

A WAY OF



RUTH ZAPORAH, author of *Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence*, is a master of solo, improvisational performances that are created in the moment, never to be repeated. She is a dancer, an actress, and a mime who creates characters of extraordinary, archetypal dimensions, illuminated by her unique use of language, gesture and her freedom of mind.

Ruth also conducts trainings in which people of all vocations awaken to their spontaneity, present awareness, and sense of play. Her work reveals that every action becomes exciting the moment we pay it our undivided attention. For more information about Ruth's schedule and work, see www.actiontheater.com.

INTRODUCTION BY CAROLYN SADEH

I met Ruth 15 years ago when she came to Northampton to lead a workshop. Her work was demanding, provocative, a little scary and a call to become more conscious about what we bring to the art of improvisation. I have continued training with Ruth over these past 15 years and have witnessed and learned from her both in and outside the studio. She has taught me the improvisation of presence in life itself:

Presence

Action Theater with Ruth Zaporah



I nearly drowned in the ocean with most of her family, we have journeyed with a Huichol shaman, climbed mountains, and cooked together. She walks her talk and I am grateful that she walked into my life.

Last summer I attended an intense training period with Ruth in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In working with the

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improvisational practice, I have a genuine impulse to play, to be open and surprised, but often unless grace steps in, I have to pass through all my patterns of survival and control: “see me, don't see me, am I doing it right, I'm not doing it right, this is boring, this is stupid, I don't believe what I'm doing, I don't like what he's doing, I'm not committed,” and so on, until I'm finally able to embrace each moment with curiosity and receptivity. It is that moment when we drop into our "animal nature," as Ruth describes it, when we are fully embodied animals, but with the added brain density to play and rearrange who we are, moment to moment, and we can make conscious choices.

There were 13 of us at the training, and one had her 14-month-old daughter with her, Amelia Grace. When Amelia first arrived she was quite shy, all eyes and seriousness, watching with caution. As the days went by, she became more animated and playful, and by the end she would happily go off with anybody there, dance a jig, crawl around the studio, move into the circle or happily be on the sidelines witnessing the work. Whatever Amelia Grace did was totally engaging because she did everything with such honest and wholehearted commitment, with her whole body, her whole self. Ruth suggested that we let her teach us about being open to whatever crosses our path.

The difference between Amelia and me is that she is just present in life, without self-consciousness. The invitation is for us to be as free and curious as Amelia Grace, but with awareness of this instrument we call the body/mind, with voice, and craft, and musicality, to rediscover our inherent nature, to get out of the way of energy at play.

As children we are in this stream much of the time. As adults we have to practice, we have to train the mind back into open space, train it back to zero, to trusting that we don't have to lean forward and topple over to make contact with life.

Carolyn Sadeh teaches Authentic Movement, Action Theater and yoga around the world as well as in western Massachusetts, where she lives. Reach her at foolplaysadeh@aol.com.

WHJ: *What is Action Theatre?*

RUTH: It's an improvisation practice of physical theater, which means that the action is produced by either a physical gesture or movement, or a vocal gesture in the form of language or vocal voice play. So using the



body and voice, action is expressed moment to moment without, hopefully—and this is why it’s a practice—any forethought. We say that “in improvisation you know where you’ve been and you don’t know where you’re going, but you always know exactly where you are, moment to moment to moment.” There’s a knowing, there’s not any questioning—and that’s what the practice is all about, because we’re always questioning where we are in the moment rather than just noticing it and staying open to the experience.

WHJ: *Does that kind of practice translate directly or metaphorically right over into life?*

RUTH: Immediately. I mean, it *is* life! Often we talk about how this practice in the studio can translate into life, but the practice in the studio *is* life. Nothing is other than life, right? It would be like saying, “How can I use this experience of sitting at the table with my family and translate that into life?” That is life! So I prefer to erase those kinds of boundaries and distinctions.

Action Theater is a discipline. We develop skills and expand our palette of physical, vocal and verbal expression. We learn the elements of the craft, which are time, space, shape, dynamics, composition. Then it’s up to the performer as to

how they pull all those skills together in order to empower their content. Our practice is not to obsess with the content of our actions, which we as human beings do. But instead to be in the experience of the actions, in the being of the body. Being.

WHJ: *What do you hope to convey to the audience?*

RUTH: Well that would be different for every performer. Some performers are political—where they draw their content from is up to them—I

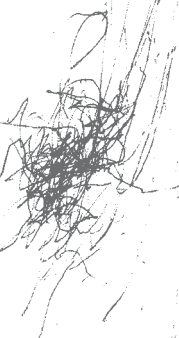
teach the skills. I don’t go see performances very much, because the performer is often not in a place of clarity, and being a teacher, I absorb their confusion. I go if I hear about a performer that is in a place of clarity in their performance, where they’re not *doing* anything, they’re not trying to make me as audience feel anything or think anything, but rather, they themselves are in an open and transformative experience. Then I as an audience member or witness can step into that experience with them and we meet in this enlightened territory.

WHJ: *So at its best, the audience not only perceives the content and the message, but they’re actually getting the experience behind the content.*

RUTH: Exactly, they’re in the magic.

WHJ: *Do you consider this your spiritual path?*

RUTH: That’s another one of those delineations. I don’t like to use the word spiritual. Because if I have to call something a spiritual practice, I would say it’s all the time, or I would say “what isn’t?” As long as I compartmentalize it, so that when I’m in the studio doing improvisation, or when I’m in the Zendo, then I’m doing my spiritual practice—that’s not where I want to go with it, that’s not what it’s about. Certainly it’s different when you walk into a quiet



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room than when you walk into a noisy one. The medium is always changing, whether it's having breakfast reading the New York Times, or whether it's in the dance studio doing improvisation, or whether it's taking a walk up into the snow-covered mountains. The setting is always different, but why would I want one of those settings to be a practice and not all of them?

WHJ: *So life is the practice and the improvisation.*

RUTH: Yes. I would say I used to have a spiritual practice. Now I'm living.

WHJ: *You graduated—congratulations! Tell me a little about what you actually do when you perform.*

RUTH: Most of the time I do solo improvisational performances. I go out on the stage not having any plan. I do have a costume, though—something black, always black, neutral.

WHJ: *Do you have a topic?*

RUTH: No I have absolutely nothing, it's like sitting in front of the white wall.

WHJ: *Unbelievable—that sounds terrifying to me.*

RUTH: Well, but you've been sitting in front of the white wall, right? Don't you sit?

WHJ: Yes.

RUTH: Well it's the same thing.

WHJ: *Yes, but you're walking in front of a group of people waiting to be entertained.*

RUTH: Oh yeah, but I've been doing this since I was four years old.

WHJ: *So tell me what happens. You go out there, you have nothing...*

RUTH: I go out there, and something happens! I mean the panic used to come in—which doesn't happen to me anymore, thank God—when I think nothing is going to happen. But something is always already happening—how can there be an empty moment?

WHJ: *What might be an opening event that might occur on the stage?*

RUTH: There might be a physical gesture, an arm might raise. Or a breath might become audible. Or a word might explode. You just never know. It depends on the audience, it depends on the energetic field that I'm in or we're all in at that moment...

WHJ: *Does it remain in the abstract domain of gestures and sound, or...*

RUTH: No it's not abstract at all. It's very human. Even if I

can't use English, because I'm often performing in foreign countries where they don't know the language—it's still very identifiable stuff, the way Charlie Chaplin is identifiable, right? What I do is not like Charlie Chaplin, except that even though it's physical, it's identifiable. And I can be really funny. I get caught in problems and play with them. There's content going on, but it's not linear. It's more like the content that goes on in your dreams, so it's odd, and yet it's very real. But it's not linear, it's not like a TV sitcom kind of content. What comes out depends on the audience. If I'm doing a show and most of the people have white hair, or if I'm doing a show like I did in a refugee camp during the Bosnian war, that has got to impact your content, because you want to connect to the people you're performing for. You don't just want to get up in front of everyone and say, "This is my art, take it or leave it." This art form is really about communication and connection.

WHJ: *That's kind of a paradox, because on the one hand you want your experience on stage to be untainted by...*

RUTH: It cannot be untainted by the context. Unless you've lost awareness. Just like any other aspect of your daily life. The context that you're in as you move through your day impacts your behavior, actually calls forth behavior.

WHJ: *It would be a fine line for a performer to not be adjusting his or herself to seek approval.*

RUTH: That's why it takes a certain kind of mastery. Because on the one hand, you're not working for the audience—that gets you into a lot of trouble. But on the other hand, you're aware of and relevant to the context that you're in. That's automatic if you're awake. If you're not awake—and we all know lots of people like this—you follow your own agenda no matter how your context changes.

WHJ: *Tell me more about your experience in Bosnia?*

RUTH: We had been invited over there by these women's peace groups in the early 90s. I performed in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and more recently, in '94, I performed in Kosovo. We had to cancel the last performance in the middle of the show because there was somebody out in the audience pointing a gun at us. It was not a real pleasant situation, We left for home the next morning.

WHJ: *Were you there as a sort of peace offering?*

RUTH: No—in fact one of the things I learned is that I felt for everybody, the oppressed and the oppressors. Everybody was responding to their dramatic and historic conditioning. Who knows, if I were in their shoes possibly I, too, under threat, could hold a gun to somebody's head.

In the studio our aim is to unload conditioned behavior. Often the very act of noticing habitual responses frees us from them because at that moment we climb into the beingness of embodied awareness and that moves us closer to freedom.