

# **FINDING THE WAY BACK**

## **Creating A Slavic, Pre-Christian Ritual In St. Petersburg**

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I had been at the campsite for five days conducting workshops and developing a ritual performance piece with the Metamorphosis Theatre. The camp, located seventy miles northwest of St. Petersburg and near the Finish boarder, was part of a disputed area seized by the Soviets from the Finns during W.W.II. It was also a place the Slavs held to be ancient and sacred. It took a long and uncomfortable train ride then a long and bumpy ride in a military truck to get there. We were in thick birch woods and next to a deep blue lake disturbed only by an occasional MiG fighter plane from a local air base.

The Metamorphosis Theatre had been together in one form or other for several years, having only recently come into the open in the post Soviet era. The group was no ordinary one, it was, since it's founding, dedicated to preservation and evolution of pre-Christian, Slavic rituals.

It was just after one in the morning in late July when the White Night sun had fully set. For the Slavic culture, as with other cultures throughout the world, the night is the time when the spirits walk. For the ancient Slavic people the beginning of the summer night was special, the deepest and the most pure time. That night was, according to Slavic custom, a special night for initiation.

In the distance I heard the women's voices. Leaving my Soviet army surplus tent I followed their voices stumbling though the dark woods and over the moist grass. The theater's producer, Olga Chernyarskaja, its manager, Olga Sapetko, and designer, Milla Krajda-Kalen, gathered at a small campfire speaking with hushed but excited conspiratorial girls. They were figures living in shadows. They surrounded Anna Malachiyeva, another of the theater's administrators, a friend, and my translator. Another figure, carved out of the

standing stump of a tree, loomed watchfully over them dancing in the firelight's shadows.

For days I had seen the three women at the edge of the woods collecting flowers, ferns, and tall grass without understanding why. That night the women dressed Anna, or Anya as we affectionately called her, with a skirt beautifully woven of ferns and flowers. The flickering of the firelight made the moment magical. Over her naked torso they arranged a flowered bodice. On her head a circular headpiece made of daisies and wildflowers. They were preparing Anna for a ritual initiation into the White Doves, an ancient, pre-Christian cult that claimed its origin in the ninth century. The pagan White Doves had survived Christian, Czarist, and Soviet persecution to re-emerge with the sudden religious and political freedoms of late twentieth century Russia. The rituals of the secretive White Doves provided many of the theatre's guiding principles and several members of the Metamorphosis Theatre belonged to the cult.

The ancient Slavs believed the trees have eyes and can see in the night. In the shadows of the dancing firelight the crudely carved figure, suddenly seemed to have a living face. The shroud of the woods, the carved face in the tree, the excited huddle of the women, and the primordial warmth, light, and comfort of the fire, all seemed to conspire to create an atmosphere of pagan timelessness. Then, from somewhere deep in the woods, came the sounds of two pan flutes.

Arkadi Zhiikin and Sergei Ostankoff, the two newest members of the group, soon emerged from the dark woods. Each, wearing only enough to cover their genitals, played a pan flute in one hand and with a large bunch of flowers with their other hand, swept the air. With soft almost dance-like movements they quickly lead Anya away. The three women and I followed. By then the moonlight was illuminating the woods and the human figures with a blue aura.

A distant flicker of fire guided us along a winding path through the dark woods. The drumming of sticks against a hollow log seemed to be in synch with the fire flicker. Things deep and unexplainable in my humanity stirred as we

walked in silence. Each step seemed to evoke another extreme and fundamental feeling. Fear, anticipation, wonder, curiosity, community, acceptance, excitement, rejection, apprehension, and hope, were all swirling quickly within me. The path through the woods, the glow of the moon, the fire and the rhythms, had become a metaphor, carrying me from who I was to something more essential. I was visiting the unknown and it was both frightening and exciting. It is this unknown force that gives shape to our reality and dreams.

The large fire blazed as if from a hole in the earth. The tall white birch surrounding the clearing stood as witnesses to the ritual. The three women and I crouched in the distance as eavesdroppers amidst the grass. It felt as if we, dressed in our modern clothes, had stumbled into a time warp and into something ancient. The tall, thin Vitali Zharkoff, a talented musician and composer with an infallible falsetto, was chanting in the old Russian language as he danced around the fire. Elena Stepahova, a young woman initiated the previous year, joined the other members of the group. She, along with Arkadi and Sergei, danced and swept the air with their bunches of flowers. Anya stood still and in contrast to the leaping and hypnotic movements of flames and naked dancers. The short and well-toned Yura pounded his sticks with a strong rhythm on a hollow log.

Anya removed her costume and stood naked before the fire and deep night. She knelt to sing a praise song and when she stood was drenched with a bucket of lake water. Arkadi and Sergei, still dancing, cleansed her by beating her with their flowers. After several moments of her screams and cries of pleasure, fear, and astonishment, Anya leapt up and ran through the fire, leaping and dancing over the fire several times. Then the men gave chase and ran in and out of the tall grass. Her screams increased as their glistening nakedness ran half-hidden through the night, the grass and the firelight. Vitali began drumming and Elena chanting and dancing. Then Yura stopped his drumming and gave chase. Arkadi and Sergei began to chant. Like a wolf chasing a doe, Yura followed Anya into the tall grass. After a few of Anya's screams there was

silence, then sounds of pleasure, then the singing and drumming increased, and the pan flutes began again.

After ten or so minutes Yura emerged carrying Anya. He delivered her into the big arms of Arkadi who wrapped her into a blanket and carried her to the campsite. Inside of Anya's tent I could see by their gas light that Olga, the director and spiritual force of the group, was talking to her. Anya nodded and agreed to the lessons that Olga was conveying. The sound of the drumming was still heard, but with a different, more frenetic rhythm. The women and I fed the campfire and made tea and sat silently in two worlds, the modern and ancient.

When Anya came out of her tent she was naked and not in the least bit self-aware. This I found remarkable. I had known Anya since first coming to St. Petersburg five weeks earlier, and all during that time she carried herself, in dress and demeanor, as a staid academic and almost dowdy with her heavy rimmed glasses and high collar blouses. That night, however, she was transformed, her skin radiant, and her attitude confident, fully embracing the night and her feelings.

After a time the drumming stopped and all the ritual makers, except for Yura, returned to the campsite and into their everyday clothes. To suddenly see them this way was to see them somehow diminished. Having momentarily touched the mythic with their nakedness they had returned to the ordinary. The well-worn, mis-fitting, and second-hand clothes they wore was a testament to both the social and political reality of post-Soviet Russia and the economic sacrifices they had made to be a part of Metamorphosis Theatre. That moment was an insight into why this group and more broadly, rituals, exists. For though ritual is a bridge to a greater reality it is also an escape from the ordinary that embodies a hope, community, transformation, and absolution. It was not difficult to understand the need for ritual in chaotic post-Soviet Russia.

## **AN INVITATION**

My invitation to work with Metamorphosis Theatre came by way of Anatoly Antohin, a colleague at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. A well-known playwright in Soviet Russia, he had defected to the US in the early 1980s, and with the fall of the USSR had returned to establish the Russian-American Theatre in St. Petersburg. I had just returned from working with the Zulus in South Africa and was in Denmark working with the Greenland Inuit group, Tukak' Teatret, when he sent an invitation telling me about Metamorphosis. Morten Ilsoe, a Danish student and percussionist at Tukak' joined me. By train we traveled to Berlin where we took a two and a half day train ride to St. Petersburg. The Stalin-era built train was overstuffed with smells, noise, and people with their merchandise. Morten and I were among the few Western passengers. Many passengers were small-time import-export merchants shuttling merchandise from the East to the West and vice versa. As a consequence the train ride also included many suspicious characters who kept us constantly vigilant and for whom, at the suggestion of the conductor, we wired our door latch at night. The sense of loss, desperation, and confusion I felt and saw in these people was a foreshadowing of what would come to frame my experience of working in St. Petersburg in July and August of 1992.

St. Petersburg had only months before my arrival redeemed its original name, casting off Leningrad without sentiment as the Russian people had cast off communism. With the casting off the old and dysfunctional was a frantic search to find themselves and an identity anew. St. Petersburg was a city founded by Peter the Great early in the eighteenth century and true the seed planted in the Age of Enlightenment, had remained the cultural capital of Russia. Unlike political and pragmatic Moscow, St. Petersburg was a city of wonderful architecture, parks, and fervent cultural activity. It was in 1992, however, a city crumbling and fatigued by neglect. Hucksters, beggars, drunks, moneychangers, hookers, gypsies, and shell-socked ordinary people filled the streets. They were walking in a limbo between economic, political, and cultural realities. Some embraced the

limbo as change and opportunity, others rejected it, and some pretended it did not exist.

The Metamorphosis Theatre was one of over one hundred and fifty small theater's that made St. Petersburg a vibrant arts scene. Under Sovietism many of the theatres and artists could survive on meager government subsidy because of low rents, a community of support, and fixed living expenses. A loaf of bread was the equivalent to about three cents U.S.; a large lunch for two was less than sixty cents U.S. Because of an acute housing shortage, many artists lived with family. Anya, for instance, lived with her mother and father in a large two-bedroom apartment, paying less than the equivalent of one-dollar per-month.

Wages were low, too, with the average worker earning the about fifteen US dollar's per-month. Inflation was in triple digits and some prices, to the dismay of locals, went up daily. Things were dynamically and fundamentally changing as vestiges of the artificial and hermetic Soviet economy gave way to a market economy. With the joining of the world economy came the introduction of consumerism and materialism, which in turn brought a shift in their values, greed, and a sudden struggle for survival. Though communism was defunct as a political system, it had nonetheless instilled a sense of collectiveness and comradeship that also expressed itself during this flash point of profound social turmoil. The long cultural, political, and economic history of struggle and suffering, was what the Russian people resorted to for strength.

The offices and rehearsal space of Metamorphosis Theatre were a long subway, then bus ride to the far edge of the city. The rattling, overstuffed bus, smelling of human sweat, urine, vodka, and beer, passed scores of similarly anonymous tall apartment complexes of roughly poured concrete interspersed with barren dirt lots where children played. In an unkempt park, filled with weeds and statues of Soviet heroes, was a state-run chemical factory. Its faint putrid smell was immediately apparent to the eyes and nose. It was in the factory, with the help of producer Olga Chernyarskaja's uncle, the Theatre had negotiated the use of rent-free space. The drab walls and dimly lit building reeked with moldy

decrepitude; glass cases of old Soviet progress charts and photos of victorious workers lined the lobby walls. A malaise, along with a chemical smell, hung in the air as workers in long white coats shuffled expressionlessly down the halls.

The Metamorphosis rooms were surrealistic in context and content. Flowing scarves, pillows, books, day glow posters, and ersatz religious alters, statues, and icons decorated the office. The group had reacted to the newly won freedoms, and overwhelming influx of information it brought, by trying or adopting every form of new spiritual pursuit. From Zen Buddhism to crystals to astrology to new age music and healing, they embraced greedily and indiscriminately what formerly was denied. The small rehearsal room in contrast was entirely neutral, covered with brown burlap. In this inter-sanctum, dedicated to their Slavic ritual theatre work, they accepted Morten and me, and Sven Holmberg, a student and Tuma Theatre actor from the University of Alaska, into their group.

Anatoly Antohin had told the group about my work and proposed I conduct workshops with them. Eager to learn from others, Metamorphosis, a small, tight knit group, agreed. The times were quickly changing and they sensed they needed shed their cloistered if not suspicious ways and open themselves to new experiences. But before we could work together we had to see how we would work together. For such a relationship to be fruitful it must be mutually beneficial and stimulating. It was not just a matter of my presenting a workshop, but rather going on a journey, spending a part of our lives together. Such performance work does not easily separate the personal and spiritual. We would be living, eating, and working together. Did we want to take this journey together? Were we, and if so, how were we, compatible?

The first day with them gave many conflicting impressions. They insisted on initiating Sven, Morten, and me before we could continue. Wearing long robes, lighting many candles and singing in Old Russian they put three small pebbles into a water bowl. After an incantation they offered a pebble to each of us to swallow. It was uncomfortable for me to partake not knowing the responsibility or significance of what I was participating in. I swallowed the pebble taking their

offering into myself—a small but important gesture. Though I had worked with indigenous groups before and had developed a respect for their traditions, I felt the pebble swallowing as an unprepared for imposition. Something that asked of me too soon. I had to fight my skepticism and rational tendencies to dismiss their initiation ritual as the fumbling of blurry-eyed wantabees. At the same time their sincere hunger for a connection to the spiritual kept me with them. Maybe I was just like them. I too, was a by-product of a cultural tradition, bereft of spirituality and looking for a deeper meaning and connection.

### **FINDING THE RHYTHM**

Their interest in Slavic rituals was at odds with how they trained themselves. Though they had a stated interest in ritual their training was more typical of theatre and the portrayal of character and mainstream Western theatre. I mentioned this inconsistency to them. They responded by saying they went to theatre for lack of any other viable medium of developing ritual expression.

Is the language and methods of theatre suited to the objectives and function of ritual? There is crossover for sure. For the lack of a coherent Slavic ritual language—there were no elders to refer to and be taught by—they went to the tradition of theatre. Theatre was in a sense, an elder, and the only extant tradition bearer. They were searchers lead by inherent need, trying their best to put fragments together as to recreate a pathway to the ritual need that lay within them. They were not very different from the many and varied attempts of a return to ritual expressed in other Western and industrialized nations. New age shamanism, witches, and healing, playback theatre and other forms of psychodrama, drama therapy, neo-paganism, the men's movement, and other expressions in the West are all struggling with the re-establishment of a method and vocabulary by which to express ritual and community.

The Metamorphosis group members were similar in one essential way to other indigenous groups I have worked with. They had lost a part of themselves. The seventy years of Sovietism had dislocated them from their rich cultural

traditions by imposing and enforcing an alien social and political order. So thorough and insidious had the dislocation been they had little sense of self, their own feelings and body. If you only have little then you must begin with what you have. Yourself. The work had to begin with a rediscovery of self. The self would provide the foundation of the reimagined community.

To begin we established daily Yoga programs as to open the body to possibilities of feeling and being. The stress of the monumental changes surrounding them was also in their bodies preventing them from becoming available to the work. As a second stage of body awareness we initiated rhythm awareness work. On the basis of my experience with other indigenous groups, I knew it was important to re-establish an awareness of rhythm in their bodies and life. The initiation of rhythm awareness would lead to the re-establishment of Slavic cultural rhythm awareness, and from that foundation, subsequent work would flow.

Initial exercises brought awareness to the basic rhythms of life, the heartbeat and breath. Often semi-meditative, these exercise explorations established of the basic self and one's basic rhythm. The explorations reminded us of the simple and basic: that the self is the origin of performance. The body is the medium of expression for the internal, self. By apprehending the internal one can better express the external if not the eternal self.

The heartbeat became a building block; for it is the measure and foundation of life community and culture everything else is a variation on its theme. A heartbeat/breath exercise we returned to daily:

Standing, establish normal deep breathing through the nose and out through the mouth. Once deep breathing is established hold breath to create stillness in the body to hear/feel your heartbeat. Holding the breath for 5 heartbeats. Then exhaling and returning to normal deep breathing. Then hold for 7, then 9, then 10 heartbeats. Developing further into holding one's breath for up to 30 full heartbeats. The objective of the exercise is to develop deep breathing and full use of lung capacity.

This exercise became a touchstone for the group, a way of centering, getting hold of one self, and a gateway to meditative practice. Physiologically it enabled the performers to use more of their lungs and breathe more deeply, filling and feeling more of the body as a consequence. People who are stressed often times breath shallow with less oxygen getting the to the mind and body. As performers they needed the power, calm, and awareness deep breathing can bring. The heartbeat/breathing exercise also instilled discipline and self-control. It was no surprise when we began the exercise some had difficulty. The exercise was self-controlled and internally appreciative. So used to following instructions from and external source and doing it right (as instilled by the Soviet educational system) the group members found it difficult trusting themselves. So institutionalized was their way of thinking, many wanted indications or reassurances from me about what they should be feeling, and if what they were feeling was a correct heartbeat. Some were fearful their heartbeat was not constant and out of sync with the others in the group. This exercise, like all other work with the group, taught the importance of listening and honoring one's self and individual uniqueness, an alien notion for them.

From internal heartbeat and breath awareness the work evolved to expressing the beat externally by way of hand clapping and body slapping. In this way the internal came into dialog with an external beat. What lives inside one self is expressed and reflected upon when it is externalized. The external beat becomes an entity on to itself, however, inspired by and evolved from the internal. Such is the paradigm, if not the essence, of ritual.

As a next step their voices began to express their beat with sounds. Their initial sounds evolved into chants then into its own expression separate from the literal heartbeat yet still inspired by it. It was a revelation to hear how the heartbeat expression blended instinctually in rhythm and voice. Rhythm and voice explorations then led to provided their personal and group rhythms and chants—personal and group chants—became expressive of the feelings living within them. The experience taught them how they can create from life—

beginning with their life—and not simply adopting external convention, script, thinking, or technique. From their initial rhythm and voice explorations a process for all of our subsequent explorations in traditional Slavic rhythm and chant was established.

Morten, an accomplished and innovative musician, built on the rhythm exploration work with the introduction of rhythm and drum technique. Besides teaching technique, which was part of our skill's exchange intent, Morten worked to develop rhythm memory, confidence, and playfulness. Many of the explorations revolved around the three beat because it was rhythmically closest to traditional Slavic beat. Each group member took the lead interpreting rhythmical patterns to initiate rhythmical call-responses with the others in the group. Leadership development became a principle informing the project.

Each subsequent session, to a greater or lesser degree, built on the rhythmic exercises and soon we introduced sticks to augment the work. I have found while working with groups lacking rhythm awareness (the Greenland Inuit as opposed to the Zulu for instance) the use of sticks, and the externalizing of the beat, assisted in establishing the beat and its vibration in the performer's body. One day as an assignment group members had to find and prepare the sticks they would use for the exercise. The sticks could be no longer than the length between their wrist and elbow. Many went to the nearby park to find fallen branches and then peeled and whittled the bark with knives. Once everyone had their sticks we continued the heartbeat exercise with the expression of the beat being focused in the sticks. The beat explorations opened to wide rhythmic variations and several rhythmic stick jams. One exercise was the rhythmic and chant expression of their lives. Within this, and other exercises, they found comfort, play, and form for their imaginations. Our work made it increasingly apparent that rhythm is what links and directs a fundamental communication between people. With this heightened awareness we carved the beginnings of a pathway between the human and spirit world. The pathway of ritual.

## **LEARNING TO PLAY**

Teaching the group to play and derive enjoyment from the process was also a part of the work. The group (and Russians in general) tends to be serious and pessimistic, and with this observation I introduced and provoked much open-ended improvisational and imaginative free play. At first they were apprehensive, the idea of playing for one's own enjoyment was foreign to them. Preferring an objective and well-structured way of working they constantly wanted to know the goal and purpose of our exploratory play.

An ongoing frustration was the group's habit of always telling me why things won't work and can't happen. They saw their worldview as culturally engendered and merited, the by-product of a life long reality of things not working in their favor or against them. I agreed, but stressed we must aspire to work though it otherwise the attitude would become a creative self-censoring and ultimately hinder the possibility of the work. Sovietism, which sustained its power by maintaining an atmosphere of petty fears of the unknown, deeply marked their consciousness making it difficult for them to trust, believe, and hope. As a consequence they were deeply afraid of the new, untried, and unknown.

Another area identified as needing attention was their ability to control and creatively express themselves with their bodies. When they moved it was as if they did not live in their bodies. In part this was due to their approach to performing which stressed the ability to start by mastering external forms and then internalize the form. It was also, in my belief, reflective of the Soviet political system that inculcated obedience and denial of individuality in deference to communal or state obedience.

Our work with rhythm and drum technique soon evolved into work with the traditional Slavic three beat. To investigate how to express the traditional Slavic beat in the body we did isolation exercises. With Morten's continuous drumming, and with the group seated, we explored the rhythm expressiveness of the head, face, arms, shoulders, chest, feet, legs, hands, pelvis, and then the whole body. Bringing the performers to their feet the exercise then explored rhythm

expressiveness in the feet. After hours of exploring and articulating the Slavic beat in their feet the performers began to shuffle, then dance. At first the performers created their own Slavic beat inspired dance. Later we explored established Slavic dances, which served to connect their personal and traditional movement explorations.

The group also developed an exercise series applying the Slavic three-beat. The exercises applied elements of their explorations and traditional Slavic dances. The series included Slavic, three-beat expressions of: Walking, journey, praise, water, sun, moon, calling spirits, dancing with spirits, trance dance, and traveling with the spirits. Each part of the series was refined and explored for its emotional, psychological, and personal content and became a part of the group's expressive vocabulary.

Once the series was established traditional Slavic chant sounds were integrated. Chant and movement integration often occurred in total darkness to force the performers focus on internalizing their expressions. Chant fragments explored included: (phonetically and spelled in English):

hey ya  
choo  
Yay gaa  
hada; hayha  
yong (nasal)  
Who (with a wide oh)  
Doo  
Ohgen (like hogan)  
Ohh yehh  
cha da  
hoo  
chong (nasal) Yay vo aa  
Dook yayvoi

Ei ga ei ga ei ga

Cha cha hugg

Batu schoi ti tsr ree u goon' (an old Russian chant.)

The act of melding personal and traditional expressions of the traditional Slavic three-beat and chants broke important psychological boundaries for the group. Formerly they accepted the authority and served traditional Slavic movement and sounds without much personalization and connection. In contrast the movement/chant explorations grounded the tradition within themselves evolving an expression of their tradition and themselves simultaneously.

Once the Slavic three-beat was established it both a reference and focal point for the work. The traditional Slavic three-beat also became a place of rest and comfort, familiarity and simplicity. They found a home within themselves and their cultural tradition.

### **A THEATRE FAMILY IN A CHEMICAL FACTORY**

The theatre's place within the chemical factory was metaphoric of the arts within an increasingly pragmatic world: trying to carve a home and remain functioning under adverse, if not unhealthy, conditions. In 1992 over 150 small theatres existed in St. Petersburg. Fewer than 20 small theatres existed by 1996. A similar progression of arts hospitality to hostility has occurred in major cities in the United States and Europe. In an ever-increasing material and capital driven world, the intangibles served up by artist have a precarious place.

To be a member of Metamorphosis, like many of the small St. Petersburg theatres, required a personal if not philosophical commitment. Other small groups like the Terra Mobile Theatre fashioned itself as a commando-style street theatre. The Yes/No Theatre was founded on a dense treatise of movements and actions outlined by its director. The Jupiter Theatre was dedicated to reviving Russian classicism. Invariably each group had a strong, if not guru-like leader and

demanded commitment not only the group, but generally to a group of ideas, a director's vision, and a certain lifestyle.

The adherence to a group of aesthetic principles, philosophy, and theory seemed to be prevalent among many of the theatres. The Metamorphosis Theatre would often talk for hours about the meaning or theory behind our work. Generally the talk had no connection to practical applications. It seemed to be a part of the Russian national character to discuss the ideas behind an action. How else, I wondered, could they have accepted communism, a sound theoretical system with obviously poor practical applications, for so long? The theory was good and that was good enough the thinking seemed to go. This tendency went against the grain of my pragmatic American sensibility of doing rather than talking. To my mind this thinking played right into the Russian cultural sensibility of perpetual struggle and pessimism. Our differences of approach and thinking were some of the many cultural issues that came into play while working with Metamorphosis.

The office workers in the offices surrounding the rehearsal room asked us to stop our daytime drum technique work. To accommodate them we adjusted our work schedule to begin later in the day and to include long weekend hours. This adjustment not only freed us from concern about making too much noise, it also avoided the hours when the factory produced nauseating chemical fumes. Thereafter much of our work shifted to the stage of the factory's large theatre. The three hundred-seat proscenium theatre originally built for Soviet worker meetings had communist flags, fifteen-foot high photos of Lenin and Marx, and countless progress charts and diagrams were stuffed behind the theatre's upstage curtains.

The family atmosphere of Metamorphosis Theatre was typical of the many small theatres I had contacted with in St. Petersburg. The daily work would begin with tea and discussion. The group's lunch or dinner break was usually the social event of the day. The entire group pitched in to prepare the meal that, with preparation, eating and clean up would last over two hours. Once a week,

generally on a Saturday or Sunday we took a long dinner break, sometimes up to three and a half hours. During the long dinner we would celebrate birthdays together, share photos and songs and folk dances.

The daily meals were like a family gathering and an integral part of our interaction. Actors brought baked goods, vegetables and fruits, grown in family urban gardens, or their family's dacha (summer home), to the meals daily. 1 Because we were guests Morten, Sven and I were not asked to contribute. Though we appreciated their generosity and respect, we nonetheless felt awkward. Feeling the urge to give to the cause I offered Olga 200 rubles (then the equivalent to \$1.40) and thought her eyes were going to bulge from her head. She refused, out of embarrassment, thinking the three of us were not being feed well enough. To avoid any future complications we simply purchased items in the market and made our contribution. I will never forget the day when Sven purchased several kiwi fruits, having never seen nor tasted the fruit, the group huddled around the table to watch the slicing and offering of the fruit.

Olga ruled the group with protective authoritarianism. This is not to say Olga was without compassion and concern. She often went to great lengths to assist the company members in their private affairs. Arkadi a former Soviet army commando, who had a pending court case regarding a fight, caused Olga great anxiety. Often during the course of the project Olga made calls and contacted lawyers on Arckadi's behalf. Daily she would quiz him about his behavior and remind him of what would happen if put into a Russian prison. Elena and Sergi were the relative newcomers to the group. The dutiful Sergi was the youngest, but because he did not pass his exam at school, Olga, like a mother, required him to present remedial lessons to her. As a punishment for not passing his exams Olga required that he be responsible for the organization of the daily meals and other menial tasks. Olga would often treat Elena like a daughter, bringing articles of clothing and consul Elena about her recent separation from her husband.

Though sharing a family-like relationship with the group, my inability to speak Russian and communicate directly with Metamorphosis members was a source of great frustration. The Metamorphosis group members and I had spent much time together and had shared many emotionally and psychologically charged experiences, yet there was always the veil of language separating us. What I missed were the spontaneous interactions, the banal and commonplace observations, songs (we did share pop song lyrics) and jokes. Our language and cultural differences required extreme patience. Though the language difference checked my sense of spontaneity it forced me to be more reflective. It also significantly altered how the group communicated and worked. What we could not communicate by way of language we communicated by way of movement, physical interaction, and sound. In an odd way the language difference was appropriate for the type of work we were doing. Denied the obvious communication of words, we had to find a more essential, and possibly universal, way of communicating.

### **RITUAL ARCHEOLOGY?**

Through discussion the group agreed I would assist in the establishment of a ritual methodology and assist in the creation of a performance language unique to the group and Slavic culture. The group wanted to create performances that did not put off but rather appealed to a broader audience to bespeak their Slavic ritualism. They wanted to use the secular language of theatre to educate fellow Slavs about their own tradition. Through theatre they saw the means by which to reawaken and express the spiritualism that lay within them and within the Russian culture.

The urging behind such ritual re-construction was not unique to the Metamorphosis and the Slavic people. People worldwide are now realizing the limits of capitalism, the destruction wrought by materialism and the uncertainty of a political, social, environmental, and economic future. Increasingly people are turning to ritual, and spiritual beliefs rooted in their culture of place as a source of

meaning and belonging. The large void all encompassing Soviet regime left after its collapse made the need for meaning in Russia all the more acute. On the streets of St. Petersburg in 1992 every variety of religious option had leaflet-passing proselytizers. On any given day one could see on Nevsky Prospekt or in the subway clean-shaven and neck-tied southern Baptist from the U.S., drumming and chanting Krishna people, black robed Russian Orthodox monks, bright-eyed and white robed Bahai, Jehovah's Witnesses handing out the 'Watch Tower', and the survey taking tables of Scientology, among others.

The script of a ritual does not make for its effectiveness. The effectiveness of the ritual exists within the participants—the ritual re-enactment is the 'script' or outline of what lives within. In this way, ritual effectiveness depends on an interactive way of seeing and being in the world. Ritual becomes an expression and reiteration of what exists and not simply an adopted pattern of movements and words that can wish or evoke a way of being into existence. The ritual participant must live, and in a sense be, the ritual. Just because the ritual is worthy does not mean the participant is; ritual is more than the exactitude of execution.

If ritual is a manifested demonstration, reassessment, and reassurance of what lives within the individual and the community, then the ritual participant carries a great responsibility not only for the present but also to past and future generations. The ritual act is the means by which a community or culture maintains the form and meaning of the cosmological narrative they are a part of. Ritual encodes a group's values, perspective, and connection with the eternal. Ritual satisfies and makes tangible the basic human need of knowing a life of an individual exist within a greater context, and participates within their cultural, mythological, and ultimately, the human continuum.

What happens when a group of people has lost the originating context of a ritual and is left with only the gesture of the ritual remaining? How do they reconstruct, re-connect with their cosmological narrative which ritual is the demonstration of?

The work becomes like that of archeologists, having only the fragments of bones to reconstruct the larger whole, of a ritual and culture that once was.

The rituals of the hunter-gatherers I have worked with refer directly and tangibly to the cycles of life—rituals for them are not metaphors but rather tangible mnemonics existing for the eternal present. Pre-Christian, Slavic tradition, like the traditions of industrialized cultures, has become removed from their practical and participatory origins of everyday life. Their rituals have instead become signals and abstractions, echoes of what had once existed. As a consequence the process of rediscovery has to work simultaneously—from cultural fragments and from the individual to articulate personal significance. The Metamorphosis Theatre and other groups attempting to re-discover a ritual tradition must re-discover the ritual need within themselves. The Metamorphosis Theatre had explored and conducted ritual performances in the past under White Dove supervision. Gestures, songs, dances, and regalia conveyed ritual practice and significance. But how effective are a ritual's external movements and psychophysical connection? Is the enactment of esoteric ritual movements like a Japanese youth dressing and acting like Elvis to somehow come closer to the musician's mystery and being? Can a culture, removed from its originating and defining cultural identity, unlock some sort of racial, cultural or genetic memory? Will geneticist find one day such genes exist? How do Slavs in the late twentieth century make a connection with a fire god? Fire is no longer central to the culture, no longer a source of light, imagination, and warmth. Can its central, primal power, maintain its place within modern Slav consciousness? Is the re-visiting of ancient ritual nothing more than nostalgia for a seemingly simpler, less alienated time?

The questions during my work with Metamorphosis were my own questions, too. For I was, in my own way, much like them. A product of a modern city, removed from nature, coming from political, cultural, religious, and economic systems that unwittingly conspired to remove or eradicate direct interaction between place, spirit and self. It will probably take the Russians generations to

recover from the trauma they and their spiritual selves have recently gone through. Can any of us return to the rituals of pre-modern times? Is it a travesty to do so? Can anyone on the earth today reclaim the perceived purity and connection promised by a ritual way of being in the world? There is no going back. We begin where we begin, where we are, and create from the fragments, rediscovering and remaking ritual anew and in our own image. What is the significance of ritual for those that have lost their connection with self and their part of the earth?

### **THE WHITE DOVES**

We began archaeological reconstruction of pre-Christian Slavic ritual performance by identifying the major tenants of the White Doves, the Slavic pagan cult that had held rituals for centuries. Through a series of interviews with Olga Chernyarskja, (a White Dove) I was able to discern an outline of the White Dove ritual practice. The White Dove ritual practice was a resource from which the group work could refer. What follows is a synopsis of the White Dove divination ritual most significant to the group's work.

The White Doves believe human's can reach a state of God on earth. They must be protective of outsiders who might resent, challenge, or be threatened by such ability. As a consequence they have organized themselves into groupings referred to as 'ships'. These 'ships' are able to voyage to the state of Godness. Each ship is organized in a hierarchical fashion and has a leader called the 'helmsman.' The leader can be either male or female. However, each ship has a 'prophet' as its center. This prophet is a woman and considered the manifestation of the 'Mother of God.'

The Helmsmen conducts the ritual and facilitates the speaking of the Mother of God through the ship's prophet. At the physical center of the ritual is a spiritual font. Criss-crossed with two long white towels, the font is a bowl of water, representative of cleanness. The towels are the white roads to Godness. During the ritual each member of the ship calls upon the water element/spirit for its

purifying powers. By washing him or herself with the water for self-purification each member becomes a clean temple for the spirit to enter them. The adoration of water enables them to save themselves with its life-giving power. Water is the medium by which to call the spirits. To call the spirits and bring Godness to humanity is the objective of the ritual. The White Dove members then dry themselves on the towels (white road) with the Helmsman supervising.

The function of the White Dove ritual itself is to create a connection between heaven, water, and the earth. The sound chant Dooch is used to call the spirits. Being led by the prophet and beginning with hand clapping and foot stomping the White Doves then initiate a ritual dance and singing. Then the Helmsman puts towels around each of the member's necks and each creates whip-like actions and sounds with the towels. The towel whips on the person's back and body as they dance with a spinning motion. The towel becomes a device by which to transform self and to enter a spiritual level of self. With the towel around their shoulders they begin spinning, becoming like a bird, White Doves spinning into an ecstatic trance and to spiritual purity. They continue to sing and hit their body with slaps as they spin. Their song is a one-sentence chant repeated with high, quick, and rhythmic breathing. They consider their bodies as instrument's sacrificed to the gathering of information from the spirits. They spin to bridge the human and spiritual reality with their white roads (towels) and in this way catch information from the spirits. When they have gathered information they have reach a state of Godness. When the force of spirits leaves or when they fill with the spirit, they collapse to the ground. It is then, with the vibration of the spirits in the air, that the prophet questions the spirits. Each White Dove articulates what they have learned from the spirits in turn. Often those that speak do so in a secret language. The Helmsman then deciphers the prophet's words and offers it as a divination to the group, village or community. The speaking of the spirits is also a healing device. The White Doves may do their ritual to address specific issues concerning the community. The body is a medium of God and the spirits. No musical instruments are used.

As the work progressed the ritual practice of the White Doves was re-contextualized to the needs of a contemporary theatrical expression. Certain key elements and motifs, such as spinning to become filled with the spirits, informed subsequent theatrical explorations. Soon physical and vocal actions could not be separated from the spiritual motive and objectives of the work. The actions carried with them their spiritual intentionality which informed our perspective and underlay all subsequent work. In as sense the ritual actions were working with and on us--shaping and guiding our thinking and process--demanding of us and altering our perceptions.

### **FROM PROCESS TO PERFORMANCE**

Rhythm and heartbeat explorations, imagination and skills exercises, and the identification of the White Doves ritual performance language, all provided a solid foundation for the creation of a group ritual. The Ritual Preparation would be the medium by which to cross-germinate all the preceding work and provide a proving ground for all subsequent group efforts in establishing an identity and performance language.

As with the development of the Ritual Preparation with other groups, I did not preface the objectives of the work as not to lead the performers in serving an objective. After a break one day I simply asked the group to find a space to be by themselves and determine three movements they felt were pre-Christian and Slavic. Returning they presented their movements to the group. Over the following week, and concurrent with other work, the group explored the movements offered, condensing, clarifying, discussing and finally putting them into a sequence. Within a week the rough sketch of the Ritual Preparation was complete. Within two weeks the Preparation had incorporated details in movement, dance, voice, chant, and sequence. Without our aspiring to it ritual and meaning emerged. (An outline of the Metamorphosis Ritual Preparation appears in the appendix.)

Three weeks after I began work with Metamorphosis we had created our Ritual Preparation. Their hard work and dedication had made quick work of the Preparation and they were enthusiastic about the results. Their enthusiasm and pride in the Preparation caught the attention of Anatoly Antohin who was at the time putting together a Russian-American Theatre conference. Citing the political and cultural need to present as much American and intercultural collaboration as possible at the conference, the group and I agreed to a public presentation of the Preparation. Held at the St. Petersburg Composers Guild Hall, the conference included panels, new play readings, and a workshop presentation of a Sam Shepard and Christopher Durang play. At that time St. Petersburg had had little exposure to American playwrights, theatre artist, and methods.

The high visibility presentation of the Preparation before an audience full of theatre artists and critics invigorated and scared the group. Previously the group had conducted public performance rituals for the White Doves or to small, pre-disposed audiences. With the conference presentation they would have to allow the work to stand and prove itself. The presentation was a necessary step for the group—it was their entry into a larger public context.

During the days leading up to the conference we worked to polish and refine the Preparation. However, what had previously been easy and organic suddenly became forced and stiff. The idea of the presentation had taken them outside themselves whereas the whole intent of the Preparation was to bring them closer to themselves and their culture. To help put things back into perspective I asked the group to gather around the dining table. Then I demonstrated how the Preparation's overall rhythmic flow and progression had become stilted and forced by using drinking glasses, a sugar bowl, and salt and pepper shakers to represent the performers. The impromptu table show was all they needed. Their presentation returned to its original fluidity and with its successful presentation came many compliments. The drum rhythms and physical intensity of the Ritual Preparation was like a shock wave in the staid, wood panel hall of the composer's guild.

With the success of the presentation Anatoly Antohin requested a workshop performance on August 10 and 11 at the Baltic House (formerly the Lenin Theatre). After a few days of debate and discussion the Metamorphosis group and I agreed to a workshop performance presentation. We would have less than four weeks to develop a performance and had no idea how we would proceed or what it should be.

The success of the presentation, unfortunately, also brought an increase in tension between Olga Cheryarskaja (Metamorphosis' producer) and myself. Though I endeavored to respect and include Olga at every opportunity I could do nothing to forestall her being threatened by my work with the group and the attention it was getting. I considered Olga a resource and colleague from whom I could learn; yet I sensed she considered me a threat to her authority. What others told me confirmed my suspicions. Part of her sense of threat was attributable to the insularity of local theatre group and the autocratic way of their artistic directors. My working with the group also presented an alternative point-of-view and a way of working diametrically opposed to the established process. The autocratic leadership organization style of theater companies was reflective of paternalistic Soviet political system. Authority evolved from, and rested with, the leader. In contrast my approach imbued a democratic organizational style, making me a guide or facilitator. I saw the actors as collaborators rather than servants and encouraged them to freely express their opinions and disagreements. Our way of working had practically demonstrated how the group members could serve themselves, the group, and their culture. They learned experientially about reciprocity and how authority and ideas must flow both ways.

Work with the Metamorphosis group and their interactions with Sven and Morten, had revealed how insular they had been. Our work and social interactions were a microcosm for the adjustments taking place within Russian society. My interactions with Olga made me aware of how my methods of working were imbued with an American consciousness and values. Our interactions raised questions for me about my right to instigate such a profound

organizational change. How, I wondered, could I separate my methods from the content it conveyed? I was simply presenting what I did in the manner I knew. What I presented was an alternative. I had a responsibility to consider the implication of what I present, and in turn, the group had a responsibility to decide for themselves how they will work in the future.

## **FINDING AN ISLAND**

Though at first reluctant about creating a performance, I soon came to embrace the idea. Metamorphosis had a responsibility to a community that was in the throes of re-defining itself. A part of re-definition was a reappraisal of who they were and how they once understood their place on the earth. The ritual performance the Metamorphosis Theatre offered was a medium by which to re-examine and reaffirm who the Slavic people were. The best way to understand such work is by testing it before an audience composed of the community.

When thinking about a performance, what kept coming to me was how Russia was deeply wounded and abused. The trauma and distortions of the Soviet era had infected their very soul and being. What was the best way to use the ancient technology of performance to heal? How could the ritual performance of Metamorphosis Theatre serve to remedy and heal?

To clear my mind and think through things I would often jog in St. Petersburg. Jogging was difficult. The Russians had not yet come to an awareness of emission controls and the streets were heavy with diesel and auto exhaust. Tattered and soiled beggars of every shape and size were common sights on the streets I jogged. Travel from the former Soviet republics had been recently relaxed and as a consequence Gypsies and the rural poor, many reduced to abject poverty, flooded St. Petersburg. One woman, seeing I was a Westerner, was so desperate she kneeled before me with her two crying children and blocked my way with their pleas. The city's promise of a better living also attracted every variety of rip-off artist, moneychanger, and shady Mafia types, all eager to prey on others for their survival. Uncertainly and the unknown had

created an almost palpable anxiety. Only a year before, in the artificial and protected Soviet economy one ruble equaled five US dollars. During my time there the value of the ruble dropped from 125 to 180 to a dollar. It was a common sight to see men and women walking the streets with bandages, scars, bruises, black eyes or just profound hurt on their faces. Not a day went by without seeing a scuffle or fight, generally between men, on the street, a marketplace or subway. Public drunkenness was so commonplace it became part of the cityscape. It was an unhealthy place, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Marketplaces and kiosks sprouted up everywhere selling anything imaginable. Everyone seemed to be going into business and struggling to make money. The collectivism, aspired to by Soviet idealism seemed to have evaporated quickly into an Everyman-for-himself reality. Among the young Russians there seemed to be a mad rush to be anything but Russian and they way they were. America, as a style and ideal seemed to have become a national obsession. Everywhere you looked there were baseball caps emblazoned with USA Dream Team or any number of American professional or University sports teams. American pop culture, blue jeans, US Army surplus, Mickey Mouse, and McDonalds are what give order, meaning, and hope to their world. What genuine American or Western items existed were behind counters or in glass cases. Items that in the US could be found in discount stores were displayed and lit like sacred objects. Some of the shops had little altar-like displays of American products: watches, T-shirts with American logos, blue jeans, lingerie, liquor, after shaves, and cigarette lighters were the hottest items. The slick design, high gloss appeal, and pretensions of fashion were all new, strange and fascinating to the Russians. It was as if they were trying to assuage their spiritual loss by embracing the trinkets of the material.

I saw much of St. Petersburg when jogging. Expressionless faces and vacant eyes are what will stay with me as will families fishing in murky polluted waters off bridges for dinner and mothers and children scavenging garbage, drunks staggering, and young women with heavy make-up prostituting

themselves. The topography of despair and devolution was unrelenting. Fortunately I found refuge on an island that was once the summer retreat of the Russian aristocracy, then a Soviet park. No cars were allowed on the island and there was an ocean breeze. I would often jog and get It was a beautiful park, and while jogging in it I would lose myself in the rhythm of my stride within the fragrance of the trees, flowers, and ocean in a labyrinth of tree shaded paths.

While jogging I would wonder what relevance performance and ritual had to people so overwhelmed with change and daily struggle. Was what I was involved with simply a form of escapism? Were performance and ritual no different from the island I sought refuge from the pollution, noise, and social turmoil? Then I thought what if it was? What if I was nothing more than an escape artist? Is that the need and function of what I do? On one level yes. A person needs to find their island of quiet and tranquility: so must a people, a community, and a culture. Performance, at its simplest and most basic, takes us to another place—literally and/or metaphorically. It is a device by which to stop or rupture time, a human technology for transporting to another place. It alters our perception and demands a conscious perception. It is way to get a hold of one self to simply observe and feel. To appreciate self, context, and the continuum of humanity we are all a part of. Theatre does this sometimes consciously but mostly by implication. Ritual does this pointedly, for that is its function, to reconnect the self with a sense of being in a larger, continuous context. To reaffirm and reflect on the communal, spiritual, bodily, emotional, and mental holism of what it means to be human. Yes, I am an escape artist. I don't create islands when working with other cultures: I simply find them. Usually they are at the center of where people live.

An imbalance is at the root of all illness, be it physical, chemical, emotional, psychological, social, environmental, economic, political or spiritual. The islands within each of us, and within each culture, are where imbalances must be rectified. A place where the elements—who and where we are, our community, our obligations, and our resolutions—take form. A place to travel to

with the specific function of reasserting an ideal, re-direct and re-balance life, relationships and purpose. To remedy an imbalance is to heal. That is a part of the work I do. A cultural healing that entails a re-affirmation of belonging to a community and being a part of an ongoing continuum and to understand one's responsibility in that context. To balance is to regain a sense of the whole to regain a part of one's self.

Ritual is an ancient technology by which to balance and understand and demands a reappraisal. The lacking of most contemporary performance is its inability to see and fully utilize ritual's practical function. In a world full of accelerated change, turmoil, and imbalance a reappraisal of ritual and its function needs to occur. Similarly, but differently, my own culture has been traumatized and is out of balance.

### **THE ISLAND WITHIN**

One thing I enjoyed about my work with Metamorphosis did not have to explain or apologize for my own interest in exploring spirituality through performance. In other settings I had to think about how others would think and react to the methods and spiritual implications of the work. This was especially true of the trance work.

I had begun using trance as a resource for performance development while working with Tuma Theatre. My research on Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo performance led to my developing a process by which to induce trance in the performers as to access another reality for images, atmospheres, movements, and emotions. Eskimo shamans developed performances, dances, and masks following a similar model. By manifesting the sub-consciousness (lower world or altered state of consciousness) in performance a community could then deal with the underlying issues affecting it. In this setting the shaman was a specialist, spiritually attuned and familiar with the technology of trance and the ability to reveal it in performance for their community. The shaman would trance in the service of the community—for the specific purpose of seeking remedy or

balance, which affected it or an individual. Often times the trance, like a dream, was only partially understood. With the act of performance, for and by the community, came understanding. In this way the performance is allowed to express itself on the terms determined by the trance experience. The spirit reality within us all shapes the meaning of the performance. To do otherwise would be to hinder and gainsay the speaking of the spirits. Trance was a means by which to define the landscape living within the group. The articulation of this landscape would create a performance—the island where the community could come to seek refuge.

The goal of the first trance experiences was to familiarize the performers with the process entering into an altered state of consciousness. Though I have developed a variety of trance inducing techniques over the years, I began with the performers simply laying supine and inducing trance by way of rattle. This technique is similar to those applied by Michael Harner in his work. Their given objective was to simply listen to the rattle and let it take them where it will. We used the heartbeat and breath exercises as a way to clear their minds.

To expand my understanding of the group I entered into a state of light trance. 2 I saw trancing with the group as a way to enlarge the quality of our contact and expand from a conscious to a supra-conscious level. With this expansion would come the unique type of performance expression we aspired to.

The group tranced a total of five times. Getting more familiar with the methodology each successive trance experience enabled the group to become more comfortable, go further and remember more from each time. It became apparent that some group members were more adept with the process. The trance experiences of Olga, Elena, and Anna in particular greatly influenced the eventual performance. We valued the experiences of all of the group members albeit the performance would only include Elena, Vitali, Sven, Morten, Yura, and Arkadi. The trance experiences of Milla, the costume and set designer, was for instance, particularly helpful in the development of the performance's visual design. 3

Space does not allow for a full recounting of each trance experience in its narrative detail. To better illuminate the process of performance development through trance I have extracted the key images, movements, and ideas that, in retrospect, either directly or indirectly shaped our performance.

There was an eye in space—it was far away then it came closer until it became enormous in size and then I entered the retina of the eye. Once I entered I went spiraling downwards into an ever-narrowing tunnel. The spiral had white trails and was in a black void. It was a new universe.

Then I saw the planet earth and it was small, too. I was flying through the atmosphere and was like a bird. I was a bird.

There were many sets of eyes. They were the eyes of some sort of animal and were floating.

The light was not clear and everything was in shadows. The light was cool and cold. Then in front of me was a river. And suddenly I was floating on that river. The river was underground and led to an underground lake where the surface was calm. Then from above I saw myself floating on the lake. I was a human figure. Then I wasn't a human figure. I became the symbol of a human body—like a cutout cardboard figure. And I was like a ghost lying on the water with aura-like colors surrounding me. Then I became aware of there being many pairs of eyes. They were all watching me. The symbol of my human body moved as if it was dancing then two Eastern men with turbans on came and were dancing next to the lake watching me. Then the men in turbans were doing a one-gesture movement.

There was a stone flower and there was a hole at the bottom of the flower. It was a hole for information and education. It was the hole for initiation.

There was a female figure at center of the floor showing me movements—they were praise movements. Then there were white symbols on a black background.

In the distance there came the sound of drumming and I sense something was approaching. The drum rhythm became rapid and I got an unpleasant feeling. A creature with many teeth on each side of its mouth was coming

towards me. It was flying straight for me. Suddenly we were looking into each other's eyes. And I went into his eye and to the bottom of the eye and into a dark space. And had the feeling as if I was in a great wheel turning clockwise. There was a wheel sound and I began to move with the wheel.

Then in the silence and darkness I heard sounds coming from the corner. They were the sounds of footsteps and I sensed a spirit was coming. I watched the transformation of the spirit into several different geometrical shapes. It then settled on one geometric face. It had two large eyes they were large slits. The mask was yellow and followed me wherever I went.

I saw a girl in long white shirt playing some game and running between the trees. Then she ran to a circle of people dancing around the fire but all faces turned away from the fire so I couldn't see them at first. The people dancing were wearing dark and white strips of clothing and black masks with no mouths only eyes.

The people jumped and danced and shouted. In the fire around which they danced were pictures and idols. They were burning. The girl was standing near the circle and there was a boy also wearing a long skirt who moved closer to her. Then they started doing somersaults. Then I saw the boy's face up close and it was terrible. It looked like a corpse, all black and dark. I became afraid and began praying to Christ. Then I saw the face of the girl close up. She was standing at the tree looking at me—her face was just like mine.

There were squares, circles and triangles changing very vast between each other. Then at my feet a thin but very long and gray stripe on the ground. I was not sure where it led. Then the girl was walking on the stripe and I could see inside her body—it was exposed to me in layers.

Then a white and black image came very fast with white arrows. Then saw the girl and I together wearing a white dress made of white net. There was something licking my feet and leaving a pin prickling feeling. I could not feel other parts of my body.

Suddenly I sensed shadows were moving quickly. Their movement looked like leaves of grass.

Then a very small black hole entrance appeared from underneath me and a rhythmic light was moving from within it. The light rhythm connected to the rhythm of the drum.

Then closed my inner eyes and everything transformed into a white. Then black lines transformed into symbols I didn't understand and they covered one another. When I was trying to understand what the symbols meant I began to be bitten on the legs then on different parts of my body. The biting was trying to call my attention to the faces above me. They were ancient faces. Faces made of ancient wood and bark. Painted faces but human faces like from another civilization. They were not terrifying. Their skin was elastic like a tree bark. There was a human face but it changed into a tree face then back to a tree face. They were always changing—each time I opened and closed my eyes it was a different face of a different old man.

I looked around and saw that I surrounded by light. Beneath me felt like the surface of calm water. Above me was a thin stripe of earth.

Then there was a tunnel that opened from above. It led into the earth. I traveled through the tunnel: it led to the sky and in the distance there were mountains.

The surface was changing all the time.

Then on the ground I saw human bodies. Then a ray found him. A tree grew from the ground and began to dance.

Then the birds flew into the sky and around in a circle to create the figure of solar symbol then flew to opposite direction. Felt the absence of my body.

There was the sudden sensation of vast space with sound coming into the space. It was difficult to keep my balance. Then a long hallway, like in a palace, appeared. It had a red carpet. Then man appeared, a stranger with a full white beard and white shirt. All of the sudden he tried to suffocate me and pressed eyeballs in. I fell to the floor, then the man tried to choke me, pushing up and

down into the floor. I couldn't breath but wasn't afraid. He turned into an angry animal-monster with horns and frown.

I went through a series of small claustrophobic spaces. Then I came upon a black man and yellow woman. They were raising and lowering a strip of the blue sky. The light from the sky was like a mist.

The sound of the drum was like the cutting of paper and very disruptive, so much so my right hand shook

Discovered myself in an underground cave with dirty water and dim light. I couldn't feel my body but I saw that my hands clasping a rock. I tried to let go of the rock but couldn't.

## **CREATING A RITUAL PERFORMANCE**

The experiences provided not only images, ideas, and emotions to be shaped into performance, it established a new context by which to link to realities—the unconscious/conscious and spiritual/secular Ritual movements, vocalizations, and patterns had their origins in, and connected to, a greater reality that reasserts and reaffirms a larger context of being. The trance experiences had enlarged perceptions of self and the possibility of performance.

Following a process similar to the Ritual Presentation, that of discussion and consensus, the group associated and defined the trance images/movements/ideas/sounds/feelings they wanted to work with. Some of the experiences were condensed; others were put on a 'reserve' list because we were unsure about what to do with them. Soon the trance experiences were transformed into several unassociated pod-narratives. No attempt to structure a sequential narrative or assign meaning was made. The instinct to assign meaning and develop a full narrative story is part of human nature, but to define narrative and meaning without allowing it to breathe and bred would cheat the experiences that held a density of information that needed to reveal and organize itself on its own terms. Those terms had to be discerned through experiential exploration.

Ironically, the inability to communicate directly (because of our language barriers) became an advantage. Without a shared verbal language between the group and I we were required to expand upon our ability to communicate physically and through song and chant. This pushed the work into the a more primary and direct communication and away from reliance on the language-mental constructs of meaning created by words that tend to lead away from the integrative, mind/body/spirit performance we were working towards. The necessity of working this way heightened the group's sensitivity to communicate among them kinetically and spiritually, reducing our communication to an essence. It is, in a similar way I believe, how traditional and ritual performances communicate.

After the initial trance experience certain motifs became evident. Remarkably a few of the group members shared similar experiences. Sensing this sharing were indicators of 'entrances' to the narrative that lived with the group and culture, we explored these experiences further with 'directed' trances. In a directed trance, rather than the group member simply following the drum or rattle and allowing the experience to happen, group members would formulate questions prior to trancing. The question would direct the trance experience. The trance itself becoming the answer.

Generally questions evolved through discussion. For instance, the appearance of the Egyptian-like men with turbans intrigued the group, so during a trance Sven and Vitali formulated questions such as: "What do the turban men say?" and "What do the turban men want and why are they there?" During their subsequent trances each performer was able to add detail and meaning to their respective characters. In a sense they asked the turban men questions much like a shaman might ask a spirit. Each performer developed a relationship with the turban men (as they became known) and performed them. Their trance work deeply influenced their performance, so much so, that I could be said that they were speaking for the turban men. In so doing they linked two different realities. Such linking is the similar to the performance model used by traditional cultures.

In traditional cultures, however, the performance of a spirit would also have meaning within an established cosmological context.

Another path of exploration was the process of physically and vocally exploring each of the pod-narratives. Groups of two or three addressed each pod-narrative to explore the possibility of expression and meaning. Groups were established according to who wanted to work with a specific pod-narratives. And spent several hours exploring pod-narratives on their own and afterwards gave presentations of their work. Other group members would then offer suggestions or revelations from their own explorations. Sometimes the work would require a further trance to investigate the pod-narrative. In this way the performance development methods cross-referenced story ideas, images, actions and opinions. Personal interpretations and free-associating—with the cultural performance vocabulary established during our Ritual Preparation and White Doves explorations—were encouraged.

Morten developed an affinity with the geometrical spirit person but came up blank in trying to define how such a being moved or its place within the narrative. Through a series of trances he was able to gain an insight into the character's meaning and movement. By trancing Morten was able to define the rhythms appropriate to the character that became known as "Pyramid Man." Rhythms expressed in other sections of the performance also evolved from trance experiences. Like Vitali and Sven who explored, defined and eventually played the turban men, Morten developed, defined and played the Pyramid Man. In this way the trance experiences interacted with the group, eventually defining and detailing (and casting) the entire performance.

Vitali, an accomplished singer, was able to develop several songs through trance experiences. During several trance experiences an androgynous figure came to him. When he asked the figure to speak it instead sang. After one trance experience Vitali was like a man possessed. Working for several hours by himself on the stage piano he was able articulate into song what the figure had sung to him. The result was three songs of an exceptionally haunting quality.

During the process of articulating the songs he had unlocked the secrets of the figure. As the exploratory work evolved the androgynous became the god/goddess that welcomed the girl's initiation into womanhood. The initiation melded the songs Vitali had developed with the action and imagery Elena had detailed from her trance experiences. The mist and smoke of her trance became in performance a flowing white veil Vitali's character wore and, in performance, shrouded Elena with.

Arkadi and Sven worked and defined the "Tree People." Though initially inspired by a trance experience, Tree people and birch bark masks are very much a part of the pre-Christian, Slavic culture. Working with Olga and Milla, Sven and Arkadi pulled together all the visual and historical information they could about the Slavic tradition of Tree People and their performance. Though visual examples of the birch bark masks exist in books and museums, their actual performance and ritual application were vague and fragmentary. Combining what they knew from Elena's trance experience and from the Slavic tradition they explored the use of the birch bark masks and developed a movement, understanding, and character of Tree People.

Absent, however, from their work was an internal understanding and sense of contextual meaning. Sven, though raised in the forest of interior Alaska was removed from Slavic culture; Arkadi, though a Slav was raised in urban St. Petersburg and was removed from the innate understanding that can develop between trees and animals when living among them. There was only so much logic bound, realistic acting techniques—physical characteristics, motive, and thinking—could offer our process. Theirs was not a realistic rendering of Trees—they were Tree spirits. How does one play a Tree spirit without reducing the portrayal to cartoon, stereotype spirit or grade school rendering? In traditional cultural context they would have had the advantage of an oral tradition to draw from. A traditional context would also enable them to listen, and be educated by, the tree spirits. That is just what they did through trance. Though time did not allow for the extensive performance investigation that might take generations to

develop, their experiences gave them an understanding and appreciation for the Tree People. Such an understanding cannot be derived by logical means. Their performance was as much for a human audience as it was for and with the Tree People. Their performance honored the tree people by giving them a voice.

How to perform Elena's journey through the earth, and how to depict the coming of the sky and the snake, particularly stumped us. Through a series of trances we were able to define that a cloth be used to depict the tunnels of her through the earth journey. Fragments of movements and choreography also emerged from which we were able to begin staging her journey scenes. During one trance session Elena and Yura tranced to reveal the snake. Their mutual quest assisted one another. A detailed look of the snake person, his function within the narrative, and relationship to Elena, was revealed during that particular trance session.

Out of necessity our process of development remained fluid, determining itself on a day-to-day basis. We adjusted and organized our work schedule around what the work suggested. We were in a dialog with the material and with the trance reality we were accessing. The process revealed the content and in turn the content revealed the process. How we built the performance had as a profound influence on the eventual performance as did its content. As the narrative proceeded from fragments I constantly reminded others and myself not to rush into linking the fragments into a whole. Narrative continuity seemed to evolve without our conscious effort. Trust and belief in the process was essential to the creation of the performance.

The choice of working orally complimented our working process. The evolving text came to exist in us and between us—and between our physical and trance realities. By working orally the work remained flexible, free floating, and mutating. Things were forgotten, inverted or remembered differently, and that was as it should be. Working orally demanded the performers remember differently and develop internal mnemonics, activating an older part of the human brain and somatic consciousness. In such a process there is no waste,

everything, every feeling, idea, movement, and interaction contributes to the work. Nothing has a greater or lesser value. In the oral world everything contains potential, imagination is given freer reign. Time and space become porous.

About two weeks after our initial trance work a performance outline emerged. Without predicting or consciously working for it, we had created a story about a girl and her journey to become a woman. Images from the trances, especially the vivid contributions from the women in the group, suggested the performance's point-of-view. The White Doves ritual framework, along with the trance experiences, shaped Elena's role into that of the prophet. Her journey was about learning and becoming the prophet, the bringer of knowledge. The performance was simultaneously and narrative and initiation ritual.

The performance re-worked parts of the Ritual Preparation as a preface to the performance. In so doing the Ritual Preparation worked for the performance much in the same way it had work for the process of creating the performance—it provided a resource and focus. Some elements of the Ritual Preparation cross-germinated with trace imagery to create new meanings. For instance, the spinning section of the Ritual Preparation expanded melded with several trance experiences to serve a function similar to the White Dove rituals. The White Doves use of towels expanded to become very long strips of cloth (thirty feet long) melded the Slavic trance tradition with the trance inspired narrative. Similarly, long strips of cloth (of varying design and color) became the tunnels and pathways the girl travels. Long strips of cloth for the sky cloth (15 by 2 feet) further expanded on the motif of the trance towels. The white pathway of knowledge the girl travels at the end of the performance similarly echoed the towel motif.

The performance reflected and was a testament to the process. Somehow everything that had occurred, whether planned or by happenstance, shaped the work: working in the chemical factory, communicating through translator, the surrounding social, political, and economic upheaval taking place in Russia, the interpersonal difficulties with Olga, all left an indelible mark on the performance.

The initiation motif, though finding articulation in the girl's journey, was our initiation, too.

## **SHADOWS FROM THE PLANET FIRE**

### **CALLING THE SPIRITS**

There is only a metal fire bowl at the center. A contemporary girl comes into an open space where the fire is burning. She senses the emptiness and the vastness of the space. She does not know how or where to direct her need so she calls into the air for guidance. It has been so long she doesn't know how or what she must call. She knows only that she has a need to call. She calls to the spirits; she appeals to her ancestors and to the ancient fire god. There is great stillness and emptiness. She is about to give up and leave when suddenly there is an answer to her calls. Something invisible has come to guide her and show her how to call upon the fire god for strength, protection, and guidance. With the help of the unseen she awakens the earth, her ancestors, and the elements. She sees the spirits living in the shadows and she is frightened by their appearance. She wants to run but something inside her compels her to stay. The four ancient spirits are there to guide her.

Girl: Father I am your child, show me the way.

The fire responds by putting the fire in her. Now with the fire within she dances.

Girl: I am ready to give myself. What is given does not belong to me but to something greater. All is under your power. Father fire takes me to the land of origins.

Once uttered the spirits vanish as if they had never been. The girl becomes frightened. She is suddenly alone with only the fire to keep her company. Had she imagined what had happened? Unable to contain her fear any longer she flees, but she cannot leave. The spirits suddenly re-appear and bring with them strips of the earth. They open the earth to her and she goes tumbling into it. Uncontrollably she is tossed and pushed further into the earth.

### **JOURNEY**

The earth swallows her and she travels uncontrollably through the tunnels to deep within her self. Everywhere she senses eyes and shadows following her, controlling her fate yet guiding her. The unknown frightens her. Finally the earth wraps her and comforts her with its moist, dark embrace. The earth takes her further into itself and into herself. The earth spins away from her and she finds herself spinning again free in a large void. She falls in exhaustion.

### **SEARCHING**

But she cannot rest for long. Soon invisible astral beings bite her legs and body. It is too early to rest their bites tell her. Their bites hurt and she runs. The bites come out of the voice and with funny sounds. Then spotlights search her out in the dark. She has no time to rest and she runs from them. The spotlights out of the void chase her into the Eye Man. A man covered with eyes and seeing everything. She is frightened by the man's ability to see—there is nothing she can hide from him. Totally exposed the Eye Man tells her there is no place where she can hide. He shows her herself.

### **THE TURBAN MEN**

They lay out the river of confusion—it is a river of words and overflowing with knowledge and philosophy. The girl seeks it out of refuge. The turban men are at either end of the river of confusion and they are too busy with their knowledge and philosophy to even see her. The girl stops and sits to listen to their words

and cannot understand a thing. She shouts at them to get their attention. They are happy and surprised to see her. Their words only confuse her. She realizes they are only distracting her attention from her path with their foolish conversation. They try to teach her to sing. When she wants to leave they make fun of her. Why should she want to leave when everything she could possibly want is right there with them? They try to persuade her to stay with them with promises of security and comforts. Then she still wants to leave and they cannot stop her they take her shadow and lay it on the river. For a moment she is standing and dead. Something has been taken from her. The Turban men take up the river of words with her shadow on it and leave, talking their philosophy as they do so.

### **PYRAMID MAN**

The Pyramid Man brings with him a calming rhythm. He re-establishes harmony and order. He is at the center of the earth. The beat awakens her. Its purity calls her and engages her. She identifies with the rhythm. He dances the rhythm of the earth. In so doing he calls the hills, the mountains, the valleys, the rivers, seas and oceans. She becomes enraptured in his rhythm and dances with him.

### **THE TREE PEOPLE**

The Tree People enter angrily because of how she and others have mistreated them. How she and others have not given them the respect they deserve. She cowers, frightened by their anger. They are about to strike her but stop short. She understands now they are people whereas before she only saw them as trees. She realizes nature is alive and that it interacts. She realizes the trees are sad. She listens to their sadness and hears their mourning. She reaches out to the trees and then they to her. They realize they must heal each other. They are her ancestors. The tree people will teach her what they know because she has learned to listen to them. They offer her their leaves from their branches. On each leaf is a pictogram. Within each pictogram is a truth, lesson, or warning.

The first is about time. She contemplates each image they give her then drops them to the ground to decompose, returning to the earth and its cycle.

Leaf symbol  
Nuclear symbol  
Dollar sign  
Soviet symbol  
Wheel symbol  
Electricity  
Fire  
Empty  
Factory smoke stack  
Bomb symbol

{The symbols correlate with the stages of man: birth, infancy, childhood, youth, maturity, old age, and death.}

## **THE SNAKE**

The snake emerges bringing knowledge from the underground and from the earth. Such snakes only appear once in a person's lifetime and it is lucky to see one let alone talk with one. The snake has a mirror in the palm of each hand. Showing her his hands he reads her thoughts. To clear her mind of nonsense he pulls out questions and concerns. She must look at herself. And accept knowledge only through herself. What time is it? Let me go. Is it time to go? Have you seen my shoes? How much does it cost? Where am I running? Will it rain today? Where is my wallet? Should I buy a metro pass? I am late for work. Why is it so bright? Where do I live? Should I go to the library? Am I afraid or not? What are you looking at? Have I fed the dog? I need a haircut. Where is the toilet? Am I pretty? I'm getting a headache. The snake transforms and is half

man. He gives her a miniature image of herself. The snake sheds the remaining vestiges of snakesness and becomes fully a man.

### **THE SKY APPEARS**

Taking the miniature image of her the girl the man travels to a strip of the sky that suddenly appears unraveled by the tree people. The sky spins and the girl watches herself dance in the sky among the stars and planets. She follows herself as the sky and her world turn. She falls to the ground to take hold of what she has learned and who she has become. The Sky, Tree People and snake man vanish.

### **RE-BIRTH**

A white path appears next to her and she awakens to the distant and beautiful sound of the universal mother. The universal mother has come to take her on her last journey. The universal mother carries with her universal knowledge and universal being. The universal mother is neither man nor woman who brings her into herself. The girl is born into a womanhood and self-acceptance. She and the spirits sing and celebrate in her re-birth.

### **THE PERFORMANCE**

The premiere of the Shadows from the Planet Fire took place on August 10, 1992, in the lobby of the Baltic House Theatre, St. Petersburg. Baltic house Theatre had formerly been the Lenin Theatre and only renamed months prior to our performance. The building was a fine example of Stalin-era built pomposity replete with enormous columns, high ceilings, marble statues and staircases, to extol the righteousness of the Soviet state. It contained several theatres and shops, including a large a proscenium theatre with nearly a thousand seats. Everything was suffering from benign neglect.

Anatoly Antohin had negotiated with the theater's management to house the offices of the Russian-American Theatre. The Baltic House Theatre was

eager to have the Russian-American Theatre because it was quickly losing ground to the other large theatres in the sudden competitive scramble for international connections. The management wanted us to perform *Shadows* in the large theatre or the smaller, two hundred seat studio theatre. We rejected the idea preferring the second floor lobby with a beautiful wooden floor and surrounding balcony. There was an echo in the lobby, no position for lights, and no off-stage areas, but the lobby was nonetheless ideal. It was a public space where audiences could be seated informally on three sides and had no theater expectations attached to it. Its height of sixty feet with a forty by sixty foot playing space complimented the larger-than-life, mytho-ritual expression, the performance aspired to. We used the inherent narrative of the space—its vast emptiness, echo, and former greatness in ruin—as a context and counterpoint for the performance.

Getting the production to opening took much ingenuity, bending of the rules, and persistence. The production budget was approximately \$100 in US Dollars. It was the largest budget the *Metamorphosis* had ever had for a production and there was much concern about how they were going to afford it. Wanting a smooth production I underwrote the entire production. Providing the money was the easy part. In post-Soviet Russia finding the most basic items such as 'D' cell batteries, muslin, or paint, meant scouring kiosks, passing the word among friends, and dealing with the Russian Mafia that could find anything for a price. To find drums and drumsticks, of any kind, shape or size, was next to impossible. After nearly a month of searching all we could turn up was a tuba and a marching band bass drum. I will forever be indebted to Milla for her tireless efforts and resourcefulness in not only pulling the costume and set design together, but doing so with quality and artistry. She had an incredible ability to make much from little or nothing.

Nothing was easy. Even going to the director of the Baltic House Theatre, to ask permission to rehearse later than normal closing time, turned into a Gogolesque farce. What I thought was a simple request soon turned into scene

with several people being called into the office, from tech director, to Anatoly, to the assistant director, and even the business manager. Suddenly there were seven people gesticulating and arguing wildly as if something serious had happened. The word problem came up a lot. The seven gathered administrators looked and pointed towards me while Anna and I sat and watched befuddled. When I inquired what was going on Anatoly turned to me with seriousness and said "Tom, why didn't you tell me sooner about the rehearsal!" Finally after several minutes the director declared with firm resolve, the others looking and nodding, "You may stay to ten o'clock. But you must promise me not to stay one minute later. This is very important!" I agreed still not knowing what the big deal was. That night ten o'clock came and went and we saw no guard. We stayed to after mid-night. The episode in the office was just another example of Soviet system afterglow whereby everything was discussed because no one was willing to take responsibility for a decision. So much confusion and discussion were involved to protect people from the possibility of a decision being wrong. What better way to obfuscate responsibility?

To add to the circus of events, the day before opening two Russian television film crews unexpectedly showed up to video the performance and to get interviews. Of course they wanted special set-up and angles. We lost most of an already hectic pre-opening day to their activities.

On the day of the opening we had a successful run through of the performance. Sensing the performers needed a rest I gave them the afternoon off. I decided to go to the city center to do some shopping. Needing some rubles I changed money on the street near the local Metro station—something I had done several times before and was standard practice throughout the city. No sooner was the exchange of fifty US dollars complete when suddenly a large burly man physically accosted and yelled at me in Russian. At first thought it was a robbery, then I realized I was being arrested. A new law had just gone into effect and money changing on the street was, as of that day, illegal. I spent six hours in a holding cell. I was to find out later my captors were former KGB men reassigned

to street detail and not too happy about it. After being yelled at by a superior in a rapid fire Russian I couldn't comprehend they finally called the Russian-American Theatre. An administrator from the theater met me at the KGB offices and it was only then, observing his sweating fear, I realized I could be in serious trouble. After negotiating with a sympathetic officer, paying fifty-dollar fine, and signing a confession, they set me free. I arrived at the theater thirty minutes before prior to our opening. The cast and crew greeted me with tears and emotion worthy of someone returning from the dead. They explained that formerly arrest by such men, even for a minor incident, often resulted in people disappearing without a trace.

Opening night was a success. In addition to audiences from the theater community there were several White Doves members in attendance. The production provoked much discussion and interpretation. Though opinions varied all of those I talked to agreed it was a story that needed telling. Some said the performance was about a search for purity and a return to nature and something with meaning. Others said it was: "A search for a home and understanding of personal feelings and impulses." "The girl's journey and lessons were to get knowledge to help others because they are helpless." "Because the earth is dying more knowledge about herself is required." "The girl, like all of us, must reassess our purpose and aim in life. We must all embrace the common pulse and the common beat to become a small part of the earth. That it was a journey of women to become who they are." "The girl was symbolic of the journey of Russia to find her self." "Russia is regaining its female, intuitive side and its softness." For my part the ultimate meaning of the performance was, and in part is still to this day, a guess, an ambiguity and mystery.

Something special and mysterious happened during the performance and its simplicity belied the complexity of its meaning. The fruits of methods, aspiration, and collectives came to fruition in what can best be described as a performance trance. The communication was less theatre and more ritual, and like ritual it spoke less to the mind and more to the soul through the body.

Rhythm and vibration, movement and symbol were the pathways. The performance made porous boundaries between physical, mental, and spiritual realities. Semantics were distinctions between conscious and unconscious, personal and communal, real and imagined, physical and spiritual were rendered inconsequential. It was a ritual performance bespeaking a unity, wholeness, and interchangeability. It was a way for a community to celebrate and liberate itself for a brief time, and glimpse a greater reality.

In a way story of the performance was a story about making a story. A story divined by the group for the group's community. Multi-leveled and faceted, the story was a fulcrum of issues, sources, needs, and expressions. The narrative they were speaking was their own and by speaking a greater part of themselves they were speaking for everyone. By sacrificing voice and body to the invisible they had made visible the shadows of the planet fire.

## **NOTES**

1 Out of economic necessity some of the group members would also sell family fruits and vegetables in parks or on the street after rehearsals or on their days off for extra income.

2 Before trance work can be engaged one must be fully prepared and aware of the responsibility of such work. Trance work demands much of the facilitator and participants. Such work often unearths personal, psychological and emotional issues. A facilitator must be prepared to deal with any number of eventualities as a result of the trance work. To better prepare for the trance work the facilitator must establish trust and sensitivity to each of the participants. Additionally, an appraisal of each participant's emotional ability to engage in such work needs to be made. As a prerequisite a facilitator must experience personally, and rigorously test, each of the methods they present.

3 The trance methods I have applied for the purposes of performance development are based on a variety of sources. Generally for introductory work I

have applied the work of Michael Harner. For advanced and directed trance work I have applied the methods of Felicitas Goodman and Doug Morgan. Personally developed trance techniques informed by my work with indigenous people and healers have also been applied. I have used a variety of rattles and drums (sometimes culturally specific instruments) while conducting trance sessions. I have also used singing, chanting, and pre-recorded tapes to facilitate trance experiences.

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