks, bums, arses, posteriors, derrieres and every possible metaphor, joke or pun that could be squeezed from the fundamental cultural obsession. From the front parlor to parliament, to prostitution and pornography, Georgian England both exuberantly celebrated and earnestly deplored excess, grossness, and the uncontainable" (Holmes 43).

The Mother-Showman's background gives her the instinctive ability to create profit through entertainment showmanship. I have also taken this a step farther as I researched the archetype of the Wild Woman. I believe that The Mother-Showman is awake to this part of her psyche, that she has the:

"... means to establish territory, to find one's pack, to be in one's body with certainty and pride regardless of the body's gifts and limitations, to speak and act on one's behalf, to be aware, alert, to draw on the innate feminine powers of intuition and sensing" (Estes 12).

In further research I watched the Canal Plus film *Black Venus*. This film is a visceral depiction of life in 19th century England and offers an amazing insight into the lives of Piccadilly show people. The character that most closely represents The Mother-Showman, Patricia, resorts

to prostitution when the situation demands. I believe this is a relevant discovery for my research into the character. The Mother-Showman would go along this route when times were tough, as supported in the dialogue of the play:

MS: Don't push me, Sweetie. Next doors a smoky pup full of
drunken men. I may just invite them in one at a time and let
them fuck your brains out.

V: They do it anyway.

(*Rest.*)

(*Rest.*)

MS Well. It's the same for all of us, love (66).

I believe that this is an honest, true mother/daughter moment, not a race or class differentiation as Anderson states in her article *Black Feminism In Contemporary Drama*. I am often cast as the white female in plays that deal with race and class conflict. I've learned that it is important to look at the dramatic situation from both sides. Anderson goes on to say that The Mother-Showman could not be subjected to this sort of violation because she owns her own business. Perhaps this is true in the current time frame of the scene, but what of The Mother-Showman's past? I think it's more interesting if she has been in this situation previously and did not have the status to say no to proposed money offers or to protect herself.

Having researched the time period and created a possible back-story for The Mother-Showman, I continued by exploring the aesthetic elements that would bring her to life. On examination of the script and following along with the character choices with which I am working, I asked my aunt, Maria Garay-Gibson, to read sections of The Mother-Showman's

dialogue as I recorded it. Maria, my father's sister, was Hungarian-born and fled to England during the revolution in 1956. She still lives in London, but was here visiting Toronto in the fall. When she fled to England, she learned English as her second language. Her accent is a beautiful, eccentric mix of Standard British and Hungarian. I felt this was a perfect study of how I might approach the speech of *The Mother-Showman*. When the director and I listened to the recording, we had a euphoric moment in which we finally understood the rhythm and the cadence of *The Mother-Showman's* speech pattern. Coincidentally, in the film *Black Venus*, Patricia also speaks with a mixed European accent.

While researching the playwright I uncovered a possible insight into the character's rhythm. In a New York Times interview it is described that Parks:

“... speaks at a high almost reckless speed, like a jazz player more concerned with hitting the right rhythm than the right notes” (Shewey 25).

I feel this might be the same approach Parks uses when creating the dialogue for her characters: a focus on distinct rhythm. I believe her characters are created more from instinct than intellect. I would like to find the rhythm of *The Mother-Showman* and create the character from within that rhythm, instead of imposing the right notes as from a written score.

Now that I have discussed the back-story and aesthetics of the character, I would like to speak to the relationships that inform the character:

“Love is arguably the most important dynamic in Parks' theatre, and also the most neglected by scholars and critics” (Garrett 4).

In the film, *Black Venus*, Patricia has a deep love for Sarra. In the end these two women are left on their own and they use each other to survive. When Sarra is kicked out of the whorehouse because she is in the advanced stages of a sexual disease, Patricia, who stays, tells Sarra about the tattoo of a compass on her arm:

“See it’s the north, south, the west and the east, when I look at this I know where I go” (*Black Venus* 1:04).

She does this to help Sarra find her own strength, to know that when it comes down to it, you can only rely on yourself. If The Mother-Showman does not possess any love for Venus, she would be a one-dimensional character.

From my acting professor Paul Lampert (whom I studied under in both years of my MFA), I have taken this quote as I contemplate how I will live and breathe this character:

“Look for the reasonable reason for unreasonable behaviour.”

To find the reason for her unreasonable behaviour, I have consulted a more contemporary text, *Geek Love*, by Katherine Dunn. The back cover of the novel states:

“*Geek Love* is the story of the Binewskis, a carny family whose mater- and paterfamilias set out – with the help of amphetamine, arsenic, and radioisotopes – to breed their own exhibit of human oddities ... *Geek Love* throws its sulfurous light on our notions of the freakish and the normal, the beautiful and the ugly, the holy and the obscene. Family values will never be the same” (Dunn).

The genetic mutated children are the moneymakers in this circus family. The book is told from the point-of-view of their eldest daughter Oly, an albino humpback dwarf. She does not possess as much ‘freakishness’ as her siblings: Arturo (the aqua-boy) or her beautiful Siamese twin sisters Eli and Effie. She takes the backseat in this family and is more of an organizer than a performer. She harbours some resentment about her lack of gifts, but when asked by a reporter:

“If you could make it happen by snapping your fingers, wouldn’t you want your whole family to be physically and mentally normal?”

She replies:

“That’s ridiculous! Each of us is unique. We are masterpieces. Why would I want to change into assembly-line items?” (Dunn 282).

Throughout the book, ‘norms’ transform into mutated versions of themselves by amputation, fire, or drug use. People who are already living with a ‘freakish’ disability or deformity from an accident or from birth are drawn into the circle and celebrated. If I follow this line of thinking with *The Mother-Showman* I could conclude that she harbours some resentment towards her “Wonders”. Having no special gift of her own, she must rely on the fortunate misfortune of others. This could be the reasonable behaviour behind her unreasonable actions as she exploits and terrorizes her “Wonders” and Venus:

“For Mother-Showman, Venus’s exoticism is to be exploited; it is an avenue to profit, one aspect of power in a capitalist society” (Anderson 63).

When she is tempted to sell Venus to the doctor, *The Mother-Showman* is curious to know what will happen to her. Eventually she gives in, knowing that with the money she will receive

she will be able to retire. She mentions this twice in the play. Again, only by the exploitations of others can she get ahead.

The final challenge that Parks presents for the actor is her use of a theatrical and literary device which she calls “spells”:

“This is a place where the figures experience their true simple state ... no action or business is necessary” (Parks 7).

Or as Lisa Mendelman explains, a “spell” is:

“A place of great (unspoken) emotion ... A place for an emotional transition” (9).

I wonder how to fill these, without over-acting or indicating? I must be present onstage and have the inner life of my character strongly imbedded. For these specific moments I will draw on character exercises from Hagen’s *A Challenge for the Actor*: physical sensation, moment-to-moment, style, and historical imagination, which will keep me in the life of the character, helping to layer in the research I have accumulated.

To conclude, I find that character research is never truly finished. Some image or realization during rehearsal might lead me down a whole different path. The director might have a new idea that we will play out and which could negate everything I have written here. This is always the excitement and challenge of the rehearsal process.

In a New York Times article about the first production of this play in 1997, there is mention of a red flashing light onstage. Suzan-Lori Parks comments on this:

“You could say it’s the heart of Venus that beats forever” (Shewey 24).

The heart of any play and any character is always beating. New discoveries are hopefully made in each rehearsal and each performance, and this is what keeps theatre alive.

In Don Shewey's New York Times article, he describes Richard Foreman, the first director of *Venus*, as a "somewhat melancholy ringmaster". When asked how he felt about the content of *Venus*, Foreman states:

"This play has a much stronger narrative than her other plays ... but it still has the circus-like aspect of showing you an object from many different sides at once, revealing the many-faceted nature of life, stories, human phenomena"
(Shewey 5).

I realize that the "object" he is speaking of is Venus, but The Mother-Showman could be approached from many different angles as well. In the same article Foreman speaks about how much he loved the circus as a child, and specifically how fascinated he was with the clowns. Perhaps playing the clown is one of the many-faceted roles that The Mother-Showman takes on in her persuasive way of achieving her goals.

Three actresses have been documented as playing this role previously: Carolyn Hoerdenman (Steppenwolf Theatre), Barbara Pinolini (Olney Theatre Center), and Sandra Shipley (Yale Repertory Theatre and The Public Theatre). There are no reviews that specifically refer to the character. Since there is no mention of The Mother-Showman in any articles, my performance will be a creation of my actor's imagination and the facts I have collected. From my accumulated research I feel that I have a strong springboard into this character. I am confident that she will be a living, breathing human being onstage.

Rehearsal Plan

To apply my research to the creation and performance of *The Mother-Showman* in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* I will take a very practical approach. I will draw from my previous professional experience as an actor and meld it with the discoveries I have made while embarking on my MFA.

The actual hard copy of the script is a sacred item to me. I have tried many different approaches as to how best to carry and work with the script in rehearsal and to keep it safe and unharmed as I travel back and forth from the rehearsal hall, and in turn, how to keep it at a quick and easy access in case I need to jot down notes on the subway or check specific dialogue sections at any given moment of the day. The best approach came to me during my preparatory work for *Oh What A Lovely War*, the MFA production earlier in the year. While I was prepping the script for rehearsal, the large photocopied pages were bulky and tiresome to keep in order, so I cut and pasted each individual page onto the left-hand side of an open medium-sized hardcover notebook. The right-hand side was left blank for me to record my impulse thoughts, images, research, actions, dictionary definitions, blocking, and character notes. This is a calming and organized way to feel ownership over the text I am about to embody. I was met with much ridicule during the rehearsals of *Oh What A Lovely War* by my colleagues because of my fastidious organization and my neat little book, but at the end of the day, I was not running around trying to find my missing script pages, my pencil (which I keep attached to the book), or the binder in which I brought my script to rehearsal. I will follow this same process to prep my script for *Venus*.

Once the cutting and pasting is done, I go through the script many times before the first day of rehearsal. I highlight my dialogue and look up each word in the dictionary that perhaps I have a general understanding of, but the images the word brings to me are not precise. I investigate what I feel my character wants or needs from the other characters in the scene. I write down a clear image of where I am coming from before the specific scene takes place, what I hope to accomplish within the scene, and where I am going to at the end of the scene. I also write down very personal unedited thoughts: these might be images, memories, and quotes from research that I believe are relevant. This is all done in pencil because things change on the path of discovery. My script is a very private book. The work I do through my process is not what ends up on the stage.

As I referenced in my artistic challenge research section, Fugard states in his notebooks that theatre is a representation of life, not life itself. I learned this more profoundly while developing my solo show at the end of last summer. I recorded many references to personal experiences that filled me with anger and hatred. In listening to these recordings, I realized that this approach would not give the audience a chance to empathize with the character I was portraying. It would be self-indulgent garble, similar to masturbating about personal problems onstage. What I ended up with was a show about what I was experiencing in a theatrical form. The process I went through while recording was beneficial. I came to a place where I could clearly write and perform a fifteen-minute piece about what I had experienced: a mid-life actor in crisis on a tightrope between life and livelihood, balancing the rebirthing of her inner artist while patiently spending the summer alone with her five-year-old. Therefore, the notes in my script are for me to follow along in my process, to clear out the garbage and get to the facts. This process will

help me find The Mother-Showman in all her glory and all her weakness, in all her pride and all her shame, and in all her wins and all her losses.

To prepare myself for rehearsal each day, I will do a warm-up along the lines of what I learned from my movement professor Erika Batdorf. I will come into the room early and let the energy of the healthy animal in my body speak to me as to what I need at that specific moment. If I draw on specific exercises learned from my experience in voice, movement, Yoga, and acting, I will approach these from an inner, organic place instead of moving from larger superficial muscle strength. I have also learned from Erika that, though some of this might be private work (ten minutes at most), it must move into human connection or else how can you expect to connect with a scene partner or have what you are experiencing read on a stage? I have spoken with some of my colleagues and we have concurred that during the warm-up before rehearsal we will work together on strengthening the ability to remain present and connected instead of going deep inside and dealing with only intense personal issues. We will create a safe environment in which we can explore together instead of keeping to ourselves. In this way, we are ready to commit to connection as soon as we start into rehearsal instead of spending needless time warming up to the other people in the room.

Though I will familiarize myself with the text before rehearsal starts, I will not memorize my dialogue. I find this to be a trap. When memorizing dialogue before the actual rehearsal process, it is hard to break free from the vocal pattern that was created during the memorization. I will use a technique taught to me by David Smukler long before I entered the MFA program. During those precious moments after I have put my daughter safely to bed, I will lie on my back. I will keep the script on my stomach to make sure I am breathing from my core. At first, I will go through the text with just breath, on an “ffff” sound, referring to the actual book when I have lost

my place. Then, I will whisper the dialogue and take breaths when needed. I will do this for each specific scene a few times, usually the scene that will be worked on the next day of rehearsal. This is not to decide how to speak the text, but to get the text moving freely through my body and again, I will jot down any images or feelings that come up on the right-hand side of the notebook at the end of these sessions. In this way I will be prepared to play when I enter the rehearsal hall in the morning. If I have a strong familiarization with the wants and needs of my character, and the text is moving freely from my core, then I will be free to play within the dialogue. I do not believe in setting out how things should be said. I believe that the relationships must be established and some specific mappings of blocking should be set so everyone is comfortable onstage, but then within this arena there needs to be room to play and explore. I will also incorporate some of the improvisation exercises I have studied in the Keith Johnstone book *Impro*: namely status exercises, and entrance and exit work. These will be kept secret from my scene partner to keep my character relationship alive.

The character of The Mother-Showman is very strong and centered. She does not lack confidence, or at least would never show that she does. She knows how to play a room, when to be the center of attention, and when to take a back seat. To accompany this research into character development, I will keep myself open to the other actors in the room. Often when I become very internally focused, I worry about how I am doing in the work, and feel embarrassed about the work I have not yet accomplished. I feel that, going along with my challenge, if I stay open and present, new discoveries can be made in a moment while sharing stories with other actors. I need to let go of my competitive professionalism; this is not a race I need to win or an audition where I need to get the job. Sometimes, sharing stories or joking and laughing (neither of which have ever been my strongpoint) can bring an ease and awareness with the people with

whom I am working. I have seen this happen around me, but have never been confident enough to be in the moment outside of the actual rehearsal of specific scene work. I am a veteran in this environment, so I need to be open to some of the less experienced actors around me and not make them feel intimidated. My personal intensity, which I am in the process of softening, can come across as arrogance, which is never the case.

I will also do my best to not bring my work home with me. From my experience in the summer of trying to write my thesis research and disengaging from my daughter, I found that the more I was open to our relationship and not fretting about the work that needed to be done, I was much more open to my surroundings. Once I get Jozefin to bed and wish my husband well before he goes to work (he is a musician and often plays through the night), then I have a few hours before bedtime to myself. It is at this point that I realize I have lived my life fully in each moment of the day. I have not played the roles of “mother” and “wife”. I can actually be present: a living, breathing, and caring person. In this way I do not spend the hours after my child’s bedtime cleaning and worrying about not being a good actor or a good parent. I can justify that I have lived my life today and now need some time to solidify the work that was done in rehearsal and prepare for tomorrow’s exploration.

To conclude, I will approach rehearsal as a new discovery each day. My goal is to stay open and present, to enjoy and communicate, to get good work done, and not feel inhibited by my armour of dystonia as I bring myself and everything I have learned to The Mother-Showman. I will not hide behind a fictitious character I have created, but bring my inner artist into the room and work from gut exploration. If there are days when my dystonia is very evident, I will challenge myself not to hide behind it or from it. I will accept where I am at present. My goal is to be truly there in every living breathing moment and simply enjoy the exploration.

Conclusion

When reflecting on my experience with my thesis role, the Mother-Showman in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, Lewis Carroll's story of *Alice In Wonderland* comes to mind. During the first three weeks of rehearsal I felt like Alice playing in her garden, confident and secure. My instrument was open and free. I was breathing, utilizing all my training of the last two years. Then the CUPE strike happened, and Alice fell down the rabbit hole. Unexpected challenges raised the old habitual patterns that I had worked to release for two years. As the opening loomed, we were under-rehearsed, scrambling to mount a show in a raw studio without props or costumes.

Director Jamie Robinson paced the rehearsal process gently and deliberately, and organized a clear schedule for our journey. Like Alice, I was carefree. I had prepared my script, had done most of my preliminary work and felt confident in my research. When I arrived at the rehearsal hall I was able to do a private ten-minute warm-up approached from an inner organic place instead of moving from larger superficial muscle strength. This was one of the main tasks I had set out for myself. Following my private warm-ups, on several occasions Jamie asked me to guide as well as take part in physical investigative relationship work with the actors playing the Eight Human Wonders. As stated in my rehearsal plan, I was hoping to have integrated warm-up exploration time with the other characters to enable us to stay present and connected, and this was accomplished.

Venus is a vast script with many characters. Although some time was taken for investigative exploration, most of these first three weeks were spent gently walking through the play, finding preliminary blocking, and getting an introductory sense of the story as a whole. Each scene was given, at most, half an hour of rehearsal time. During this period, I kept my ideas fresh, let the

words come off the page instinctually, kept open to what I was being given from my scene partners, and played status games within the work. I experienced the usual doubt within my work, questioned some of my stronger choices, and my dialect was not coming together as quickly and clearly as I had hoped. Jamie quelled my frustrations. He told me *The Mother-Showman* was opening like a fine wine; all she needed was some time to breathe. We agreed that the detailed work would come later, when we were all solid in our dialogue, when we were climbing on the actual set, and when we'd be able to feel the vocal energy needed to work in a 350-seat theatre. We were not totally oblivious of the impending strike but kept our hopes up that all might be resolved and we would keep working.

When Alice goes down the rabbit hole, she has no idea what will happen next. This is exactly how I felt when the strike continued past the first week. I had made myself believe, perhaps as an innocent child would, that the strike would only last one week. I went on to tell myself that this week would give me time to solidify my dialect, learn my lines, and integrate some of the work I had set out to do in my research. As I mentioned in my artistic challenge research document, my dystonia is worse when my body is in a tense state. The situation of waiting from one day to the next was not helping my condition. When I arrived at the first optional off-campus line run and was met by all the fourth-year students and only three of the ten other MFA candidates in the cast, I realized that the situation was graver than my little fairytale mind had thought.

Throughout that week and then the following week I was full of anger. The focus of my study has been to let go of anger. Obviously this was more of a challenge than I had anticipated. I was angry at the situation, angry at the lack of support from my colleagues, angry with my body for being tense, and angry with myself for being angry. It was hard to keep up the work. I

did work alone at home and I was able to solidify my dialect choice and make some interesting discoveries within *The Mother-Showman*, but I did not have the opportunity to engage with the other actors and put these discoveries into practice.

At this point we had no idea if the show would actually happen. In these weeks I somehow, probably due to tension, pulled the muscles in my neck to the extent that I could not turn my head to the right at all. I was in complete denial of this problem, did not seek out any medical advice or do any personal physical investigation. A schedule juggling picket line duty, caring for my daughter (home for March break), and learning my lines, left no time to visit my on-campus sports therapist, or do a personal physical exploration in the studio.

According to schedule, after three weeks in the rehearsal room, we moved into the theatre faced with various challenges due to the strike. Many cast members were absent (conflicted over the CUPE situation) and there was no technical crew, thus no lights. In the shadow of house lights, we worked to get used to the space and to the gradually inclining risers reaching a six-foot height. Some investigative work did occur, but again my anger stood in the way. I spent one afternoon working alone with Jamie marking out most of *The Mother-Showman*'s scenes. In this rehearsal we solidified my character's relationship with the audience, worked vocally in the space and started to touch on my character's journey. Instead of having a proper warm-up, my brief time before rehearsal was spent physically releasing tension built up from walking the picket line, dealing with irate drivers.

By the end of that week I was confident in myself, and my anger was starting to subside. I was excited to employ my discoveries working with my fellow actors. I was also intrigued to see and feel how the space would transform when we had props, costumes, lighting, and a completed set. This in the end became a passing fancy for all of us.

When Alice is offered the mushroom by the caterpillar, she takes a piece from each side: one side makes her smaller and the other side makes her larger. This was me, moving from the studio to the theatre and then back to the studio again. In the theatre I felt small, and I nibbled the mushroom slowly until I found my body and voice in the large space. When we moved back into the smaller studio I began to nibble the other side of the mushroom. In my rehearsal plan I stated that I would approach rehearsals as a new discovery each day, I would stay open and present, enjoy and communicate, and not feel inhibited by my armour of dystonia. This was the objective I was now embracing.

By this time we knew that *Venus* would have its short life in this small studio space instead of the 350-seat theatre for which we had been preparing. We had three days. It was up to Jamie and me, the two veterans, to make it happen. This was the beginning of the release of my inhibition. We had a plan. We let our creative ideas fly. We reinvented the space. I let my previous theatre experience guide me. I took big risks and made strong choices. The challenge was to strip away the work prepared for the large theatre and re-block the show with cast members who had been absent for weeks. I was able to move back into my personal preparation time at the beginning of rehearsals, though I found it difficult to connect with some of the cast members. In hindsight I understand now that my difficulty in connection was due to personal insecurity about my own process. I felt that my work was lacking and my voice was not connected. The urgency of the situation was once again forcing us to sketch out the whole story instead of deeply investigating relationships, solidifying intentions and playing moments.

Alice stumbles upon The Mad-Hatter's tea party and is challenged to get herself a cup of tea, just the way she likes it. This was me, having to mime props and costume pieces not available due to the strike. When I brought in my personal belongings to serve as props and costume

pieces, I was able to let go of this fairy tale imagery, put my figurative pieces of mushroom down, and get on with the show.

Our first and only dress rehearsal was a nightmare. Cues were missed, scenes were discombobulated, and entrances and exits were late, early or missed. We had no back stage area. We set up blackboards on both sides of the studio, curtains on the back wall, but these did not give us complete sightline coverage from the audience nor did we have a clear pathway for crossing the stage. During this dress rehearsal I did find the ability to play within the moment and was clear on my intentions, but I was not clear on The Mother-Showman's journey. My frustration grew much like Alice when she could not get the key off of the glass table, not get through the tiny door, and did not feel comfortable with the size she had become. I was reduced to tears behind the curtain before my last two scenes, again angry, this time giving over to childish emotion. Instead of working around these emotions, I embraced them; I let them fuel my work. In my next scene I impulsively ripped the tape up off of the floor. This tape represented the outline of the set we were to have worked on in the theatre. I was making this space my own. To my surprise, the last two scenes moved smoothly and clearly. I made new discoveries and felt a strong relationship to my acting partners. I began to understand the journey of The Mother-Showman as I related it to my own misfortunes and shortcomings. The fine wine that Jamie had defined as The Mother-Showman was being poured from the decanter to the glass. I had hopes that perhaps the audiences over the next two nights would get a taste.

On opening day I did not go to picket duty. I spent the day at home, screaming my lines, and releasing my anger as I vacuumed, scrubbed, dusted, and mopped. This is exactly what I needed to do. Part of my challenge was to not hide behind a fictitious character, but to bring my inner artist into the room and work from gut exploration. I realized I had again become intense and

small like last summer, when I pulled myself away from my daughter so I could “work”. I had been neglecting my life. I did not bring the work home but my body was a tense self-reflective expression of muscular power that was trying to keep the fictional character of The Mother-Showman alive. I had been too wrapped up in the artistic drama of my thesis to bother with cleaning or laundry. When I got to the studio that afternoon, I was an open, breathing, connected human being. I was alive. I made jokes and greeted everyone warmly. For the first time in my life I was not hiding while getting ready for the show. My warm-up moved from my organic healthy animal.

My neck was bothering me but I accepted it. I realized that there was nothing I could do about it in the moment. Nothing was going to give me a quick release. Dealing with dystonia was to be a life-long process and just because I was writing a thesis about it did not mean that it was going to go away. I needed to accept my condition in order to work with it and through it. I had written this thought many times, but only that evening did I actually breathe it.

During the two studio performances of the show, I felt I was home, much like Alice when she returns after her adventures in Wonderland. I was a living, breathing woman in the studio, and The Mother-Showman was given the life that I hoped she would get. My dialect rolled off my tongue and clearly presented the background I had created for The Mother-Showman. I was a woman who was struggling with her own defeats but also had the instinctive maternal nature to care for the other characters around her. There were times when I felt I found the clown, the ringmaster, and the contrasting male/female aspect of the character. I felt that The Mother-Showman connected to her Wild Woman archetype, and due to the circumstances caused by the strike, so did I. My spirit was challenged, and it rose and played with the obstacles it was dealt.

When the strike created a diagnostic malfunction for *The Mother-Showman* in the performance of *Venus*, I accepted it as a welcoming challenge rather than a disembodiment. I am now starting to understand how to do the same in my personal life. Throughout this process I have experienced moments of freedom, and am now more aware of what triggers my protective sheltered nature. My artistic challenge was to seek release from the armour of dystonia and patiently rebirth my inner artist. I feel that I was mostly successful. My initial approach worked, but when faced with unforeseen challenges, my habitual instinctive guard came back and I did not have the energy or the patience to release my armour.

In the future, when I reflect on my recent academic and creative journey, I will accept this new multi-faceted person I have become. Recently, new avenues have been opened that will allow me the opportunity to research and work with others who have suffered under the armour of dystonia and have not been afraid or embarrassed to embrace this challenge. I feel that I now have the strength to not hide behind my life as mother and wife, but to embrace it together with my inner artist and keep working in my chosen profession as actor and instructor.

When Alice wakes up from her dream at the end of *Alice In Wonderland*, her sister brushes dead leaves that have fluttered down from the trees upon her face. “Wake up, Alice dear!” said her sister. “Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!” (Carroll 165). I feel that these two years spent at York University embarking on my MFA and articulating my artistic challenge have woken me from a long slumber and have given me the passion to again begin to create.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Lisa M. *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*. Urbana and Chicago. University of Illinois Press. 2008. Print.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. United Kingdom. Pavilion Children's Books. 2009. Print.
- Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*. New York. Vintage Books, a division of Random House Inc. 1983. Print.
- Estes, Clarissa Pinkola, Ph.D. *Women Who Run With The Wolves (Myths and Stories of The Wild Woman Archetype)*. New York. Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Print.
- Fugard, Athol. *Notebooks 1960 -1977*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1984. Print.
- Garret, Shawn Marie. *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*. New York. McFarland Press. 2010. Web. 20 Dec 2014.
- Hagen, Uta. *A Challenge for the Actor*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, Macmillan Publishing Company. 1991. Print.
- Heilpern, John. *Conference of the Birds*. Great Britain: Faber and Faber Ltd. 1977. Print.
- Johnstone, Keith. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. England. Faber and Faber Ltd. 1979. Print.
- Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice: The Actor's Guide to Talking the Text*. New York. Theatre Communications Group Inc. 1992. Print.
- . *Freeing the Natural Voice: Imagery and Art in the Practice of Voice and Language*. Hollywood: Quite Specific Media Group Ltd. 2006. Print.
- Madach, Imre. *Az Ember Tragediaja*. Budapest: Szepirodalmi Konyvkiado. 1984. Print.
- . *The Tragedy of Man*. Hungary: Corvina Books, Ltd. Sixth edition, 2009. Print.
- Mamet, David. *True And False*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc. 1999. Print.
- Mendelman, Lisa. *Resonant Silence: Love, Desire, and Intimacy in Suzan-Lori Parks' Venus*. Los Angeles. University of California. Web. 29 Dec. 2014.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *365 Days/365 Plays*. New York. Theatre Communications Group, Inc. 2006. Print.

--. *Topdog/Underdog*. New York. Theatre Communications Group, Inc. 1999. Print.

--. *Venus*. New York. Dramatist's Play Service Inc. 1989. Print.

--. *Venus*. New York. Theatre Communications Group, Inc. 1990. Print.

Peycheva, Lozanka and Dimov, Ventsislav. *The Gypsy Music and Gypsy Musicians' Market in Bulgaria*. Holland. 2003. Web. 24 Aug. 2014.

Scully, Pamela and Craig, Clifton. *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. Princeton University Press. @2009 ABC. Web. 22 Dec. 2014.

Shewey, Don. *An Eccentric Ringmaster Creates his Own Circus*. . New York Times (1923-current file). Apr 14, 1996: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: the New York Times (1851-2010) Web. 20 Jul. 2014.

--. *This Time the Shock is Her Turn Towards Naturalism*. New York Times (1923-current file). Jul 22, 2001. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: the New York Times (1851-2009) Web. 20 Jul. 2014.

Venus Noire (Black Venus). Dir. Abdellatif Kechiche. Canal Plus. 2009. Film.

www.abouttheartist.com/characters/49957-the-brother-in-venus-by-suzan-lori-parks. Web. 19 Feb. 2015.

Appendix A: Selected Journal Entries

January 28th

Interesting conversation about prejudice. I went to Jamie, our director, privately and told him that I grew up with a father who taught me to believe that all Indian people smell, all black people are stupid and all Chinese people are terrorists. These are not my beliefs – but they are in me and I remember being constantly reminded of my father's standards. I have spent a lot of time being the white person in a black play and I have a certain guilt about not being well enough informed. The seminar by the assistant director was interesting – the Khlo clan was called this because the Dutch couldn't understand what they were saying - also interesting to note the amount of travel that took place during the time period. As to my character and my neck, The Mother-Showman (MS) seems very solid, very grounded and very pure. Jamie spoke of not letting emotion get in the way and I think this will be a good mystery/secret for my character.

January 30th

Really interesting today – Jamie had me take the Eight Wonders through a physical spinal awareness exercise in which I used the two-cylinder imagery with which I have been working. Then he asked me to find the drumbeat that brought us all together (which Peggy-Jane Hope so explicitly discovered the other day was the heartbeat of The Venus). Then he had me meet each of the Wonders for the first time – and bring them into my show. Very interesting – the best way I could communicate was to coax, soothe, entice, and compliment. Rehearsal with Gabrielle Graham (Gabby) was a bit more stilted. I had not done all the work that I wish I could have done – my dialect choice at this point was just an idea. I did discover though that MS is very open to the audience at all times – she is on show. I made a very big bold choice – with pulling pubic

hair out of my throat – right intention but way too big – but what we got from that was – the foreshadowing of the night before – of me stopping for a shot at the bar this morning - hair of the dog. Full back-story of how I bought The Venus realized as well.

February 4th

Big court scene – gave me some time to look at the script – this dialect I have chosen is difficult and tricky but I think I can get a handle on it. Rehearsing with just Neil Silcox was a breath of fresh air. Nice. It made me think of working at the Neptune Theatre in my twenties, in the Anne Chislett play *Yankee Notions*. I had to confront Richard Donat. He was older, very tall, and a very strong and experienced actor. All he had to do was stand there in all his tallness and be present. I was shaking in my boots – he almost blew me over. Standing opposite Neil today – some twenty-five years later – I had no problem holding my ground. I guess experience does count for something. Realization: The Venus is not a freak - she is a beautiful being – but a different species. She is my daughter more than the other freaks – I do love her.

February 11th

Worked with Professor David Smukler in the afternoon and he had a wonderful concept of how the dialect should be placed – this makes things easier to handle and prepare for. The Hungarian dialect dominates and I need to concentrate the energy to the tip of the tongue, the teeth and the lips. The British part of the dialect is the narrowing and pointing aspect of the tongue. But both dialects are forward in the mouth. The Hungarian tongue is wide while the British is pinched and forward. He suggested that I lose the deep dark body of the Hungarian dialect and make it brighter. When speaking in Hungarian the middle of the tongue comes up. When I told him why I had decided on this hybrid dialect he agreed and stated that Pushkin's father was African. So we are on the same page. He mentioned that I should treat some words like I have never spoken

them before: “Negro”, “Native”. My survival instinct as MS is giving me the need to voice things for the first time. I need to try and find how the words are made in my mouth, and practice forming the concept. We spoke of the exoticism of Hungarians at the time, and how the MS knows this and can play with it. Words like “mother” – I know I say it differently so I need to get the image across. The ends of the words need to be played with – it’s a journey – I need to sell the consonants and use the syllables. Lift it clean, breathe it down and sell it. In rehearsal we did a run of Act 1 and it seemed VERY VERY long – though I am starting to find some variation. My neck went nuts in the confrontation with Gabby, when I catch her stealing money. But this did not happen in the confrontation with Neil. Why? Perhaps because it’s not a big confrontation - it’s scolding a child – two things at once. I’m getting over being sick and still have not had time to prep the way I want to. I’m also thinking that this whole written thesis thing before rehearsal gets actors very much into their heads. Yes of course I would do research before I play any role, but not this academically. I can describe the character to you but I can’t seem to play it yet.

February 13th

Run of Act 1 took me by surprise – thought I was off the hook till Reading Week but we have a new lighting designer, so he had to see it. This made me use my subway time very efficiently last night and this morning – went through the script to understand my intentions. A lot of MS is repetitive – so it’s finding the builds and the different ways to attract the audience to come see my show. The one-on-one scenes are different. Not sure how I am going to learn all these lines in one week off when there is the making of lesson plans and thesis work to do, not to mention household chores and motherhood. Have to say though I did have fun in the run. MS is an open woman who is not afraid of her own presence, her own power or her own intensity (though

perhaps finding moments when she is vulnerable might make the character more human and more layered). I think the dialect work after meeting with David was clearer and easier this time – really feeling the front of my tongue and my teeth and my lips – now need to work in the exoticism of the Hungarian and perhaps the sexiness of the language. It's still stuck in the back of my throat a bit. But not as bad as the first run of Act 1. The whole friendliness thing and joking thing is sort of working. I feel like the undergrads are a bit afraid of me. Lauren looked at me today and said, "You could beat me up" and I thought "Now?" and she said, "Your arms are so strong." Other comments have been "I so admire your work." But really, I need to stay focused in rehearsal – I am doing my work – that's my job and like I said I don't want to bring it home with me, so I have the subway and rehearsal in which to work. So far those 'precious moments' at home when Jozefin's in bed and Michael is at work have not happened because we have all been sick for two weeks. Still the same spot in the play – looking at Gabby – same scene – it's the only time my neck tenses – why? Because it's raw? Because I'm trying to be nice? And still – maybe next time I get there I will think blood/breath/gravity during Parks' spell and rest and maybe that will get me more grounded. I'm tired. I would love some time to myself to breathe, work physically and then work text. Hmm – probably not till I am seventy – would I be retired by then? Will I ever retire? Jozefin says that she wishes I were retired now. Went for drinks tonight and we talked about the definition of "vulnerability" – the ability to be affected by something and change. A lot of what I am doing on stage is not there yet. A lot of it is marked. Though I am having moments of pure connection and reaction, I need to keep it alive.

February 28th

Ran the whole play for the first time - impending strike!?!? I found some stuff today – the accent/dialect is still all over the place - I feel that when I find the British it's there – though people only hear the Hungarian. After the run we worked my most challenging scene – I worked with what Smukler suggested – feed on the words – make a meal out of them, really enunciate and find the pleasure. Then I feel that people understand me – but still – and yet – maybe this is the way to go because you can't play an emotion right? Perhaps MS is the strong man in this circus show – not the clown – or is that just me muscling through the dialogue that I have to encompass to make the words happen? Caught Gabby to go for a drink with Corey Turner and me. Still don't really know her but it was a start. I realized that she is twenty-two. I am twenty-seven years older than her – I have been out there – I have done what she wants to do – and I want it all to go well for her – my mishaps of not being confident enough to not do theatre for no pay and wait for the film gigs – I told her to be confident about it – I never thought I had experience but I guess I do. My body was very sore today. We had a small audience of students – MS relies on the audience for a lot – seeing Rosalinde Pecino's song at the start of Act 2 made me think – yes, this is how the relationship I want should be established. But Rosalinde has the freedom to improvise dialogue; I do not. Do I set this up for the play? I am muscling my way through right now – perhaps because I need to be word perfect? Most likely I have found the “mother” part; now it's time to find the hardcore sleaziness of MS without thinking or feeling that that is what I am doing. What I do is for my own good and for the good of my Wonders – the best scene is where my lightness needs to come out – but it is out of despair more than anything else – I have lived this hard life for so long - I need a break – I want what's mine - I can empathize with The Venus – I'm in the same situation too – perhaps my threat of smoky pubs

comes from past experience. That's how I was dealt with – that's all I know – yeah – threatening makes her vulnerable – I have been in your position – you are living my life – but now I am in charge – I am in power – I can do no wrong. Got to find the human presence of the character, and then put it in a theatrical setting. Right now I am just in a theatrical setting not knowing where this all comes from. My vulnerability is so lost because I have hidden and protected it for so long that it is hard to show, but it is still a part of MS. How much would I like us to all stop working and be in a place where we are capable of not relying on others for our well-being?

March 4th

Well – strike. So be it. Trying to think positive. It will be one week, a chance for me to catch up. I had started actioning my script – and found it rather challenging to be that precise but what a glorifying experience. It gave me much insight into finding my own way through my repetitive monologues to the audience – and has been helping me track the journey of MS. Since my husband's entire band was rehearsing in our house today, I went to Yoga after dropping Jozefin at school and then went to my neighbour's house. Graham is an opera director and has always offered to run lines. So I took him up on it. It was an interesting experience – it's always the same little niggly bits I get stuck on, because I say the same things in many different ways. I had made a discovery last night about the scene in which I kick The Venus, and as we were working it Graham made the same discovery – that MS is so sick to death of her own life that I kick and abuse The Venus to make myself feel better – I ask the audience if they are feeling low because I am at my all-time low in my life – also there are four or five lines that are very hard to wrap my tongue around – Graham suggested that I don't hurry through these – that I play with the words and make these sentences up as I am speaking them – this was very helpful – since my mind is full of “Pick up the pace!”. Act 1 is too long – there can be spots when I do take my time to let

the words out. It's picking up cues and making sure I have the right thoughts and intentions that will take care of pace. With the two hardest scenes – one with *The Venus* and one with *The Baron Docteur* – it was refreshing to run these in a different context – instead of being in rehearsal proper and staring intently at the other actor – acting intentions – it was nice to play with them as simple conversation – taking out the importance and finding the flow. Graham and I also spoke about the play and what it was doing – I came to the conclusion that it is telling a story that draws the audience in and they enjoy it. Then afterwards, they feel uncomfortable about what they have just enjoyed. It was also refreshing to work on the script with someone who has never read it. Graham found it funny and explosive – he also said that if he were directing he would make *The Negro Resurrectionist* white. Interesting choice. But the whole experience gave me a fresh look at the script. I always run lines with someone – usually my friend Bruce, and I will probably do this as well. I need to hope that the play will actually happen. I will get to experience the whole performance aspect, finish my thesis and graduate. Here's hoping.

March 5th

In the basement of an off-campus high school to rehearse during the strike, all the undergrads showed up; five grads were missing. Really? I slaved through *Oh What A Lovely War* with you guys, I never walked out, never complained when someone went on about “My thesis this” or “My thesis that”, and now you can't take interest or support your five colleagues that have their whole MFA riding on this show? Fuck you. In communication with one colleague she felt she was crossing a picket line by coming, so she stayed home to mark papers - that's CUPE – not the fucking play. Anyway, I would feel uncomfortable crossing the picket line up at York. The line run went well, we took six minutes off Act 1, but it's still niggling in the same places – three or

four times where I get caught on lines. Along with the disrespect of the people who were not there was the disrespect in the room of people talking when they were not in the scene – fuck your ignorance. I am talking monologues as you do – and you can't shut up – you don't think that that's disturbing or disruptive or makes me feel like you just don't respect what the fuck I am doing? I'm boring you to shit. And what the fuck is a line run? A LINE RUN. Don't get up and half act out the lines that you don't know, and then talk to me later about the scene we are in and say "Well I know your part is very hard so I didn't want to butt in". You call yourself a professional actor, asshole, so then ACT WITH ME, PLAY WITH ME, BE WITH ME ON STAGE. Don't pussy-foot around and puppet-string yourself since you think your incoherent accent is funny because all the younger girls are laughing. Take the risk and look me in the eyes and see what happens in the scene instead of playing around it or on top of it. Not a good day. I'm very mad at the whole situation, if that isn't obvious. Tomorrow I'm going to a Yoga class, and then I'm going to vacuum. I'm going to the art gallery and then having dinner while running lines with Bruce. Fuck everyone right now.

March 10th

I have realized that all my discomfort in my short scene with Corey could partly be because of what MS is feeling at this moment. She/I want to be the center of attention: I want to be thought of as sexy, I want to be special, I want someone to want to touch me. I am sick of being the show person for people who are extraordinary. In other news, my thesis supervisor, Mark Wilson, sent me a link to an article about dystonia. This opened up a whole new avenue of research. After months of looking for material in the summer and coming up with the same old websites, books I have never seen have now become available to me. A bit of overload right now. In my personal script work I have had the time to lie on my back, exhale on a 'FFF' sound

and whisper lines. This has been helping me with placing the dialect and understanding the rhythm of the piece.

March 17th

So. Yeah. A new show. I remembered my character body presentation from Erika Batdorf's class and sold Jamie on using the back curtains as the tent. It works. It's the space we are in so use it. Yesterday I really wanted the tape ripped up off the floor, but today I felt justifiably that we are doing a show on top of all the production values that are not going to happen. I spent part of my morning cleaning out the ash bucket from my barbeque so we could use it as a prop, as well as talking my daughter into letting me borrow some of her chalk. This is sad because it is my MFA, but also I feel that I will never get away from the theatre that we make ourselves, so somehow it was oddly comforting to bring in half my belongings to do a show. Corey and Jamie, very hung over, came to pick up all the props I could muster at one p.m. Last night as I was coming home and was waiting for the streetcar, there seemed to be something wrong, because there was not one streetcar coming. I noticed a man had gone to inquire at the TTC kiosk. He came back, grabbed his girlfriend and started walking for the exit, so I asked, "What did he say?". He said that there was an accident. I said, "Thanks for letting us know". Then I left the subway station and started walking. I was just in front of the man and his girlfriend. I could hear them bitching and complaining about the woman who said, "Thanks for letting us know". The man was saying things like, "I take care of my own", "I'm not responsible for all the people", "Maybe she didn't like me because of my pants", "Fucking bitch, who does she think she is". When we reached a red light I said, "That was me". They smiled, awkwardly. I said, "I meant no disrespect. It's just nice to let the other people in line know what is going on". This couple was African-Canadian, and I believe had decided I was prejudiced against them

when I made the initial comment in the subway station. When I spoke up they didn't attack me, but seemed to realize that perhaps they took it too hard. Then I realized - is it the strike? Am I angry or perturbed that no one seems to be giving out information because no one knows what's happening? This man knew a streetcar wasn't coming - so share it with the rest of us. In rehearsal today I remembered one of the last things I stated in my thesis - I want to bring my whole self on stage and not hide behind a role, to bring my artistic self there so I am present and not hiding behind anything - so much easier now knowing that it's me. No costume, no make-up, no artistic vision from the production team. Though there is not much time, I am slowly working into my character how I feel about the whole situation, and facing challenges and problems as they come up. I am so angry, uncomfortable in the spotlight, but needing to keep myself together. My neck has been a mess for the last few days - mostly off stage again. Can I deal with this right now? Not really - just trying to get the show up. I feel that if I was any other person I would not be working at all but trying to deal with the pain in my neck and back. I can't turn my head to the right or the left at all. I'm fighting through it saying I will deal with it later instead of crumbling and giving up. I am Hungarian.

Friday, March 20th – Opening night

MS says to The Venus, "You're standing there with your lips poking out like a wooden lady on a wooden ship, smile or something." This is how I felt about the audience tonight – so close – yet so far away. I did a lot of new shit – found the span of MS trying to get my audience for my show. A bit hard in this studio. Jamie and I worked it out about ten minutes before we let the audience in. But – well – that's life. My arc or journey was not really clear but was sort of there. My body felt twisted and contorted and when I found myself in these positions I just accepted it instead of breathing to try and change my body. Tomorrow perhaps I will try to

elongate my body to find the lightness in the character. Tonight I was a weighted woman. Tomorrow I will play with being light and smaller - worth a try. In conversation with my husband who came to see the show, he mentioned that when I introduce the Wonders, I have done this at least 800 times, so it should be much more by rote, which I understand in a very visceral way. But because the audience is so close, I play off of what they are giving me. I am selling my show. As a musician, he compared it to how he does the same show at the Commie every Saturday, but it is always different.

Saturday, March 21st – Closing night

Yeah – so - not that great. I let everything – everything get to me. It was hard to get myself into show state. So, I let myself be where I was. I fucked up some lines, but covered. Gabby and I had our first moment of true connection in our last scene together, and I let it sit - I waited and took this in - it took me a while to say my next line. I felt that I deserved to live in that realized moment for a little while. We had earned it. This was for us. The audience was more open and friendly and still very close. When I saw a certain member of the audience, whom I felt had no right to be there for this limited presentation, I was thrown. I tried to avoid eye contact, but to be true to my artistic challenge and MS's selling of the show, I needed to make contact. I spiraled. I felt that perhaps my professional life was over now that I had moved into academia. Yes, some moments worked - a lot of it was really fun. But I was feeling a little offset, embarrassed, compromised, selfish, obedient. I could not talk to anyone about how I felt because I'm the only one who is finished after Act 1. It was a reasonably good second night performance, except for my few line fuck-ups. I really don't have much else to say. This whole process was fucked and a struggle and a fight with understanding people's morals, ambitions, and selfishness. I've pretty much had it. This whole experience has wound down into a dark rabbit hole. This hole has a bit

of ice and cold mud at the bottom of it. I am currently curled up and hiding in there. Since the hole is small, it is a bit warm and dark. Right now I would like to sit in it forever – if I was a rabbit and had fur.

Appendix B: Script Sample

- We sleep upstairs from pub: woke the wonders,
 MG: Had a shot, roused "the man" and kicked him out
 - of the pub. mother / daughter

inches."
 (Rest)
 "Her stomach was of the usual form. Small intestines measured 15 feet. Spleen was pale in color and weighed 2 and ¼ ounces. Her pancreas weighed 1 and ¼ ounces. Her kidneys were large."
 (Rest)
 (He releases The Venus' arm. She flees but doesn't get far. She runs smack into The Mother-Showman.)

- in SMA 11 room back of Pub
 Scene 27A, June 1, 1810, 11am Saturday
 Presenting The Mother-Showman and Her Great Chain of Being

THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.
 A) Strip down.
 Strip down come on yo filthy, Girl.
 B) Come on lets move thais it take off every stitch and hand it here and pronto!
 C) I'll clean em for ya.
 Damn its dark in here.
 That scrap too around yz/womans parts hand that here too.

THE GIRL.
 It dont come off
 It stays. Its custom.

THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.
 Fine.
 God. He wasnt lying.
 You got enough here to make em come running.
 Today's my lucky day.

THE GIRL.
 Whats that?

38

Get her to Love me. "The Adoption"
 Wants/Needs Objectives Obstacles/Hurdles Tactics/Actions Notes/Research Definitions

Super Obj: check out the merchandise I bought - and if its good (I'm hoping) get her ready for the show	I'm hung over from last night	I have a shot of Vodka at the bar	I have ams fill showtime - its our busiest day - Saturday - it was a slow week - last night drink in the pub I met her "man" I bought "the girl" from him for £50 : usually make 1000 to 1500 a show so - This was my savings of the summer so far.
① get her naked (I need to know if she's worth the £ I spent)	she doesn't know me or trust me + I'm pushed for time.	A) Bewilder B) stimulate C) Honour	SOB: Trepetation → take ↓ status
② let me inspect her without showing my true feelings	she's beyond what I imagined! I took a gamble and won.	A) Absorb B) devour C) shirk	SOB: Exited

Scene 27A: Presenting The Mother-Showman and Her Great Chain of Being (page 38)

Appendix B: Script Sample (continued)

Wants/Needs Objectives	Obstacles/Hurdles	Tactics/Actions	Notes/Research definitions
<p>③ get her clean quickly</p>	<p>- it hard to hide my excitement. - need something to clean her with.</p>	<p>A) muffle B) Accelerate C) court D) woo</p>	<p>still excited! # my status # little white lie #1</p>
<p>④ gain her respect - get her excited about being part of my show</p>	<p>she doesn't know who I am.</p>	<p>A) Intrigue B) captivate C) involve</p>	<p>soB: motherly</p>
<p>⑤ get her to trust me.</p>	<p>she feels abandoned - shes scared</p>	<p>A) Weaken B) calm C) challenge D) Ally E) Aborn F) Boost</p>	<p>soB: motherly # little white lie # 2 indecenty - Sexual disease prostitut e</p>

Scene 27A: Presenting The Mother-Showman and Her Great Chain of Being (page 39)