

REFLECTIONS ON IMPOSSIBLE PURSUITS: STAGING HARRY PARTCH

This essay traces the origin, research, development and production of the performance work entitled *The Boy Who Went Outside*,¹ which took as its point of departure the life, work and struggles of the American musical revolutionary and composer Harry Partch. It is at once a personal reflection, the biography of a stage production, an argument about discursive hegemony, and a contribution to the ongoing discussion amongst artists and scholars about the problematized texts that fall under the rubric of ‘auto/biographical theatre.’ In the course of describing this work—my first attempt in this genre—I aim to demonstrate that this kind of theatre is as much about its creator as it is about its putative subject, and is therefore as much ‘autobiography’ as it ‘biography’—or rather, that it is neither, as the theatre cannot sustain meaning in a way that is equivalent to that of written text. As Anne Nothof has observed,

Portraits of artists on the stage assume life and veracity when they are imbricated with the sensibilities and convictions of the playwright, when they become vehicles for self-expression. Like a self-portrait, any play about an artist is an imaginative expression of a series of possibilities, created as a way of understanding the subject and the self: the playwright *is* the artist. (Nothof, in Grace and Wasserman, 149)

Playwrights themselves seem to be in agreement with scholars on this subject: as the late Lorena Gale has written, “[t]he writer can only present an interpretation of the life they are examining All characters, even self-portraits, are contrived.” (Gale, in Grace and Wasserman). Linda Griffiths, author of many auto/biographical plays, concurs: “The real people are springboards into an intersection between reality and the imagination,” (Griffiths, *ibid.* 301), and this imagination belongs to the playwright as well as to each member of each audience that receives the work.

Upon reflection I came to understand that my choice of Partch as a subject served a second related, but distinct, purpose: an attempt to do my part to rescue something I believed to be singular, important, precious and fragile; that the play would form, even with its limited reach in time and space, “a crucial site for inscribing and preserving cultural memory,” (Grace 15) namely, Harry Partch’s musical and aesthetic legacy. And, especially, in the case of Partch, staging a performance work about his life and creative project acquired a kind of urgency, as “giving voice and embodiment to marginalized, forgotten or devalued lives only adds to their

¹ This work will be referred to throughout as *The Boy Who...*

significance.” (16) I came to realize that *The Boy Who...* was therefore about my search for a kind of heroic narrative that would vindicate my own choices and practices as an artist and person. In other words, as Sherrill Grace has proposed, I was using the theatre “to embody and perform a process of self-creation, recreation, and rediscovery.” (21)

In the course of confronting the various obstacles that arose in attempting to realize the production I came to further conclusions: both the musical establishment as it exists today *and Partch himself*—insofar as he survives in the form of the directives he established regarding his musical estate—resisted my attempts to rewrite his life and work in heroic terms of any kind. The creation of the work, and the work itself, formed a tangled knot made up of various strands of meaning, difficult indeed to untie. But I begin with the question of where the knot had come from in the first place.

ORIGINS

Can one speak in the voice of one art form to consider another? Why not create a theatre piece *about* music? So I thought in the fall of 2004 when I was working as a movement coach on a revue for singing actors. I was struck by the thought that singing all day surely produced distinct psychic and physical effects in professional performers. This turned into speculation about how different musical keys and chords produced consistent and predictable emotional effects in the listener. Before I knew it—and how this actually happened I don’t recall—I had stumbled upon the idea of creating some sort of text-based piece about Harry Partch. Who was Partch, and how did I know anything about him? I realize now that I had learned bits and pieces about him as part of a course in new music and dance I took during my undergraduate years. But why had he recurred to me at that moment?

Harry Partch (1901-1974) was not only a composer, but also an innovative theorist, who, in the 1920s and ‘30s, formulated an entirely new system of tuning, based on ancient Greek, Asian and pre-Classical Western musical forms.² Because no instrument in our culture could play his music, he became of necessity an inventor and builder, and over the course of his lifetime built twenty-five remarkable and beautiful instruments. He rejected Western music, in particular its dissociation from other art forms, and so also became a musical dramatist who

² Observations about Partch’s life and work are taken from *Harry Partch: a Biography*. Gilmore, B. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.), and the web sites of Dean Drummond and Kyle Gann.

wrote his own texts and created music-dance-theatre works based on classical texts such as those of Oedipus and the Bacchae. He may have been the first serious interdisciplinary artist of the 20th Century in the West. (For more detailed biographical information on Partch please see www.harrypartch.com and www.corporeal.com/cm_main.html)

Ignored or condemned by the musical establishment during his lifetime, Partch is largely unknown even to music aficionados today, perhaps because what he proposed is too threatening to an edifice of ideas and practices that we have come to regard as inviolable and unquestionable. His story offers truths about how modes of cultural production are established and perpetuated, and how rival discourses are ghettoized or even erased.

THE OUTSIDER

In the 1930s Partch began to adapt guitars and violas, lengthening their necks in order to expand their pitch range. (Gilmore 72) But then he began to build entirely original instruments in a new microtonal tuning system. He built over twenty-five of these, including keyboard, string and percussion instruments with wonderful names, such as the Chromelodeon, an organ that featured forty-three pitches to the octave; the Kithara (an updated version of the ancient Greek instrument); as well as the Harmonic Canon, Cloud Chamber Bowls, Diamond Marimba and something called the Spoils of War that was made of spent shell casings.³

Though he was largely ignored by the standard musical institutions during his lifetime Partch became a brilliant spokesman for his ideas. To explain his philosophy of music as well as his ideas about intonation he wrote a weighty treatise, *Genesis of a Music*, which has served as a primary source of information and inspiration to many musicians for the last half-century. (61) Always a gadfly, whose taste for polemic was served by a powerful writing talent, he criticized Western concert traditions: the conventional roles of performer, composer and audience, and the situation of music in society as a whole, in particular its dissociation from other art forms. As Bob Gilmore has written, “no matter where music historians locate him, Partch remains a true American original.” (7)

Remarkably, Stuart Isacoff neglected to make any mention of Partch in the first edition of his book *Temperament*, an omission that is hard to fathom given that, in many ways, Partch’s

³ Partch continued to build new instruments and adapt existing ones throughout his life, as Bob Gilmore documents in great detail.

greatest contribution as a musical theorist was in the highly contested area of temperament. For this neglect Partch's defenders and champions accused Isacoff of being part of "a conspiracy of the status quo." (Isacoff 238) He only corrected this defect in the Afterword to the paperback edition of the book, which afforded him the opportunity of making the observation that Partch was "a thoroughly mediocre composer," (Ibid.) I disagree, and rather believe that Partch represents a paradigm of the rebel and the outsider, whose story offers truths about how cultural practices are established and perpetuated, and how rival discourses are subverted, marginalized or erased.

And this became the main thematic thrust of *The Boy Who...* Partch was an outsider in every way: alienated from his family, he spent much time alone; he was homosexual in a time when it was very difficult and dangerous to live openly as one; he was a rebel who fought relentlessly against an established order, and was frequently mocked and dismissed. Meanwhile, he went on, creating new instruments, writing music that few people could accept or understand, and living a marginal and nomadic existence. He constantly moved house—including his growing store of often very large and bulky instruments— across the west and mid-west of the United States to engage in various commissions, most of which were from college music departments.

At this juncture it is important to note the conflation of 'biography' and 'autobiography' in this narrative: I'm both inspired by Partch's story and feel an identification with it, as someone who feels acutely his outsider status. I too am homosexual, and fled home and family early in my life, embracing radical politics, and then, by a circuitous route, finding my way to an artistic practice by means of which I create work that is situated in the interstitial and often unnameable territory between performance disciplines. I come from dance, having become a choreographer some years after I began to dance professionally, but migrated steadily to theatre, carrying with me, however, the aesthetic suitcase of assumptions and dispositions that are part of a dance sensibility. Over the years I've created many works that run the gamut from dance- and physical-theatre to full-length plays and musical satires, as well as performance pieces that defy definition, as Partch was driven to do.

THE BOY WHO WENT OUTSIDE

“Once upon a time/There was a little boy/And he went outside”: (Gilmore 20) This was a graffito written on the wall of a projection room in one of the silent-movie theatres where Partch played the mechanical organ as a teenager growing up in the U.S. Southwest. I decided to call the play *The Boy Who Went Outside*, as this poetic fragment seemed to offer a summary of both his life and work.

But, to take a step back, was this work to *be* a play? Ought it not to be an opera? Or an indefinable music-dance-theatre hybrid, the like of which Partch created a number of times in his troubled career? The problem of medium was the first of many to come crowding around me as I pondered how to proceed with the piece. At first I decided that it ought indeed to be a piece of music-theatre, scored for actors, singers and musicians, and that it might involve dancers as well. But then, reasoning that the piece needed to be based in argument—an argument about the true nature of this mysterious art form called music—and ought to convey as much of Partch’s life story as possible, I opted to write a play, albeit one with a liberal dose of music.

The next obstacle to surmount had to do with Partch’s body of work: which pieces should I feature in the play, and how might they be invoked, framed or described? At one point in the development of this work my administrator and I were informed that we were not to be permitted the rights to use *any* of Partch’s music: he had specified that he did not approve of his pieces being chopped up like so much yardage to be used as supports for plays or other works of performance. This at first seemed like a ghastly blow: how could we portray Harry if we couldn’t play excerpts of his famous pieces, such as *U.S. Highball*, a vocal and instrumental piece about riding freight trains from Sacramento to Chicago? Or *Delusion of the Fury*, a massively ambitious work for female soloist, male chorus, and a particularly large contingent of his instruments? And how could the story be complete without reference to Partch’s *Oedipus the King*, with its libretto by W.B. Yeats, and which had been in some ways his greatest success?

André Cormier, the first composer I approached to do this work—and there were three in all—had stated very definitively that he didn’t wish to excerpt the music. This had seemed to be an impossible condition at the time, but now that we knew we were forbidden to use the passages of the scores I realized that it was actually a boon: how could we have meaningfully excerpted Partch’s music? And would it not be much more powerful to commission *original* music written in the language that Partch had propounded and championed? This would

demonstrate that he had established the basis for a *living* musical tradition, rather than merely having been the inventor of a sideshow in a museum of forgotten musics.

But how could we commission music on the original instruments? Partch's inventions are in the hands of Dean Drummond, co-director of an ensemble called Newband, and director of the Harry Partch Institute, based at Montclair State University in New Jersey, where only nine of them have been copied. (Gilmore 394) It would be like shipping elephants across the country, *if* we could get permission to rent them. Whatever band we hired would then have to learn how to play them. But then Patrick Pennefather, the second composer whom I approached, and who participated in two of the three development workshops, discovered a web site where one could play the instruments on line, and also download one's compositions for them. However, we were also prohibited from incorporating *images* of the instruments into the production. So, while we could talk about the evolution of the Chromelodeon, and compose on it virtually, the audience would not be permitted to see what it actually *looked* like.

On two occasions I wrote to Danlee Mitchell, Partch's heir and the executor of his musical estate, in an attempt to receive some special dispensation regarding Partch's music, and in the hope that he might collaborate with us in some way. While we *did* hear from his assistant, who re-iterated the rule that no excerpt of the music could be used in any theatrical work, we never heard from Mitchell himself; there evidently was no interest in the project whatsoever.

We carried on regardless. Patrick got to work on the music, setting the more poetic passages of text that were to be sung or sung-spoken. But there was just so much story to tell, so much dialogue and dispute, and at the rate he was going the work would be six hours in length. The problem of form came back to haunt us: was this to be sung-through, like some variant of opera, or was the music to be used only sparingly, in certain scenes, a kind of *singspiel*?⁴ Or was it to be restricted to transitional music and underscoring, or perhaps some combination of the latter two choices?

The main point of the work had to do with performing my own version of a 'rescue' of Partch, his work and his legacy, establishing a new text about him, and extending, if only

⁴ Merriam Webster online defines *singspiel* as "a musical work popular in Germany especially in the latter part of the 18th century characterized by spoken dialogue interspersed with songs." *The Magic Flute* is in fact a *singspiel*.

marginally, his cramped place in the cultural record. But how does one write a dramatic work that is basically biographical? How can one meaningfully condense a life into the frame of two-act play? As Sharon Pollock has observed, “it is impossible to write or portray a life. It can only be lived.” (Pollock in Grace and Wasserman 297) Merely to convey certain ‘facts’ is an enterprise that is probably doomed to failure:

The facts, while important, are never enough, and they are rarely clear-cut. Truth is always ambiguous, fractured and dispersed across the perspectives of all contributors to the life story, and no one’s life story is ever only their own. (283)

And facts on their own do not make works of biography, let alone those of drama. As Pollock goes on to state, “biography. . . is not well served by the container of theatre. Time and space, the play script, the performance, the production elements,” (ibid.) all contrive to take us into an entirely different order of experience. As David Hare has famously observed, the play is contained in time and exists only “in the air” moment by moment as it is being performed. (Comden 45) The ‘biography’ as a text-based object that unfolds in linear order in the act of reading, and that may be recalled at leisure by the reader, disappears; as Pollock says: “I believe the only life on stage is that of the play.” (Pollock 299) Nonetheless I felt driven to wrestle the subject of Partch’s life and work to the mat, and concluded that representations of the basics of his family life, his early years, his first contact with music and his major achievements, all merited some place in the narrative.

I found the evidence surrounding his relationships with his parents particularly compelling, and the scenes I wrote for Partch and the ghosts of his mother and father remained in every draft. Indeed, the theme of troubled relations between parents and children, and the search for some mythologized *artistic* parent, as a replacement for an emotionally absent biological one, proved to form an important part of the play’s meaning. This too, reflects a theme that is located in autobiography, that is, my troubled and contradictory relationship with my own father.

In order to generate dramatically credible scenes I had to contrive encounters between Partch and any number of individuals implicated in his life story, as well as to invent characters outright. There was a scene with a piano teacher in which Partch’s primary argument with Western concert music was articulated, one that also survived all the cutting and rewriting. I wrote a scene between Partch and a woman named Bertha Knisely, a close friend who fell in love with him, and who was ultimately hurt by his inability to reciprocate her feelings for him. I

imagined the scene where Partch met W.B. Yeats, who gave him permission to use his libretto for *Oedipus the King*. Another scene that survived all the cuts was one in which Harry has sex with a stranger while sleeping rough as a hobo, in which it is revealed that his testicles had never descended, one of many intriguing and unusual facts about Partch:

Man: You—um... Well...you have no balls!

Harry: I do, they're just hiding.

Man: Huh?

Harry: They never came down; never descended. [To Lily] How in hell did you *know* this?!

Lily: I did my research, sir.

Harry: Was it a matter for living room conversation?

Lily: People talked; they gave interviews.

Harry: Oh, Christ on a bike! [He lies back down.]

Lily: Go back, please.

Man: Uh, Miss, I don't feel like I'm really a specific character?

Lily: [Pause; then she resumes typing.] I met him at Anderson Creek, up near Big Sur—

Harry: —he was a convict, working with a team on this mountain road. He had a very strong smell; you never forget smells.

Man: Okay, that works for me.

Lily: Oh, thanks so much.

Harry: I have no balls: they never came down; never descended.

Man: Wow. Weird.

(Alexandrowicz, pp. 19-20.)

(As one can tell from this excerpt the writer who is composing the play we are seeing enters freely into the scenes as she is writing them; of this, more below.)

So, if this *were* in fact to be a play-with-music, whom ought Patrick and I to cast as our workshop performers? We held auditions for actors who could sing, professional singers who could act, and progressive-minded musical theatre performers who might also be able to dance. Just as Partch had been—throughout a career spent defying disciplinary boundaries—we were saddled with the problem of what breed of performer would be best suited to the tasks of

realizing this cross-eyed beast we stitching together like a pair of Frankensteins. This problem is overtly addressed in a scene from act two of the play, where Harry finds himself on a talk show called *Stone's Throw*, whose host is a young Scotsman named Zachary Stone:

Harry: Ideally, singers would be skilled in the arts of dancing, acting and mime, so you'd just have performers, all speaking the same language. But in our specialist culture, well, dancers, singers and actors are like different species.

Zachary: But how could you change that, in practical terms? I mean, it would take decades for people to learn to sing, dance, act and play musical instruments with equal skill, right?

Harry: It's the art forms that have to change. Someone said, "Ideals are like stars. We can't touch them but we can look to them for guidance."

Zachary: That's lovely, but these art forms have grown up this way over centuries; you can't just undo all that emphasis on virtuosity. (37)

Indeed. We engaged a company of well-intentioned and intrigued performers of various skills and dispositions and hoped for the best.

THE FIRST WORKSHOP

Eight performers were engaged for this six-day exercise, which was held in Vancouver in June of 2008. I had decided to frame the themes of Partch's life story in the terms of a particular genre, that of the courtroom drama. Taking place in some supernatural ether after Harry's death, it was a trial presided over by one of the Greek muses, Polyhymnia, who is responsible for such things as sacred song, oratory, lyric, rhetoric and singing; she seemed to be the appropriate Muse to assess Harry's *oeuvre*. She became Madame Justice Polly Hymnia—Polly for short—and the point of the trial over which she presided was to determine Harry's place in the artistic firmament, and therefore in the history of his art form. Would he join the ranks of his illustrious composer-ancestors, his works taken into the canon of remembered and repeated works? Or would he and his pieces be left to sink into the river of forgetfulness that the ancient Greeks called Lethe? I pressed Lauriston Marshall, one of Harry's life-long supporters, into service as his defense counsel:

Laurie: Your Honour—Madame Polly: Harry Partch was born in Oakland, California on June 24, 1901 in the family home at 5861 Occidental Street. His parents, Virgil and

Jennie, had been missionaries in China, until they had to flee during what is known as the Boxer Rebellion. Grew up with various musics, Western and otherwise. Fled the world, as it were, to make another, musically speaking. Iconoclast, revolutionary, curmudgeon, nomad, former hobo and migrant worker, essayist, librettist, poet, inventor of twenty-five original instruments to play this new world of music he had made. Conjuror of new something-or-others in the interplay of music, drama, dance. I'm exhausted, but I forge on. Let's begin at the end, shall we?

But the format was wrong for the story I was trying to tell: the courtroom drama observes very highly formalized rules, and any content framed within it must respond faithfully to them. It presumes that a crime has been committed: What had Harry Partch done to warrant his being put on trial? Perhaps members of the early 20th century American cultural establishment who denied him so much should have been put on trial in the play instead. But the reference to a court proceeding that did survive all the way to the production script was that of determining Harry's place in the historical record. Would he be remembered and honoured, or would he disappear into the obscurity that is the fate of most artists whose work is not selected for elevation to canonical status?

In this draft—and each one that followed—there was the problem of how to convey a mass of music theory that would be comprehensible to an audience one had to assume had no musical training, and that would somehow manage to avoid being anything but deadly exposition. If people didn't have certain basic information about the difference between just intonation and equal temperament, had no idea what microtones were, or how harmonics work, they wouldn't know what was at stake, and therefore the story would mean nothing to them. The fact that I have no formal musical training myself in some ways compounded the problem. But from another perspective it made the task clearer: if *I* could grasp the terms of the debate, I could safely predict that my audience would as well. But the first version of this passage of text ran to four densely argued pages, an appalling trap to place in the path of an unsuspecting director; but, of course *I* was the director.

This seems like a good place to expose some of the problems one faces as a playwright-director, a kind of two-headed creature that in my case was even more vexed, given that my background is in dance. What could a director with a passion for movement do with a four page

monologue on music theory? Into this were inserted bits of text for the other actors, functioning in the scene as a chorus of students attempting to follow a lecture by Harry Partch. Supposedly to be sung, they were either repetitions of what the principal speaker had said, or questions framed to prompt the next point to be conveyed to the audience.

We live in a culture where text is privileged over other modes of expression, in particular those evanescent figurations that are generated by the bodies of performers. Dramatic texts that win awards are published, while most disappear into the clouds; this despite the fact that, as Peter Hinton once observed to me, “plays are only incidentally works of literature.” While sitting at one’s computer engaged in the intense internal testing of words and their placement as imagined utterance one rarely wonders what a director will do to embody such utterance in a credible manner, even if the director who will be saddled with the dire problems presented by texts that are not inherently dramatic is oneself! In this case the writer in me, while fully aware that this scene might merely be absurd, felt that as a crucial piece of text *some* way would be found to make it work dramatically.

It is only recently that Western cultures have begun to explore writing “on one’s feet” in the rehearsal room as part of an actor-driven process of creation. Daniel MacIvor remarked to me when we were working together in 1992 that *House* was the only play of his that he had performed to that point in which he did not visualize the page of text in some part of his brain as he was speaking its lines in performance because they had arisen precisely in this way, as the products of *physical* improvisation. This topic points to the ways in which the desires of playwrights and directors may operate very much at cross purposes to one another, with often bitter or even explosive consequences.

My fond wish in the course of writing successive drafts of the play was that I might dispense entirely with this huge chunk of explanatory text, and somehow convey its content via dramatically active dialogue, but I only succeeded in whittling it down further and further, to about a page and a quarter.

THE SECOND WORKSHOP

The playwright who attempts a work of auto/biographical theatre must grapple with both the ethical and aesthetic problems regarding how many of a subject’s less attractive features

ought to figure in the portrait. Act one of the third draft—with which I entered the second week-long workshop, for seven performers, and held in December of 2008—ended with two scenes that revealed Partch's combative relationships with other composers; these scenes formed part of the final draft of the play. In one of them Partch gets into a very embarrassing wrangle at a dinner party with the eminent French Jewish composer Darius Milhaud, who, after fleeing the Nazis, was offered a faculty position at Mills College in Oakland. In this scene Partch's envy of others' successes—and his loathing of Old World compositional approaches—were in unpleasant evidence, as well as his total disregard for the atrocities of the Second World War. The text also included his conflicted relationships with friends, benefactors, collaborators and supporters and disputes with other composers, such as John Cage (whose work he scorned utterly) as well as with critics and representatives of the musical establishment. It was not, as they say, a pretty picture but I felt his gritty curmudgeonliness was both engaging and true—in some essential way—to the man himself. This points to a cognate problem with plays of auto/biography: depending on the disposition of the writer their content may be perceived by interested parties as hagiography or libel, or both by turns; but in any event, untrue.

Were these valid elements in the telling of Partch's story? At some level, yes: my primary source for all of these imagined scenes was the Gilmore biography, which is meticulously researched and finely written, and is highly regarded by those who knew and worked with Partch. Would he have approved of all the liberties I took? He was, of course, unable to respond, and, as I point out below, the executors of his estate seemed entirely uninterested in the project, and therefore were not in a position to object to my fictionalizing. On the topic of deceased subjects Sharon Pollock muses, “[f]ortunately they’re dead, but is there an ethical dimension to my cutting and pasting their lives to make a better dramatic point or play? I believe acknowledging ... my theft and manipulation of their lives meets my ethical obligation to them. My primary ethical obligation (if one can prioritize ethics) is to the integrity of the work.” (Pollock 299) As Maria Campbell states, “[a]ll artists are thieves. It is the artist’s obligation to steal, but then to give back tenfold.” (Campbell in Grace and Wasserman 305) On this subject, central to the burden of the auto/biographical playwright, I—perhaps all too conveniently—concur with Linda Griffiths, who has claimed, “[t]o some it’s stealing, to others it’s the creation of a mythology.” (Griffiths in Grace and Wasserman 303)

Perhaps the most daunting problem in climbing the hill of this piece had to do with who was to play Harry Partch. How could one find an actor to do justice to this vivid eccentric? And what age should he be? If I were presenting Harry in all his various ages and manifestations, then a middle-aged or elderly actor would not do. Scott Bellis, the very skilled and commanding actor I worked with in two of the three play workshops, proved to be very convincing as Harry. But it was still too much to burden one actor with the task of bringing this complex figure—and the whole troubled arc of his life—into dramatic focus. The textual expression of this problem was that the play involved massive monologues that were unwieldy and dramatically flat.

In both workshops the format was essentially the same: it was a bio-play where Harry harangued the audience, and appeared in every scene, regardless of the age he was meant to be. The composer set some of the text to music, while the actor-singers struggled with microtones. And I struggled with what passages and events from Partch's life ought to be staged. I added and subtracted and revised, and found that there were a number of scenes that kept sticking to the wall, as it were, after they had been thrown at it repeatedly. Others, while conveying compelling narrative about Partch's life, and perhaps graced with strong and playable dialogue, were just too much. These scenes were too long and added too much weight to what was a very ponderous, slow-moving ship indeed and were tossed overboard.

At the reception after the second workshop the lead Mr. Bellis' wife, Sandra Ferens, asked me why this story was compelling for me: "I want to see your personal investment in this figure somehow revealed in the play." Her comment and question triggered something I had already been pondering: perhaps the play ought really to be about *my struggle to make this play*; it ought to be the story of a playwright struggling with an impossible project, regardless of the consequences.

THE THIRD WORKSHOP

This final six-day workshop was held in the summer of 2009, and ostensibly was about incorporating video components into the piece, although the focus of the work was again on the script. While this was unfortunate for Jamie Nesbitt, the video artist who was left cooling his heels much of the time, I made a breakthrough in terms of the dramaturgy. Rather than simply writing myself into my play I took a step back from the story and invented a character who was essentially a stand-in for me. The playwright was a woman named Lily Barlow who was

struggling to tell the story of Partch's life. We would see on stage what she was writing, and therefore the play could have the kind of mutability that only exists in the imagination, or in dreams.

In the course of the play, Partch's, as well as her other characters, begin to talk to her, and she to them. She risks being sucked into the fictional world that lives in her imagination: such is the power of her engagement with it, and her need for it to fill some crucial void in her life. Here at last was a way to bring some part of an artist's predicament into focus, as well as the issue of parents and children, which now also entered the thematic field of the work: Partch became a kind of father to Lily, an elder artist whose struggles and sacrifices were both an inspiration and a warning.

Scene 9. Harry Emerges from the Play and Confronts Lily

[Richard as Harry is staring at Lily, who has an astounded look on her face.]

Harry: I never liked girls much—

Lily: I know.

Harry: —let alone women.

Lily: Some of them helped you; gave you money.

Harry: That's none of your damn business. Who *are* you?

Lily: I was baptized Lillian, but you can call me Lily.

Harry: I died: my heart stopped and I fell off a bed and hit the floor. Is that going into it too?

Lily: I can resist everything except temptation.

Harry: What makes you think you can write a play about me or anyone else?

Lily: I've written lots of plays.

Harry: So what? You barge in here like this, telling me you're trying to write my life, and that I'm dead...

Lily: I thought you said you knew you were dead. [Pause]

Harry: Now I wonder: Am I a man dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I'm a man?

Lily: But I think it's more likely that you're the butterfly and I'm the man... as it were.

Harry: What if I don't want to be in your play?

Lily: You don't have much choice: you're dead.

Harry: Right. [He climbs back into the scene, and gives the Harry robe back to Michael.] (Alexandrowicz, pp. 17-18)

In the course of the piece we hear a recorded voice that conveys a steadily dwindling bank balance, as Lily has no income, and has placed all her eggs in this one basket. Towards the end of act two, as she seems to be sliding into some kind of mental derangement, we see her cracking open her RSPs. We also hear from her agent, who informs her that the play has been turned down by the artistic director who might have offered her a production in his next season—or a commission to develop the play further—in favour of the work of a younger artist.

Friends, board members and other interested parties who had attended the first two workshops felt that I had at last found the right path for this troublesome piece to follow. Many of Partch's speeches now belonged to Lily, the writer who had become the focus of the story. She narrated his life, in terms as brief as possible, while he also spoke to the audience directly. At times they spoke together, especially at the commencement of some scenes, as what she made up out of imagination became words in his mouth.

PRODUCTION

My administrator and I decided, after three week-long workshops over almost two years of development—which was certainly not enough—to produce the play at Performance Works on Vancouver's Granville Island in May of 2010, despite a serious funding shortfall that a number of very generous donors and I tried to ameliorate. The play was to be for six actors, most of whom had participated in one or more of the workshops: Meghan Gardiner, Anna Hagan, Josue Laboucane, Michael Mori, Richard Newman and Linda Quibell. I began to collect my design team, and to find a stage manager. I also had to find a new composer and sound designer, as Mr. Pennefather was unavailable. The young woman I found to fill his shoes, Lee Gellatly, was very much an emerging artist, but she was fascinated with the project, understood perfectly the musical issues at stake, wrote well, worked fast, and was prepared to be endlessly adaptable.

In the course of the fall of 2009 and the winter of 2010 the script came more clearly into focus: the playwright character Lily has been offered a commission to write a site-specific pageant about Confederation to be stage in various parks in Ottawa. She is trying to write the

part of the play that deals with Thomas D'Arcy McGee and his assassination, the only one of its kind in Canada's political history. But she keeps diverting her attention from the only income-generating project she has in order to work obsessively on her play about Partch. Her agent berates her for this career-threatening negligence, but Lily persists, trying to convey the beauty and power of microtonal tuning to someone who, while pretending to be her friend, is really only interested in her percentage of the commission.

It is said that 90% of directing is casting; if so, the remaining 10% consists in finding the right set design. And the question of how to realize a set design was indeed problematic for *this* play, as it took place in a huge number of settings; whatever approach we took had to allow for maximum fluidity. The designer, Conor Moore, and I arrived at a very austere concept: a desk and filing cabinets for Lily downstage right, a series of scrim-covered screens on wheels, as well as a suite of five-legged stools, and two half-tables that formed a longer table when placed together; that was all. One *might* say that the poverty of the production helped us to avoid doing too much; however, I wish we had had twice the resources to serve a piece of this thematic reach and richness.

I decided that all the actors would play Harry—men and women, young and old—except for the woman who was to play Lily. The costume designer wanted to know why. I understood that this would make her life very complicated indeed: how was she to costume a character played by five actors of different sexes, ages and body types? I told her that I supposed it was about the fluid nature of identity, and the provisional nature of any theatrical portrait of someone who had actually lived, or any character at all, for that matter. “When there is a coincidence between the subject of the autobiographical performance and the body of the performer for that script, then the frenzy of signification ... has for audiences an unusually strong claim to authenticity.” (Bennett, in Grace and Wasserman 35) I wanted to frustrate the audience's desire for this kind of authenticity; to interrupt this “frenzy of signification,” and to reveal instead that identities are constructed and performed, may be assumed and discarded at will, and to allow an audience to observe its own investment in the power of embodied performance. (Dolan 431) The designer solved the problem of multiple Harrys with one beautiful piece of costume, a maroon, Kimono-like robe, rather like a smoking jacket, that the actors passed from one to another, depending on whose turn it was to play Harry. We arrived at

a particular set of moves that each pair of actors executed, so that the passing on of the role acquired the flavour of a ritual.

In this “finished” version of the play Lily imagined Partch at the moment of his death, and then as a youth, as a young man, a man of middle years, and then again as an old warrior, exhausted by his many struggles. Both of the younger male actors played him in the first half of act one. Later on the women played him as well, pushing the whole issue of identity across the gender divide. (The elder female actor proved to be perhaps the most convincing Harry Partch!) Richard Newman, the elder male actor who played Harry at the opening of the piece, did so again in a scene where he emerges from the play-world and confronts this woman who is attempting to reduce the complexity of his life to a two-act performance. And he also played Harry in the crucial scene near its end, when Lily tries desperately to hang on to this character she has invoked, but who is now leaving her. This penultimate scene comprised the only remaining vestige of the play-as-courtroom-drama: Madame Justice Polly Hymnia intends to determine Partch’s place in the artistic firmament on the basis of a statement he must make summing up his life and work. He does his best to be both pointed and concise, but in the end he refuses to comply with her request, electing instead to embrace the oblivion that awaits all of our endeavours.

STAGING CHOICES

At the top of the show the actors, playing characters in a scene from the commissioned play Lily is attempting to write, crawled out from behind her desk. Richard Newman also played Darcy McGee, but in the middle of his harangue on independence for Upper and Lower Canada—delivered from one of the aforementioned stools—he morphed into Harry, giving up his frock coat and top hat for the “Harry robe,” and falling into the arms of the other actors. Laid on the stage floor, he commenced a scene entitled *Ashes in the Pacific* that survived all the cuts and revisions over five drafts, in which Harry re-imagines his death from a heart attack.

As for the monologue on tuning, it was delivered by Lily and was illustrated by the other actors, deployed as performers without character signification: in this way they functioned much as dancers do:

Lily: Just Intonation, which we’ve forgotten all about, if we ever knew it existed, is the system of tuning pitches to the simplest and most consonant intervals. [*She turns upstage*

as a hand is extended from the stage right middle wing. She takes hold of this hand and pulls the other actors onstage, who are holding a twelve-foot length of rope.] This goes all the way back to ancient Greece and that mad genius Pythagoras, who said that proportional lengths of a vibrating string, in small-number ratio relationships, produce basic musical intervals. [The rope is held two-fifths along its length. Two of the actors “pluck” the divided rope, one after another, and sing the pitches that form a fifth.] A perfect fifth! Equal Tempered fifths have been nipped and tucked so they make a closed circle that goes round and round and round. If you put a series of perfect fifths in Just Intonation end to end they will make a spiral, like the inside of a Nautilus shell, spiraling away into the clear blue. [The actors form a circle, then a spiral, out of which they all spin.] (Alexandrowicz pp. 9-10)

Perhaps the most bizarre writer/director choice I made occurred at the top of act two, in which we saw Lily writing a futuristic talk show entitled *Strange Crew*, hosted by a cat and dog, with a guest that was a plant, the *Gunnera Manicata*, or giant rhubarb. This character, in full plant regalia realized brilliantly by the costume designer, spoke in an entirely invented language that was translated by the dog. The point of this scene was to convey the notion that Partch’s music was a resonant part of the bio-vegetal world; that while many humans could not appreciate his sonorities, animals and plants instantly understood them.

The scene that revealed most cruelly our lack of resources for the production was contained within the other talk show—referred to above—hosted by a young Scotsman named Zachary Stone. His interview with Partch was interrupted and invaded by figures intended to invoke one of the composer’s more notable pieces, *Revelation in the Courthouse Park*. In this re-imagining of *The Bacchae* Partch transposed Euripides’ story to an American setting—Dionysus became a pop star named Dion—and told it in alternation with scenes from the ancient Greek original. We were able to muster precisely two Maenads, of which an example was made regarding the impoverished state of small theatre in Canada:

Harry: [To Lily] Those are the Maenads? Are you kidding?

Lily: We can’t afford big casts these days. Go on, please. (38)

The other younger male actor in the cast played an outraged Dionysus who accused Harry of hijacking his mythical story in order to dramatize the rage Partch felt at his mother’s sending

him off to be circumcised when already eight years old. In the midst of much yelping and ululating Harry complained vehemently to Lily that her attempt to represent his work was a *reductio ad absurdum*, while Lily defended herself by saying that it was better to give brief samples of his work rather than nothing at all. The story of Dionysus, Agave, and Pentheus was told in slapstick movement in a matter of seconds. At one point a doll was thrown on stage and was shortly beheaded by his mother, then tossed like a ball and finally brandished as a trophy. Harry barely escaped with his life, and found himself in the underworld in the company of his late father Virgil.

This very calm *adagio* scene, configured as a classic reckoning between father and son, allowed for more interplay between the playwright and the characters in whose mouths she was placing imagined dialogue, in particular on the subject of the interpenetration of biography and autobiography:

Harry: So, what did you think? [Pause] It's okay if you didn't care for it. I'm used to hearing that, Dad.

Virgil: Son... You know, I was raised on hymns and Bach and Buxtehude, and all that traditional stuff, but... well, son, I just *loved* your music. It was a feast for all the senses. You'd take it in through the pores of your skin like a sweet fragrance!

Harry: Oh, Dad... [Virgil takes him in his arms.]

Virgil: I love you son, so much—

Harry: Dad. [He weeps. Then to Lily.] Are you alright?

Lily: I know!

Harry: Is this about you or me?

Lily: I'm sorry. Please go back. [The scene is replayed]

Virgil: Son... You know, I was raised on hymns and Bach and Buxtehude, and all that traditional stuff, so... Son, I never really liked your music. Some things, were... quite pleasing, at least in part, but... I'm sorry, son.

Harry: Could you, um, could you hold me? Please? [Virgil holds him, with difficulty. Music in. Lily continues writing. Time passes.] (pp. 44-45)

In the penultimate scene, as mentioned above, Harry had to give an account of himself and his work to Polly Hymnia, the muse responsible for the kind of work to which Partch has

devoted his life. She was miked and seated on the balcony that is part of the structure of Performance Works. It was dressed with soft masking in such a way as to make it seem as though she were floating in space. Harry decides to forgo fighting for a place in the artistic firmament, and opts for oblivion instead. Lily, aghast both at this and at the fact that her character has escaped her control, steps into the scene and attempts to rescue Harry, her play and her reasons for being a writer:

Lily: Please, Harry, I've sweated blood for this, for *you!* I'm in way over my head.

Harry: Just write this in your play: "The body is the music which is the body."

Lily: That's very nice, but what about... what about *us?*

Harry: The body is the music, and this body is already dead and forgotten.

Lily: Oh, shit, *shit!*

Harry: You want your play to end on a heroic note, me becoming a legend and all, but I can't give you that.

Lily: I don't give a fuck about the play, Harry! Just *stay!* Stay with me! *Please!*

Harry: I'm dead; you're alive. [He puts his hand on her head.] I'm going now, Lily.

Lily: But, you can't: you're—! [She embraces him and clings to him desperately.]

Harry: Goodbye, my dear sweet heroic child... [He peels her off, kisses both her hands, and leaves her. Blackout. A huge rushing sound is heard, like trees in a torment of wind and rain, then a massive crash, a volcanic eruption, or the earth opening up.] (pp. 50-51)

In the Epilogue Lily is discovered standing downstage centre, wearing the Harry robe. The rest of the actors, grouped on and around her desk, regard her with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. Admitting she doesn't want to finish the play "because then the story, *his* story, would be over; and his story is bigger than words. It's not even really just *his* story anymore," (51) she bids the audience farewell and exits left. In the long fade to black we played a brief, legally allowable excerpt from *Eleven Intrusions* entitled *The Waterfall*, with a ghostly Partch singing and intoning.

As for the bulk of the music, the composer Lee Gellatly used the web-based versions of certain instruments to create very skillfully Partch-like sequences that echoed some of his famous works. These sequences supported the choreographic shifting of set pieces that was necessary in the transitions between scenes. She also scored certain passages that were sung,

intoned, or spoken rhythmically, as a way of evoking the kind of discipline-defying works that Partch created. Music was the least present element in the play, even though it was music—Partch’s music—that got me rolling this stone up a hill in the first place. The precarious and perishable nature of what Harry Partch invented extended to this work *about* him and his impossible venture, and it could not be otherwise.

CONCLUSIONS

This production was as much about what was *not* on the stage as what was; its various ‘present absences’ were particularly insistent. Partch’s instruments ought to have been used, for their magnificent lines, colours and volumes as much as their sonorities, but were not. And one could argue that his music ought to have formed some significant part of the production, but it did not. There ought to have been a much bigger cast and more substantial production values—this really looked like a show that had been created on a minuscule budget—but the audience instead encountered a chamber production of six performers, a desk, filing cabinets, three moveable screens, two wheeled tables, five stools and various hand props. And one wanted to see video or film projection used in the production, as this was a subject that lent itself most particularly to the great variety of images, historical periods and spaces that this medium is able to furnish—but there were no projections. The spare physical elements of the play embodied the narrative of the struggles undertaken to produce it against the forces—including those provided by Partch himself—that resisted the show’s coming into being at all. Indeed, perhaps the only successful production element was the costumes.

The Boy Who... played to small houses, but was very warmly received, including by people who knew and worked with Partch and who travelled from the U.S to see it. Not surprisingly, given all the formal and logistical problems, it garnered mixed critical response.

Over the course of the two years it took to develop this piece much struggle with form occurred, much had to be changed and discarded, and a great deal of frustration had to be borne and overcome for the work to go on at all. Artists must be careful with the projects they choose to pursue—or that they allow to pursue *them*—because anything that seems to be an impossible pursuit most likely *is* one. This work took up two and a half years of my creative life: was it worth it? None of us knows how much time he or she has on this earth: what shall we do next? What subjects should any artist choose to pursue? I *could* say that it was indeed worth it despite

all the difficulties, including the absence of serious attention paid it by the press and the public. But would that be true? Did I need to learn the painful lessons the journey forced upon me, many of which I knew well enough already?

Further, did I do my part to rescue Harry Partch from the oblivion to which the musical establishment seems determined to consign him? Apart from the very real difficulties of sustaining a music that requires the mastery of specialized instruments, employs scales unlike any others in Western music, and scores few can read, there is the problem of the Partch estate itself, which seems to be a willing participant in this process of erasure. Gilmore points to “the sheer unavailability of much of Partch’s work. Its practical inaccessibility continues to be the largest single cause of the neglect it has suffered. (5) One of his most famous scores, *The Bewitched*, “still awaits publication, together with the vast majority of Partch’s other works.” (392) Much of this has had to do with the all-too-familiar disputes about legacy that arise amongst various collaborators and followers after the death of a visionary artist:

While the motivations and the viewpoints of the individuals concerned are clear and worthy of respect, the net effect has been a suppression of Partch’s work and a general and widespread dearth of materials which has been detrimental to his whole artistic standing. It has seemed that, through neglect, he is being written out of music history. (393)

However, Partch himself seemed unconcerned with a need to be rescued from such perdition. As he said of his legacy:

Just as one instinctively clings to life, he clings to a possible extension of his life through those who follow. But in candor I must face the probable fact that in my case there will be no extension whatever. I have only the hope of a continuing spirit—going where or how I do not know, and it is unimportant. (394)

This is a similar utterance to the one I imagined for Harry in his last scene with Lily:

Harry: Some day the sun will blow up, and whatever is left alive here will be sucked into a black hole. Or so they tell me. Everything humans ever did will just be a stray hair in God’s soup. (Alexandrowicz 50)

What I *can* perhaps state upon reflection is this: given that we are living in dire times indeed, now more than ever it is crucial to listen to alternative voices that speak to us of who we might be, what we may have forgotten, and what may have been taken from us without our knowledge. It is also crucial that we consider how we might create identities outside the forms

that are presented to us as fixed, natural and inescapable. But regardless of what the future holds for us we are condemned to keep telling the stories that we feel are important, even crucial; to keep exploring; to keep asking why; to keep *playing*.

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