

## Joanna Sherman

# Tigers on a Tightrope

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joining, all at once,  
a secret society, a revolutionary  
movement, an exclusive club  
with the best members  
and a tradition that went back  
so far in time as to defy history.  
Comedy is ancient;  
comedy is universal.  
And even more important,  
comedy is political.*

*I don't care who I was in a former life.  
Why waste time trying to figure out if I was  
Nefertiti or Cleopatra?*

*I plan to use all my time to live this life with so much passion  
and wild good deeds that in the future someone will wish  
she was Flash Rosenberg in her former life.*

Flash Rosenberg, poet, theatre artist, cartoonist

Another generation is born every second - a tiny, individual generation of one, each of us a representative of our own moment in time. The whole of our lives is spent discovering connections between ourselves and others, between us and the world, until our small sphere is made porous with experience, and blossoms into a flourishing web of kinship. In fact, we are all related: our ancestors were all sisters, sons and cousins a mere thirty generations ago. The earth is an incestuous place, and we breathe in and out the ancient molecules of our ancestors with every breath. In a sense we are all of the same generation, all timeless reflections of each other. We are all Nefertiti; we are all Cleopatra.

It is a grand thought but, nonetheless, each of us wants to claim our own place in time and enrich it with our own ideas, even though they may be lifted from some cosmic source-of-all-thoughts and regenerated through our own unique sequence of discoveries. The smallest, most average events of childhood are prophecies which fulfil themselves over the course of our lives - both irreplaceably individual and, at the same time, universal.

*I, a young girl dancing on my toes and longing to be a ballet dancer, am eventually coaxed into applying my talents to a more "useful" field and enter architecture school. Caught up by the inevitable forces of desire and fate, I move, as if shuffled along by unseen hands, through architecture, into painting, into dance, into acrobatics, and into a side-show version of theatre that I never expect, that I never knew existed. I am the protégé*

*of an old Vaudevillian, Joe Price, a seventy-three year old benevolent tyrant with a shock of white hair and a keen eye. His classes are colourful pools of humanity animating his dingy studio in Hell's Kitchen, New York: strippers, cabaret artists, ice skaters, tiny gymnasts, old tap dancers with one "famous" trick, a seventy year old acrobat who could do a back flip and catch a handkerchief in his teeth, and actors. Why actors? I think. What could be their interest in acrobatics? Joe takes me to work with the actors; he puffs with emphysema as we climb endless studio stairs. These actors are like none I had ever seen - André Serban's Great Jones Repertory, André Gregory's Manhattan Project, and others - and I watch them in amazement. Their work is a fantastic marriage of dance, acrobatics, voice, music, communion, energy and joy - passionate abandon combined with discipline and technique. It is as though I have come home.*

A life in the theatre is a million lifetimes. An actor reinvents herself on the stage every moment. And, wholly born into her new skin, she reveals her new life to the audience again and again and again. This is the experience we share with every actor everywhere: the feeling of the foot on the floor, the turn of the head, a moment that transcends time and place, breathing the breath of Cleopatra and Salome, and repeating gestures done millennia ago.

Ingemar Lindh first made the connection for me, that a gesture had a life of its own. After years of ballet and acrobatics, I knew positions, steps and tricks. Innately, I imbued these movements with passion. Ingemar synthesised the concepts that freedom and precision are equal partners in a fully expressive body, that every resource is contained in the actor's body and soul, and that everything is revealed through the actor's being. Yet, ironically, the process of self-penetration, although a highly personal

one, involves focusing on some image or point outside oneself. The life of a gesture emerges through the cyclical process of connecting the external and the internal. These ideas seem obvious twenty years later, but I recognise that this information has accompanied me throughout my creative life and I happily pass it on.

But the revelation that I was treading on ancient and universal grounds came through the art of the clown. The first works of Bond Street Theatre, the company I co-founded in 1976 with Patrick Sciarratta, were comic but also dark and full of symbols, a cross between Fellini, Bergman, and the Three Stooges. My characters were clownesque, quite like Giulietta Masina, and our first venues the Festival Theatre d'Avignon and LaMama Theatre in New York. Being a clown was like joining, all at once, a secret society, a revolutionary movement, an exclusive club with the best members and a tradition that went back so far in time as to defy history. Comedy is ancient; comedy is universal. And even more important, comedy is political.

I have been unceasingly fascinated by symbols and their power, by what is understood universally, what wink, nudge, gesture, pose means the same thing everywhere, what makes us laugh and cry, what behaviours, thoughts and images are common to us as humans. In my observations, there are two basics of human nature which are truly universal (I hear the scholars shuffling their papers already): one is our elaborate response to gravity, the other is comedy.

Gravity binds us all to this small planet and our struggle with gravity is both poignant and grandiose. We find it sublime to fly, climb, swing, leap and transcend the merely earthbound by wearing stilts. It is the essence of circus. An anthropologist told me this story:

*Speaking to some tribesmen in Iraian Jaya, he*

*explains that in his country there are men who can fly through the air and walk high in the air upon only a thin rope. They laugh and say that this is impossible. The anthropologist shows them a photo of a tight-wire walker in the circus. They laugh and tell him that clearly he has been fooled! This is not a man walking on a rope because that is impossible. This is a tiger disguised as a man walking on a rope. That is possible.*

We laugh when what we expect is reversed, or what we consider normal is turned



Michael McGuigan and Joanna Sherman, Refugee Camp in Macedonia. Photo: Marko Georgiev

around. A person walking suddenly trips and falls - it's a comedy, a farce made of an activity we all know well. A pie in the face, a collapsing chair, a hat that won't stay on the head, or water squirting from the mouth, human beings share a propensity to laugh at the absurd: a man walking on a rope or a tiger disguised as a man walking on a rope. Take your pick.

Why is this important - finding universals, connections, synchronicities? Because it is our job: theatre is communication. Art is the way that societies speak about themselves. So, for us artists, it is not a matter of being "original", but of being truthful. Herein lies our power. In my work, I use a physical language because it can gracefully cross linguistic and cultural borders. Even in the most indirect and metaphorical behaviour, viewers vividly see their own reflections.

There is comfort in our kinship and I delight in connections, especially when they are found in faraway places: an all-night-long *dramagong* I attend in Bali is full of slapstick and silly business that could rival Chaplin and Keaton; the antics of the Monkey King bear close resemblance to Bugs Bunny; and any culture which uses chairs has the game we call Musical Chairs. No wonder tricksters, clowns and shamans with their earthy eccentricities are universally revered: they reveal our true selves under the adornments of our personalities. I readily admit that I am blessed to have such a life in which otherwise anti-social behaviour is not only permissible, but a requirement, our ancestors having paved the way.

My company and I have traversed this small planet, teeming with ideas and voices, and in the process of gathering and sharing, we have lost our borders. I feel "of the world", not of any particular address. The comedy and gravity incorporated into our work allows us to speak of our mutual content-

ment or concerns. Theatre is happily promiscuous; it freely cavorts with other disciplines, art forms and cultures.

There are times, however, when I feel like "the American". I apologise for CNN, McDonalds and *Baywatch* if I personally represent all that the USA ungraciously foists upon the rest of the world. Or I feel that I/we personally balance the ugly face of the USA with a real face, a truer face. Those huge, monolithic, transnational corporations have no allegiance to any country. We take to the field to meet Goliath, as dauntless as David, with our very earnest slingshot. My company worked in the Kosovar refugee camps in Macedonia last June, trying to balance the might of NATO with the might of our performances. Our work cannot help but be political.

*At the border of some foreign land, a Customs Inspector stops us and scrutinises our list of theatrical properties. From among our dozen or so trunks, he asks to see the twelve telephones listed, which aren't there because the scene with the phones was cut last week. However, there are some extra "unlisted" shoes. We show him the shoes. "They are telephones in the show", we assure him, bringing a shoe up to an ear to demonstrate - theatre, you know. The Customs Inspector frowns sceptically but nods us through. It's a small joy - using the imagination as a weapon against bureaucracy. But maybe the Inspector's frown is not incredulous; perhaps he flashes on his childhood self, gliding a shoe through the stratosphere in serious contemplation of its docking at the space station on the bureau or making a successful landing on the bed. A small fantasy of childhood. Perhaps the Customs Inspector, a man whose role in life is to inspect things, reaches into the universal storehouse of things remembered, recognises the mythic quality of a shoe, an unimportant average item of childhood, and, in a rush of understanding, fulfils the prophecy of*

*his youth in which things are living, working beings. And for a moment on the customs platform, all the shoes in the world take on lives of their own, fulfilling all possibilities of being boats or buildings, imbued with powers of flight or dance, and proving again that the individual and the universal are one.*

I am frequently told that "young people today" are only interested in the prefabricated entertainment of the media. They just don't have the patience for live theatre. I don't agree: there is a renewed interest in live theatrical phenomenon, in events that look you in the eye, literally and figuratively - visceral, interactive events that happen in "real" time. It was inevitable that television would reach a saturation point; it has ceased to be a definitive standard of entertainment and has become a mere time-filler and a medium for advertisement. Now, students come to us looking for something real, desperate for something of value worthy of dedicated effort. They are amazed to discover that there is a world of theatre beyond their sphere, rich with images and ideas. The revived interest in circus exemplifies this renewed appreciation for "real time" phenomenon over fabricated special effects.

On the one hand, the USA's lack of a long cultural history relieves the next generation from having to defend or preserve it. Countries with long histories present their modern artists with firmly codified baggage which is often construed as restrictive. On the other hand, without a firm grounding in any specific theatrical roots, young artists get a piecemeal education accenting the psychological without the physical - perfect for the "talking heads" format of television and film but detrimental to the development of a strong physical stage presence. As one student put it to me, the three choices for young artists in the USA are: the dominant

commercial theatre/mass media conglomerate, the "art for its own sake" avant garde, and functional theatre whose mandate is to educate or address specific problems. The options for ensemble work, collective creation, dedicated exploration, commitment to content rather than appearance, and other process-oriented work are scarce and scattered across the country... but growing.

Perhaps the largest battle for creative artists in the USA is that they are perceived as being elitist, purposefully obscure, and irrelevant, especially those whose work is original or experimental. How can we artists reverse this perception of exclusivity? By placing our work where people congregate. To Europeans and others for whom the open air spectacle is a grand tradition, art is not threatening. Artists in the USA need to be highly visible, very accessible and responsive to the needs of a sceptical public. There is a temptation for artists to be seduced by our own words and charmed by our own creativity - especially within the closed circuit of artists and critics.

Yes, this current generation of young people was raised on "eye candy", instant gratification and an attention-numbing flash of images. But, in fact, the speed of the technology which surrounds us has played havoc with all of us, a grand, cross-generation scheme that includes twenty-two year old techno-genius millionaires and old guys who run huge multinationals from their yachts. Few in this country have escaped the effects of technological time warping and the counterfeit world of special effects. Perhaps we are as united as generations have ever been. The divisions are far more dramatic between the "haves" and "have nots", across the globe, than between ages. There is an essential role for artists now to illuminate this fragile, uneven "global village", to cross the

great chasm between the teeming marketplace of the so-called developing world and the clean, mean marketplace of the overdeveloped world. What are the synchronicities between *these* realities?

*In a copy shop, a woman peers over my shoulder at the promotional photograph I am xeroxing. The image is a stilt-dancer caught in a leggy arabesque. She says to me with just a hint of accusation in her voice, "Do you know what that is?" Her accent clearly reveals a West Indian origin. "A Moko Jumbie. Stilts come from my culture. Now, the young people just put on the stilts and do the dances", she complains, "but when I was a girl, the Moko Jumbie were very religious figures". She tells me that the Moko Jumbie, the spirit-made-visible of West African origin, was brought to the West Indies during the slave trade. He is a reminder to the people of that which is more powerful than they - the laws of nature. As we discuss the roots of this figure, the attendant comes back with my copies. Both of us are surprised when she excitedly points to the stilt-dancer in the photo. "Stilts!" she says "You know these come from my country... China!"*

Stilts, as they artfully grapple with the forces of gravity, are not the only image or ritual activity that is gradually moving away from its mystical origins. All around us we see the sacred and the profane slipping together into a vast, secular pool of available material for fashion, sport or media marketing. Yoga for fitness, Sufi for centering, miracles by television, oracles by phone... Is nothing sacred? Blatant naiveté abounds. Can we blame the Japanese department store whose bright December window display showed the Christmas manger scene attended by a selection of Disney figures from Bambi to the Seven Dwarves? Or stranger still, the display of a cheery Santa hung upon a crucifix, tinsel and all? Such is the nature of our tasty



Bond Street Theatre in *Roadworks*.  
Photo: Brian O'Donoghue.

intercultural stew; it is bound to offend. The predominant images today are not about *being* - they are about *having*.

I am struck by a vision of the people of the world standing face to face, a breath away, yet still divided by a great chasm. The over-developed world is concerned with the ability to control, while the developing world is concerned with survival. I embrace chaos and contradiction as useful; artists seek resonance, not control. In a divisive world, artists are uniquely able to make positive, creative connections in order to balance the more self-serving connections made by politics and business. To me, this task is a pleasure. I am buoyed by our kinship. By our common vision, we give each other strength. We are not so far apart; in fact, we are all still close to our forebears painting panthers on the cave walls, and we still breathe the ancient molecules of our common kin.

JOANNA SHERMAN (USA) is the co-founder and Artistic Director of the Bond Street Theatre, a physical theatre ensemble founded in 1976. She has studied, taught, and performed with the company around the world, and participated in humanitarian projects in Ireland, Macedonia, Canada and Brazil. Also a musician and mask maker, she has been a panelist and speaker on physical theatre, women in theatre, and interdisciplinary programmes. She was the co-founder and Artistic Director of the Palenville Interarts Colony that won the MacArthur Award in 1990. She has a BFA in Visual Arts and Masters Degree in Cross-cultural Theatre from New York University.