

# Beneath the Poetry: Magic Not Meaning

By Kate Hennig

As part of the Pure Research Project of Nightswimming

“Beneath the poetry of the texts, there is the actual poetry, without form and without text.” – Antonin Artaud

*Helen:* “Text is the foundation one builds classical work on. Do we not owe it to ourselves and to our [audience] to explore the language to the utmost? ...I cannot derive the meaning of a word from more words. We rush to put deep emotion onto shallow words. People talk about mining text, what we did was a full-scale ground breaking dig to the core.”

## Introduction: Why, What, How?

Bring your bucket. We’re going on a dig. Just let me tell you why we are digging, what we are digging for, and how we will embark on the dig.

- Background

For the past two years I have been teaching intuitive and metaphysical exploration in voice for the theatre. This work utilises the whole body as the source of vocal expression. I work with the capacity of intuition in acting; something that we are unable to teach or to grasp or to repeat, but that we can feel energetically as part of our theatrical process.

I am fascinated by intuitive connections to text. These connections empower the word at its source: intent, theme, feeling, and the need to communicate. Theoretically, this is contacting the initial energy of the word - the same energy that inspires the writer to put the word on paper. If we as actors can access this connection, it should effect more vibrant expression and communication of poetic texts in the theatre.

So I undertook an exploration of intuitive connection with text as part of Nightswimming's Pure Research project in May of 2003. With six professional actors, and twenty-four hours of research spread over five days, we went on an archaeological dig through our relationship with language. The experiences I share with you are gathered from various sources: the participants' journals, observers' notes, video archive transcripts, and my own research journal.

- Context

In addition to my own developing creative practice, we used the practice and concepts of Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, Joseph Chaikin and Eugenio Barba. These theatre masters were proponents of the connection of the voice with the body, using extended range of the voice in communication, and its emotional power as a tool of expression.

The ideological concepts of the research were based on the eco-philosophy of David Abram, who believes that the natural force of the word has been lost in its visual description, that is, in its *spelling*. He suggests that we can rediscover our relationship with our planet by rediscovering the *spell* cast by the word: by making communication a fully sensual experience.

- Purpose

My long-term goals are to explore alternative models of illuminating text in rehearsal. The current model of table work functions well for actors and material geared to a visual/ analytical process. But for many of us the aural and physical processes, not to mention the intuitive process that is often dismissed entirely, go untapped. I am interested in mining their potential.

## Part 1 - Ground Work: Relationships with Words

Dig into communication and expression. Excavate meaning. Discover magic. And tyranny. And fear. And possession. And hysteria. And gifts.

Search. And re-search.

When I read David Abram's book, The Spell of the Sensuous, I was thrilled to find a philosophical context for my passionate relationship with words. He is a passionate man, with passionate interests. Plenty of passion.

In his first few chapters Abram introduces the ideas and writings of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the *philosophy of phenomenology*: the science of experience. (Don't let that scare you. It's just a word. And as you will see, it is only your *objective experience* of that word that frightens you.)

Edmund Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology includes the concept that in order to perceive an object we must enter into a relationship with it. That is, if we are to perceive a plant, we enter into a relationship with that plant, and the plant enters into a relationship with us, thereby creating an exchange of energy and information (Abram, 36-39).

I wondered if such a phenomenological relationship might be created with something lifeless, like a word on a page.

- Objective Experience of the Word: The Secondary Level

Phenomenology purports that the world exists in both *objective* and *subjective experience*. Our cultural understanding of words in Toronto in 2003 is basically an objective one. We look at words on a page and we try to understand their literal meaning in order to use them.

This literal meaning is the *secondary level of language* according to Abram, an *objective understanding* of the word:

“[The prevalent view] considers any language to be a set of arbitrary but conventionally agreed upon words, or ‘signs,’ linked by a purely formal system of syntactic and grammatical rules. Language, in this view, is rather like a *code*; it is a way of *representing* actual things and events in the perceived world, but it has no internal, nonarbitrary connections to that world, and hence is readily separable from it. (Abram, 77)”

Separable from the world... therefore *objective* experience.

In the theatre, particularly with poetic texts, we sit around a table for a week establishing this *objective* understanding of the words, so that we can all be ‘on the same page’.

My research participants have complex reactions to this type of table work:

*Pam*: “...it is almost like a false sense of knowing the text - or rather than false - it is a surface understanding.”

*Marion*: “By the end of [the table work] I feel, great, now the play is completely dead for me. We’re now going to try to reanimate it...And I can’t come up with ideas while I’m sitting down holding a coffee looking at paper and other people sitting down. I feel like I start rehearsal a week behind everybody else, and I have to catch up.”

There must be another way.

- Subjective Experience of the Word: The Primary Level

The *primary level of language* is communication with gesture and non-verbal sound:

“... communicative meaning is first incarnate in the gestures by which the body spontaneously expresses feeling and responds to change in its affective environment. The gesture is spontaneous and immediate. It is not an arbitrary sign that we mentally attach to a particular emotion or feeling; rather, the gesture *is* the bodying-forth of that emotion into the world, it *is* that feeling of delight or of anguish in its tangible, visible aspect (Abram, 74).”

'Bodily-forth' into the world... therefore *subjective* experience.

**The Big Question:** So... what if we enter into a relationship with the word that is completely subjective? How rich will the experience of the word be? And will we be able to communicate that richness to our audience?

## Part 2 – Methods: How Do We Mean?

Time to dig. Like archaeologists we went searching for that primary level of language. And there were many layers of inhibitions, patterns, and judgements to traverse before we found it.

We ventured forth in two steps:

- Step one investigated the *primary level*, first through **non-verbal expression** (no words at all), then through **pre-verbal expression** (expressing a word in non-articulated sound and movement), and finally through **subjective experience** of words themselves.
- Step two took these findings and **applied them to text**; a poem that the Butterfly speaks in Federico Garcia Lorca's The Butterfly's Evil Spell.

Our goal was to excavate the depths of experience that language could provide. But as much as we managed to create and dwell in the experience of those depths, they were hard to capture in words:

"Every attempt to definitively say what language is is subject to a curious limitation. For the only medium with which we can define language is language itself. We are therefore unable to circumscribe the whole of language within our definition. It may be best, then, to leave language undefined, and to thus acknowledge its open-endedness, its mysteriousness. Nevertheless, by paying attention to this mystery we may develop a conscious familiarity with it, a sense of its texture, its habits, its sources of sustenance (Abram, 73)."

This was our point of departure: accepting the mystery in language, engaging with that open-endedness, coming to a familiarity with it, and applying its sources of sustenance, be they physical, vocal, emotional, or intuitive, to the work at hand.

### Part 3 - The Primary Level: Body Speaking to Body

- Non-Verbal Expression: Animal Exchange

The investigation of **non-verbal expression** aimed at creating basic communication through the voice and body, with no literal associations. We began as animals meeting around a watering hole, first in the dark, and then in light. The only instruction: greet each other.

*The body is not separable from the desire to communicate.*

*Helen: "Sensual communication... we were asked to make a sound, but all morphed physically as well. For me it would have been impossible to communicate the sound I did if I were standing straight and walking upright."*

*The primary level of language is created in intention and relationship.*

*Observer 1, Clare: "Exchange of language – creating form of language which is shared instantly because of dedication of meeting each other – language is a relationship – tonal melody – understanding the interaction without the need for words – intention, emotion, intuition, using sound and body"*

An anomaly occurred once the exercise switched to two humans meeting.

*Human language patterns make it difficult to retain the primary level of language.*

*Kate: "There was a true exchange of language of the body and the voice, and without words one very quickly sees this interchange. In the [exercise portraying] birds it was an exchange of cooing and heads. In the fish it was an*

exchange of completely different kinds of bubbles and fins. In the humans it became literal. Sign language: 'call you later'."

*Michelle:* "2 animals meeting – no need to construct: getting to be birds, everyone is in relationship immediately; 2 humans meeting – less freedom – temptation to translate into English."

What is it about the nature of our humanness that frees us to communicate at the primary level so clearly? When the actors were fish and birds, and the language was in their bodies, they did not need to interpret. But as soon as the human element came in, the language moved to their heads, and there was a need for precise understanding. Analytical understanding.

We are not satisfied with the magic of communication, or its simplicity. We are obsessed with literal meaning; we have a need to be right or wrong.

- Pre-Verbal Expression: Bypassing Analytical Function

With the investigation of **pre-verbal expression** we tried to bypass the analytical understanding of the word by carrying the meaning through the body.

*When words are present analytical function wants to dominate, making access to the primary level challenging.*

*Helen:* "I had difficulty with my word [cynicism]. Nothing visceral happened to me. As I took it in I felt my mind go through all the times I had used the word. I kept seeing people smoking cigarettes. I think by the time my body moved I had no idea what the word meant at all. I just saw an image flash across my eyes of Lauren Bacall... then just the words resistance and denial. I felt entirely in my head. The words on the paper seemed inadequate to describe what the word meant to me and my body was unable to describe what the text was saying... I just decided that I did not really understand what cynicism was and desperately wanted a dictionary to look it up in."

Unlike the **non-verbal expression**, the introduction of words in any fashion made it impossible to get entirely out of our heads. And of course, our heads are necessary to

our work. Without that analytical function there would be no plays as we know them: no controlled form, no rational choice.

*Diverting analytical function brings a new kind of meaning; a different idea of what is 'right'.*

*Pam: "...it is so easy to get caught up in the old 'doing it right' or... is this right – does it actually capture the specifics of the text. And this questioning immediately takes me/took me away from just breathing in the text and trusting it and my own intuition to guide me. The allowing process I guess. Allowing it to come through the body and voice in the purest way it can WITHOUT THE HEAD GETTING IN THE WAY. And yes, there were moments of this definitely... and still – for me – there is a lot of chatter, judging of my efforts – all that garbage that takes time to strip away."*

*Larry: "I've used language as a safety mechanism, an escape at times. Sometimes warranted and necessary but sometimes as a place to hide. When the language is taken away and I am required to express myself in another way, it's more visceral for me. There is more meaning."*

*The primary level of language seeks 'how' to communicate not 'what' to communicate.*

*Helen: "[Pam's] initial gesture breaks my heart. I feel her pain, and hurt... When watching people take in the word, what occurred to me is that kind of time is never taken to interpret language. What does 'betrayal' mean? Not what. How. How does it mean."*

Here we see the "bodying forth" of emotion that Abram talked about earlier. A physical need: not to discover *what* to mean, but to discover *how* to mean.

*The 'how' is manifest in directness of intention: sticking to the task at hand.*

*Marion: "The moment I had the idea 'I want to take in this word (or phrase) in order to communicate it' – Images, sensual images, flooded in without my having to do anything to get them. I think what I usually do is 'I want to take in this word. Then when I really understand it, I'll be able to say it in such a way that other people will understand it too.' So at this point, I fall off the intention of communicating, and switch to the intention of 'understanding with my head'."*

So we need the intention to communicate to supersede the need to understand. Action betters reason. We can *mean* things without a literal understanding of them. And we can communicate that meaning. When the intention is to *communicate*, rather than to *understand*, the breath, voice, and body are allowed their intuitive experience, and access the essence of meaning in the word. (And I'm sure, reading this with your left brains, you're having a hard time *conceiving* of *how we mean*. It's pretty tough to *think* about because you're using your analytical function. You have to *experience* it intuitively. More digging.)

- Pre-Verbal Expression: Chinese Symbols

We began to look at written form as a first step toward accessing the *primary level* with text. To access language without the immediate intrusion of rational association I followed an idea from David Abram's book. Chinese symbols are pictograms: derived from visual representations of what the symbol represents. We would seek the information carried in the pictograms without knowing their literal meaning by drawing them, and then improvising what they conveyed to us in sound and movement.

*When analytical function is diverted, information contained in pictograms is identifiable and expressible.*

*Helen: "I can not analyse. I have no desire to know what it means. Construction of the symbol. Two lines running parallel. Two creatures, destined never to meet, never to touch. A line joins them, what connects two people, love obligation blood. Another line joins, independent of the first two, a newness child now a family. How does family feel in my body? No this is not family, that is my story. I have analysed this to death. I am wanting the symbol to say family. It is not. Go back. Colour.*

*The lines are red now. The connector yellow and the newness bright pink. I will not assign people to the lines. They are lines.*

*I draw and a picture comes. The bright pink hugs the other colours.*

*Back on my feet. I find the lines, the parallel, never meeting, the strength of running on forever. The connecting line is sensual, seductive. The new line reaches up to the sky and into the heart."*

Helen's pictogram was *heaven*: "the strength of running on forever"; "up to the sky and into the heart". The brain was there trying hard to interfere, but she recognised that interference and shifted it to gain the essence.

Below is a chart of the words the group used to describe what they had seen in Helen's pre-verbal interpretation of the pictogram, *heaven*:

<b>HEAVEN</b>
expanding
sunrise
connection
family
love story
discipline
acceptance

You can see in the descriptions of Helen's *heaven* that some of her initial analysis of the intersecting lines crept in. But the more abstract notions that she was working with still somehow expressed things like *expanding*, *discipline*, and *acceptance*: words that we might associate with a Taoist idea of heaven. This is the mystery we are digging up.

*We don't really know how we receive intuitive information.*

*Helen*: "There is the sense of something very mystical. As if through our bodies we have unlocked some sort of universal communication. As if by shutting down our big brains we have been able to hook into something else. And, well, we did. We hooked into something and drew meaning from inside a package we did not know how to unwrap. Is this a party trick? No it feels too close, too real. Family, home, peace, love: Heaven... Are we moving closer to the primary level or is this a magic language?"

*Larry*: "Something very profound about those Chinese symbols. It affected me at a very, very deep level. Something about just expressing what that symbol was, it changed me."

*Michelle*: "...distant contact with other...come to a meeting with other."

We were entering the realm of the metaphysical now. There had definitely been a profound experience interpreting those pictograms. Could the same hold true for our

mother tongue? Could we look at our English symbols and through their expression find deeper meaning?

- Pre-Verbal Expression: English Words

*Kate:* “As if in total opposition to this I then gave them some [unfamiliar] English words to work with. Immediately there was an adverse reaction. Michelle said that it instantly switched her thinking to the discursive mode. It upset her. You could tell. She just couldn’t switch off her logic brain. And it made her sad. I could feel it. The Chinese work had been so liberating for her... And here, she just shut down. Pam went hysterical. She just couldn’t stop laughing at her word. The others used their imaginations, but for the most part the meaning of the words stayed remote.”

*The spelling of the English word did not contain the metaphysical information that was present in the drawing of the Chinese pictogram.*

*Pam:* “... the Chinese symbol – there was wonderful freedom in exploring that – in just taking it in – listening to what it had to tell me – breathing with it and... just listening and trusting what I inherently knew about it. What was interesting was that with the English word there was definitely a restriction... it seemed less organic in what it was communicating... more heady itself. And my reaction to it – the hysterical laughing – what was that?”

*Tanya:* “FRUSTRATING!!! Don’t want to use words!!! They are not effective as they are limiting and can be easily misunderstood. Inefficient!”

*Helen:* “We all felt stunted. The sense of magic and freedom was not there... There was a sense of grasping for meaning that was not present before... Very discouraging though to go from such a place of magical discovery to such a flat arid landscape as those words. I feel ensnared by the English language.”

There was a lot of discussion around the powerful negativity of English. There are complex reasons for the lack of information inherent there. Our spelling is a description of the phonetic sound of a word, rather than representational information. We had many thoughts about alternative exercises to explore this phonetic information, but time was lacking, and we needed to move on.

To harness the information of the *primary level* in text work then, we must somehow find the bridge to the metaphysical carried in the English word:

*Kate: "... what we are looking for here is magic not meaning. We are trying to dig out of the words what their original power was; their spell. So we must have faith in [words], and the deep connections we have to them personally, and also the deep connections they can establish in us as links to our nature, our past, the collective unconscious, and the energy net of the world. So that will be the goal... Magic, not meaning. We will start to dig into the Lorca text. And try to discover what magic it can share with us."*

## Part 4 – The Secondary Level: Words, Words, Words

*Michelle: "How do we get from the freedom to the language...? –Physical /vocal / intuitive impulse."*

The bridge consisted of taking the freedom of the *primary level of language*, and **applying it to text**. This was done in four steps:

i. Establish pre-verbal sound/movement gestures (we call these 'spells') of twenty four words and phrases from the poem.

*Time and repetition allow easier access to the primary level.*

*Tanya: "'repetition not rehearsal' – The acceptance that every time is different; must be different, yet repetition gets it into the body, so the body knowledge can express the ideas not just the mouth."*

*Helen: "I know what 'fly' means, but our work... made me look deeper into the word than just trying to communicate the meaning... 'Fly' manifested itself in my body as a reaching, a desire to fly. Coupled with the joy that flying would be... The word did not scare me as it did the day before... I found I care about the actual word."*

Such a sensual, subjective experience: reaching, desire, joy - fly.

*Pam:* "Meeting and the Meaning... That relationship seems to be both in the communicating forces meeting each other and also the communicator – me – having a meeting out of which comes meaning from the word... my meeting with the word... The interconnectedness of it all is fascinating to me – makes me feel like we are actually tapping into a common consciousness..."

There is a sense of something bigger than us coming through the work. This is the phenomenological relationship: the exchange of energy and information. The thing that is bigger than us is the power of the word and the vastness it has stored in its history.

*The process of work with the spells created a complete change of energy in the group.*

*Dialogue from video [stemming from a profound silence after the day's work]:*

*Michelle:* There's a spell here.

*Tanya and Kate:* There is.

*Kate:* It is very interesting. I think it is the poem. And I think you will find tomorrow that this energy that we feel right now is the spell of the poem that is working on us. It is the magic of the words that are actually working on us.

*Tanya:* That gives me goosebumps.

*Helen:* [nods and rubs her arms]

*Kate:* ...I think there's power there. This is a totally different energy than we came in with this morning. That's the power of the poem.

[*Michelle* says something about the audience members not believing, that I can't quite make out.]

*Kate:* There will always be the cynic... There's this little thing called doubt, or fear. There will always be people who are too afraid. People who don't believe in magic.

[And then I stand staring off for a bit. I take a deep breath and sigh out heavily and shake my head as if I'm trying to get my wits back – trying to believe in magic myself.]

2. Introduce the text gently by layering it into the improvisation, first with individual words.

*Words bring fear and analytical function that threaten the process.*

*Tanya:* "The poem has cast its spell on us. Fears of hitting up against the language."

*Helen:* "Finding out our words filled me with anxiety. I did not want to lose the magic... I could feel myself retreating into my head. I was afraid people would not understand why I chose the 'spell' I did for the word."

But the actors' fears were soon alleviated, as they delighted in how accurate their interpretations of the words had been, and they embraced the words as an extension of their sound / movement spells.

*Working from the sound/movement spells, and creating a vocabulary without literal meaning has allowed expression that is free of self-awareness, criticism, and judgement. In this way we have bypassed the objective understanding of the word, and accessed a subjective experience with it.*

*Michelle: "To initially feel the panic and walk through the fear into meaning. The [word] is felt and explored without the intellectual impulse of right and wrong getting in there."*

*Observer 1, Clare: "[I] lose myself in the sounds and meaning of each word... my heart and body take over. It's nice to free myself into the realm of the 'spell', not trying to comprehend a linear meaning."*

*Helen: "We had discovered magic in these lines on paper. The words were in our muscles and in our breath. We were the words."*

*Larry: "There was [] a depth to the group working together which could only be a result of the process. The group became the 'poem'. We were the poem."*

3. Introduce the poem to the group.

*The actors' subjective experience replaced their animosity with a creative relationship to the words.*

*Larry: "In the use of the word in context, I go into my head and something is cut off from the rest of my body. So when the poem was presented to us... of course I balked at having to use it... When I relaxed and allowed whatever was to happen, happen – and trust - then I became astonished at the depth of meaning which was culled from the work... I think part of my resistance to the text, the actual poem, was that I believed somewhere inside of me we would have to change now. That what we had created was not part of that text, it was something of ours, when in fact it was ours and not ours. It was the authors, Lorca's, and it was ours. And in doing that we gave the text new life."*

*Helen:* "Lorca took our words, our spells, our magic. He took it and put it into his box where things were backwards and made no sense. No. We took his words. And now must give them back. The words were empty boxes that we filled with breath, love, grief. That we filled with life and now we give them back..."

For Lorca:

Thank you for your words, thank you for the order you have placed them in. Here they are back again from our right brains ready to work in the place they are meant to go. We took them out for a spit and polish, let the [audience] tell you what they think of them, we have had a hard day."

*The observers had a far more difficult time resolving the objective and subjective experiences of bringing the analytical mind into the intuitive playground.*

*Observer 3 from video:* "I resent the intrusion of language ...I didn't like it. I felt like my inner understanding of this had been obliterated or pushed out of the way, and it became a question of ownership of the meaning of this, and I felt like I was losing *my* ownership of the meaning of this."

*Observer 1, Clare:* "I felt almost an intrusion of words. It felt almost too linear. Like I wanted more time with individual words."

*Observer 2:* "Words take over and sounds are missed."

*Observer 3:* "...tyranny of words usurping my meaning."

4. Individuals speak the poem with only a cursory understanding of the narrative, communicating our twenty-four words at level zero physically (outside stop), while maintaining level 10 in intention (inside no stop)<sup>i</sup>, and using the other words of the poem as glue.

*The communication of a text does not have to come from objective, analytical or narrative understanding but can come from subjective, affective and physical experience.*

*Tanya:* "...because I had spent no real time with the text once I received it, the journey between the words was unclear in my mind ... It was only afterwards that I felt like I had deeply connected to the material without really understanding the complete picture of what I spoke."

*Pam:* "I felt I knew the text in a different way - in my body as opposed to some 'idea' of it in my head. And though we were unfamiliar with reading the text off the page - I felt that both listening [to others] and reading the text myself - that I knew it so intimately... it actually overwhelmed me emotionally how connected I was - how much I felt for that text - the impact the text had was at a level that my 'intellect' didn't really comprehend."

*Larry:* "When I read the piece as a solo, a knowledge, a knowing, descended upon me in the reading. It wasn't the usual feeling that "oh, I understand this text". It was a visceral reaction, a connection to the images and the emotion (surprising the amount of emotion that connected with the text in reading it)."

*Helen:* "When I read, I found the words. Outside stop, inside no stop. At first I did not feel emotional, the poem meant very little to me. I was concentrating on my words. But the reflective emotion of the collective circle was so strong. It fed me, crept into my spells, my other words, my heart. I felt overcome by the gift given to me by our collective. My spells affecting them, affecting me. Truly one of the most powerful moments I have had as an actor."

The observers were given the opportunity to interpret what they saw, giving them some ownership of the experience.

*Tanya:* "I felt that the other readings were musical and beautiful to listen to... but I did not get the sense that I knew what they were trying to say with the whole piece. However, I was transported by the reading to a place where I put together what the piece meant to me. In a way that is a greater gift... almost like the difference between reading a book and seeing the movie... in this way I was more of a participant in imagining the meaning."

*Observer 1, Clare:* " [Marion's] remark about not having the intention to *cause* emotion but rather just sticking to the task at hand hit home for me in a big way. [The actor] must trust in the work. Dedicate yourself to the work and the audience is allowed in... do all the emoting for us and we pull away... we want to feel it... you are the one who must communicate it..."

So at the end of the day the emphasis of our findings can be summed up in three areas:

- the engagement of the body and the communicative intention;
- diverting the analytical function of the mind to access the intuitive experience;
- delicately bridging the intuitive experience into text by clearly maintaining connections with the body and the intention.

## Part 5: Conclusions, Applications, and More Digging

Magic not meaning. We didn't start the dig looking for magic. But that is the nature of archaeology: you may know what you are looking for but you don't know what you will find.

- Conclusions

In answer to **The Big Question:** So... what if we enter into a relationship with the word that is completely subjective? How rich will the experience of the word be? And will we be able to communicate that richness to our audience?

**The Big Answer:** We were certainly able to effect an exchange of energy and information with the word through the *primary level* of subjective experience. Then with some delicate diversions of the analytical mind, we were able to fuse this relationship with text bringing its power and sensuality into the text itself, *the secondary level*. This relationship was extremely altering for the actors, but we ended up with insufficient data to judge the effectiveness for the audience (see More Digging).

- Applications

For application of the work I want to turn to my researchers and observers for their ideas:

Body work with text:

*Tanya:* " ... incredibly present work, what is the way to be that present with dialogue and text in a conservative setting [of the rehearsal process]? It must be in the body... we must be connected to the material in our bodies."

*Pam:* " ... tonight when I was going over my monologues for my [] audition tomorrow – I couldn't help but feel that my whole body is still informed from the work. I really wanted to involve my whole body in the exploration of my monologue. And to maintain that sense of freedom – that sense that my whole body is communicating... not just the words."

*Kate from video:* "Rather than having a week sitting around a table figuring out what Shakespeare tried to say, you do a week of exploration of words and movements, and come to the understanding of text through the body and the sound rather than through the analytical process. That's the goal ultimately."

Intuitive work with text:

*Larry:* "I didn't want to close up and try to protect. I wanted to learn a new way of dealing with [vulnerability] in the world. And maybe that's what the work is enabling me to do. Maybe it's about a new way of expressing myself that is much more at the core than I'm used to."

*Michelle:* "The intuitive self knows – whether we can train ourselves to get out of the way is the challenge. Freedom is gained when we give permission to explore beyond safety... Poetry used to scare me. Now I notice the fear and embrace the wonder and magic... This week has been a series of doors into magicland. Energy and instinct. Fuck the fear."

Archaeological work with text:

*Helen:* "A word is necessary to build language. The trap of words [is] trying to be smarter than words. To outsmart the words is to lose the words, we can not condescend to our language... We have to climb into language the way we climb into a character. We do not want to create two dimensional characters why do we want two dimensional language?"

*Observer 4 from video:* "It would be interesting to see what would happen if you were working on, say, a Shakespeare play, but you did an exploration of the words... in Chinese. I wonder how much the visuals of another language would bring to the meaning of the words."

- More Digging

There is always more to look for. We open the box to find what's missing.

We shared some of our work on the poem with observers, but I realise now I was looking for insufficient information from them. What I need to complete the research with the audience is a double-blind study: one actor learning the poem using the path of the *primary level* (subjective experience through body and voice), while another actor learns the poem at the *secondary level* (objective experience through table work). A comparison of the two with audience present would give us suitable data to understand the effectiveness of this work from their point of view.

Also, a deeper look at the information carried in the transcription of the phonetic form of the English language would help the dig go even deeper.

And then, to undertake an investigation of how this physical information and subjective experience can inform character and dialogue in plays.

On it goes. Search and re-search.

- A Gift

I will leave you with the final thoughts that Helen committed to her notes on the research, which sum up my feelings completely:

*Helen:* "The gift of this knowledge will profoundly shape how I approach all of my work from now on. And there are no words I have found to express how thankful I am for this gift."

## References:

- Abram, David                      The Spell of the Sensuous   Vintage Books, New York, 1996  
Artaud, Antonin                 The Theatre and Its Double, Grove Press, New York 1958  
Barba, Eugenio                 The Paper Canoe, Routledge, London, 1995  
Brook, Peter                     The Empty Space, Penguin Books, London 1979  
Lorca, Federico Garcia         Five Plays, Penguin Books, London, 1970

## Acknowledgements:

This research was conducted at The Theatre Centre, Toronto, Canada, from May 12 – 16, 2003, under a grant from Nightswimming, and with the enormous support of Brian Quirt and Naomi Campbell.

I am indebted to my six actor/participants for their courageous labour of love, and their attempts to commit it to paper:

Marion Day  
Helen Farmer  
Pam Johnson  
Tanya Matthews  
Michelle Polak  
Larry Smith

I would also like to thank Clare Preuss for the donation of her time and energy in observing and making notes on two of the sessions, and to my other anonymous observers.

---

<sup>i</sup> In describing the work of the performer in the Japanese Noh theatre, Eugenio Barba uses the expression "movement stop, inside no stop". I have used this expression in my classes often, substituting 'outside stop, inside no stop'. It is a description of retaining energy in the body even though there is no movement. As Barba says, "The movement is interrupted but the energy is suspended (Barba, 69)."