

REPORT  
**PURE RESEARCH IN COMEDY**  
A Laboratory developed by The White Hags  
with Brian Quirt and Naomi Campbell  
for *nightswimming's Pure Research*  
October, 2005

*nightswimming's "Pure Research on Comedy"* Laboratory was held in Toronto in Glen Morris studio at the University of Toronto from October 11 to 14, 2005. In attendance at *the Pure Research Comedy Laboratory* held were dramaturg Brian Quirt of *nightswimming*; The White Hags (WH) comedy team, Lois Brown and Elizabeth Pickard; *nightswimming* interns, Andrea Romaldi and Marie Barlizo. Other participants in the laboratory were Nikki Payne and Darryl Dinn. The Laboratory was administrated by Naomi Campbell, also of *nightswimming*. The WH would like to thank *nightswimming* and particularly Brian Quirt who was the soul of enlightening calm and incisive inquiry. The WH would also like to acknowledge the support and commitment of the interns, Andrea and Marie. They added invaluable insight and encouragement to the process.

**PART ONE - NARRATIVE REPORT**

**Day One**

Day one began with donning our lab coats which Naomi had purchased for us at the University of Toronto Bookstore. As we paraded around in front of the studio like peacocks in scientific drag, we unknowingly passed Marie Barlizo – who we had not yet met. A few minutes later, we returned to the Glen Morris Studio where upon introduction, Marie said to us: "I noticed you two just moments ago and I thought to myself – they're either scientists or Liz and Lois." We were delighted with Marie's observations, because we are both. Now we were ready for the lab.

Liz and I brought a plan and some specific research questions to the laboratory; however, on this, Day One, we decided to begin with questions uppermost in our minds. Or maybe Brian asked us what was uppermost in our minds. (This approach parallels the way the WH create material and our understanding of the present and spontaneous nature of theatre, so we didn't feel like we had in anyway betrayed our plan or the research by jumping off in this way. Obviously *nightswimming* is comfortable proceeding in this way as well. And of course, this kind of phenomenological approach has great validity as a research method.)

Initially, we discussed questions around the following issues:

internal points of transformation,

transforming a space,

satisfying a performance,

looking at fear,

bombing. We stated that we wanted to have spontaneity under our control. We prepared questions for Nikki Payne, a stand-up comic, who was attending the laboratory that afternoon.

Nikki said: "Bombing is a part of the process." She told about an evening where she was bombing and comic Shawn Majumder was in attendance. She said that the advice he gave her about the audience is the best advice: "Listen to them." She said in terms of the relationship between you and the audience: "You can't bomb and the audience be unaware of it. They know you're bombing. You know you are bombing and so, it's pointless to pretend you're not."

We talked about swearing as a default. We talked about Seinfeld's rule: finding funny bits that are not bolstered by a "swearing default mechanism." (He appears to have abandoned this rule in his latest touring show.) In Larry David's show "Curb Your Enthusiasm" Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Larry David

talk about how wonderful getting an HBO show would be because they could swear. Swearing, their contention is, makes everything funnier. Liz's *Helen* bit tended to prove Larry and Julia right.

Nikki had some great ideas that she could express concisely and clearly. Nikki's mottos:

Don't goad the drunk, unless you can take him down.

Your gut will tell you what to do and your gut can be wrong.

Commit to the decision.

Acknowledge what is going on. If you're dying, you're dying.

Honesty.

#### Strategies:

For a heckler: "Yes and...?"

Tape your sets and look at them, perhaps with someone else who can help you look.

#### Philosophies

Emotional fullness: Choose the emotion you're conveying. You wrote these jokes because you feel something about what you're saying. You feel passionately.

Joyful communication: This is your party. The audience members are the guests.

Spontaneity arises because you are emotionally there. (Think about why you're here. You want to do it.)

Be a part of the show – it's all your show.

The audience wants to connect and it's different from theatre, the wall is down.

Nikki said that her persona is one that allows her to enter like a ball of fire. She starts with her funniest material and then arcs down to her stories.

She talked about the risk, persona, spontaneity and the magic space. Nikki said that the comic, faking it or not, is the leader. She leads us through the magic space. She uses visualization to see her performance and own it. If possible, she checks out the venue for the same reason. She discussed her preparation. She talked about the fact that some audiences are not going to get certain material. She discussed shaping material to help audiences have a context for her material.

Brian told us to go see "The Aristocrats."

#### **Day Two**

Day Two included an interview with Darryl Dinn, an improvisational comedian who works with sketch comedy. We invited Darryl because of his Newfoundland connection. He is often in St. John's and we would be able to invite to perform in a WH burlesque.

His maxim's were:

Start big and leave big.

Pleasure the beast.

Enjoy yourself.

Darryl talked about some of the problems that he saw in his recent work. He seemed to be in a sort of malaise, because his most recent sketch work seemed too massaged for his taste and he felt it had lost its connection to what excited him. It was too safe. It had lost its essential truth. (Although he didn't say what that truth was.)

We discussed charm, speaking the truth, and not working hard.

He said his process was: "Improvise, remember the funny bits, and do it again."

In the afternoon, Liz and I continued to talk a lot about a range of topics. This parallels our process as well. For the first time (perhaps in my life) I wondered how valuable our off-topic discussion is. I think that it's very valuable for writing in the sense of creating, but a hindrance to refining what we have created, and developing a nuanced performance. Talking seems either to be a discovery (i.e. we

can take something one of us said or a story one of us told and use it pretty much verbatim), or to mask a discovery.

From here on in, the laboratory was very intense and full. As I reflect on it I find, not surprisingly, that what I remember best is my experience of the laboratory rather than the events themselves. My report from here on in focuses on my experiences as I recall them and Liz's experiences as she has recalled them to me. If it is in any chronological order, it is completely by accident.

### **PINKY**

Liz is developing her bra puppet – Pinky, and is searching for a voice for Pinky. Pinky is an alcoholic, torch-song singing, sexually-driven, smoker.

During the laboratory, it became obvious that I<sup>1</sup> had an adversarial relationship with Pinky of which I was previously unaware. I think this adversarial relationship has a lot of comic potential. Liz had an idea during the lab that I could have a bra puppet too, but I am much more interested in my relationship with Pinky.

Three of the things I like about my conflict ridden-relationship with Pinky are: 1) a conflict can be explored endlessly – so there is something for me to explore 2) because Pinky - who is essentially Liz's bra, with Liz acting as puppeteer, can press my on-stage buttons it immediately sets Pinky up as my equal and my opponent, a threat. I think that having a bra as my equal is a fertile idea and as my opponent, a dynamic idea; 3) it confirms Pinky's existence and reality.

Equally as interesting and weird is this idea. I think Pinky might be a sort of alter-ego for me. For instance, I seemed to be more like Pinky when Pinky is not around and more up-tight and moralistic when she is. I think the interpersonal dynamics between the three of us work something like this. Since Pinky is completely without self-awareness, she takes up all the rebellious space for her own antics. Liz and I usually define ourselves by our rebelliousness. With Pinky monopolizing that space, we have to find ways of defining ourselves other than by our rebelliousness. Or we could try to be more rebellious... Or as Liz does, try to persuade Pinky to be less rebellious. I think this three-way relationship is a psychological and sociological bomb waiting to explode on stage.

Liz is the puppeteer and has plenty to do, (ie play two completely different characters at the same time); she may not immediately need to find a conflict or theme in the *Pinky, Lois and Liz scenarios*. She is already occupied. I, on the other hand, need something to occupy me. I see our 3-way relationship as family systems theories in action. I find this a very exciting way to look at it. We haven't discussed this in any great detail yet, but one could say Liz specializes in writing about unusual family units. Knowing her past work as I do, I can guarantee that Liz will want to explore this area. I think this could be one of the potentially strangest and explosive all-female family units to hit the stage.

I can also guarantee that the problem of maintaining an out-side eye will be challenging creating within such emotionally charged relationships.

### **THE BAGEL**

Liz showed a videotaped performance of my stand-up material (quite by accident), including "The Bagel." It was a performance at The Ship Inn in St. John's in which the audience was very small and I felt over-rehearsed and unexcited – two signs of potential, on-stage death. After we watched this performance on Liz's camera, I got on the stage in the Glen Morris Studio and did "The Bagel." Liz and I decided we would tape this. Strangely I found the video camera so intimidating, that I was almost

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<sup>1</sup>I move from referring to me and the on-stage me without distinction – I hope this doesn't cause confusion.

unable to perform due to anxiety. The uncomfortable elements were fortuitous in a sense, because some of the basic roots of my issues were undeniably apparent. (Obviously, not every performance is this bad or I would have given-up long ago.) These are sticking points (I am literally stuck at these points when I encounter them): I had no joy of communication, I was not “on” when I got to the mic, and my emotional fullness was covered or hidden. First, there was my discomfort with the space that I talked about as “arriving late.” “When I get to the microphone, I’m still warming up – gauging where I am.” From the moment I arrived CS, the joy of communication became less and less joyful. Partly, it’s a result of how difficult it is to get back to a level playing field when you’ve lost it. The sense of failure is hard to drop and the longer you take to drop it – the longer you fail/flop/bomb. Every performer knows this, and we all try to develop methods to deal with it. One of the things that I notice, as I reflect on the laboratory, is that this was one of the first times and may even have been the first time that Liz and I have watched a WH show together.

### **THE VIDEOCAMERA**

Liz avidly tapes them, but almost never watches them. I never watch them and obviously, we never watch them together. I think the only reason we don’t watch them is due to time constraints. This, of course, is, as I am realizing at this moment, an “important” versus “urgent” dilemma. Liz’s diligence has not been mined for all the help it could provide. It could help me with my issues. It could allow us to look at our material with some objective distance (or enlightened distance), and talk about it. Through talking we can discover and develop mutual theories about what the WH theatre really is and what it can be. I think we both realize the vagaries of videotape, but it is an important research tool. And if we watched the play-back together, there would be a reason to try to put some money into better equipment or into taping sound off the board on occasion so we had more accurate records of our performances.

Another thought that occurs to me : is why do videotape, if we aren’t going to make the time to watch it.

### **THE COMIC PREPARES**

In the laboratory, while performing “The Bagel,” it became clear that there are some simple methods for “pissing out the space.” Basically stand-ups make do with the resources they encounter at a given venue, and find alternate (from actors) ways of preparing. This was my first block uncovered.

Upon reflection (necessitated by this report), I see the laboratory as essentially Brian’s presence in the room.

The Watcher: His watching. When Brian is in the room, we know exactly what is true and what is not true. The watcher is a catalyst. Without the watcher there is no experiment. Without the watcher, there is exploration, but we are not trying anything out to see if it works – as in an experiment. We can’t, without at least one watcher.

But we can invoke the watcher.

For example, I can use the watcher as a technique for determining how to prepare. I can think about the process, visualize it like Nikki does – as if Brian is there. I can pretend a watcher is there. I invoke/become the watcher myself. I can think about the context of my preparation by seeing (in my mind) a kitchen, for example, in the bar, in the Ship Inn in St. John’s. I can think about my preparation in a bar with no privacy at and acknowledge that. In this way, I can begin to see what I can do in those kinds of venues to prepare.

Nikki talked about standing at the back of the venue and visualizing her entire performance. Other performers have employed this technique, in fact I know this to be a tried and true tool. How did I forget it?

Invoking the watcher will help me remember these tools. By using the distance provided by invoking the watcher, I see what the situation is and use some of my problem-solving abilities to select a tool or technique that can help me turn the situation into a relationship.

Perhaps it is easier to find a watcher? Not necessarily and not one with the experience and skill that any given WH has.

### **REPETITION IS A COMIC DEVICE AND PINOCHIO**

Repetition. I did an improvisation on “repetition is a comic device.” Exploring this notion was a part of the WH original proposal to *nightswimming* for *Pure Research*. This idea comes from Bergson’s famous essay on comedy. Brian, Andrea and Marie acted as audience members. They had situated themselves in the back of the room, far from the stage area. While performing my bit, I chose to get off the stage and walk down to where they were seated so that I could speak to them directly. I think this *walking down* would have worked even better, if I had recognized walking down was acknowledging my audience and being honest about the situation.

At the time, I hadn’t broken down (analyzed) the nagging idea that I should stay on the stage; this nagging idea prevented me from committing to coming off the stage. An audience knows a performer is disappointed with a small audience. I was not acknowledging this, as Nikki advised us we should. If I acknowledged this and let it motivate me to come off the stage, then coming off the stage could be an honest and necessary event. It could be a threat. It could intimidate. Or it could be intimate: “it’s you and me, baby and we’re gonna see this joke-telling through to the end.” It could be something. Doing it helped me see that there’s nothing wrong with getting closer to your audience. (I do wonder how to keep focus in a room where the audience is spread-around if I leave the lit areas. But that’s a good question for us to answer. WH have the expertise to answer it. It’s good one to workshop with Brian during Magnetic North.)

WH work with small audiences. Our audiences are usually small. We could use this as an opportunity to develop material for small audiences. How do you get seven people in a 150-seat venue to laugh? At the beginning of the night? What is the personality of the tiny audience. And so on. Things for us to consider. (During the workshop with Brian at Magnetic North.)

Pinochio. Telling the well-known *Pinochio* joke (a joke which truthfully I do not particularly like) nine times not only dealt with repetition as well, but also pulled away a lot of blinders about what joke-telling is. After awhile the need to tell that joke honestly, realizing the story and way the people in that story felt inside the telling was ultimately important to me. The interesting thing was I think the funniest time I told it was my second to last time, not the first when the punch line was fresh and not the last, when you would think that after all that practice, I might have told it best.

A lot of the content my original material is not geared towards laughter, instead I analyze the joke encouraging audience to separate the laughter from it. During the lab, the realization seemed to come that I had been sucked-in by my own rhetoric. I had begun to believe the comic premise of my material. I had forgotten one of the main ironies of this material is its underlying psychology: I developed the material to rationalize the fact that people sometimes don’t laugh at my jokes and to distance my self from the fact that this hurts me. I am having one over on the audience by telling them not to laugh. As I reflect on telling the Pinochio joke X 4 (Liz X 5) and I write this, it’s clear that there is an emotional fullness to my original material– that I miss – by playing it in my head.

To me the Pinochio joke X 9 was a revelation because 1) it was fun to compete with and steal from Liz 2) I was listening to Liz tell it as I prepared. I would think about what was working for her and what wasn’t. I would plan to change the joke accordingly. I would review my plan in my head to make sure my plan still supported her way telling of the joke. 3) The best time I told the joke, I got a laugh and the laugh came from really, really getting the emotional liminality in the moment that Jesus says: “Dad.” In that moment Jesus is actually renouncing his heavenly father for his earthly one. Jesus is reduced to a little needy baby. A lot of adult people are still searching for their Dad’s with that same

childish neediness and if you have that kind of family history or you are empathetic with that experience, you know Jesus is about to sacrifice his adult self for the needs of his inner child. A rebellious, needy child. Transactional analysis, psychoanalysis, common sense, and so on tell us this would be a disastrous decision for Jesus. It is ironic that the son of God is about to make the wrong choice. In fact Jesus does make the wrong choice, but is saved from disaster because he has mistaken Geppetto's true identity for that of Joseph. This man is not his earthly father Joseph, it is Geppetto. All this makes up the emotional fullness of this joke.

Director, Linda Moore calls playing with the emotional fullness of a monologue "resistance." Resistance to the experience of this liminality could also create audience engagement.

Should the audience laugh? The answer seems obvious, but I had lost my way with this one. During the Lab, I did a number of experiments where I made it a rule not to stop til someone laughed. The important revelation is not that an audience will, for the most part, laugh when you want them to, but that one's relationship with the audience can be very simple, direct and clear. There is a easy path to the audience. See them, where they are seated, who they are, what the current situation is and tell them directly what you have to say. Is this a small audience strategy that the WH should test?

### **THE ARISTOCRATS**

We worked with "The Aristocrats," each telling the joke explored in the movie. Liz told the joke straight-up. I, instead, gave an opinionated synopsis of the movie. Both of us worked with our separate versions of the joke. The exercise worked to basically force us to determine what essentially the joke was, so that we could simply jump-off and wing it. Both of us have benefited from this sense of tearing away the curtain between the teller and the joke and absorbing the essential joke – so that it can be all about the performer or the performance – the connection. I think there is more directness in both Hags attack of/approach to the content. In fact, Liz has told me since *Pure Research* she has no fear when she goes on stage. I haven't seen her perform since *Pure Research* yet, but I expect to find her comedy more playful, angrier and more spontaneous. Less coquettish and more ferocious.

We also told the aristocrats joke together. I liked being on stage together; however playing old ladies – or really any character - has no appeal for me. But sometimes you have to. I think this has more appeal for Liz. For me, I was more interested in what this piece revealed about our relationship. I think it shows that there is much more to find out than I had anticipated. Liz mentioned that I seemed to talk about what she did in the improv, instead of developing storylines for myself. Maybe I'm holding back. Perhaps I need to explore our boundaries with each other before I feel comfortable about being in what was on the out-set her joke. In other words, I'm not avoiding covering my imaginary self with shit and semen, rather I am avoiding interfering with Liz's character story arc by doing anything active in it.

### **DAY THREE/FOUR**

We explored repetition, we wrote new material and performed it, we explored swearing. Nick and Justin came into our workshop and we went to their improv workshop.

### **IMPROVISATION**

Liz, although a professed hater of improvisation prior to the lab and although unfamiliar with the history of and approaches to improvisation by people like Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, (both of who were accessed during the three hours in the evening), is quite talented at it. She has no problem being spontaneously creative. She is also shares. I have studied improvisation and done a lot of work with it as an investigative process and as a form of performance. I stopped performing improv for the same reasons Liz dismisses it: because of the scene and state of it in St. John's. I also came to find the performance of improv limited by (interestingly) the watcher.

To continue investigating comedy and creating through improvisational approaches together, we would need to get on the same page. The argument on the last day proves that.

The fight with Pinky. Liz thought pretending to hit Pinky was against the rules. I did not. (In fact although nobody agreed with me, I still think that a physical fight between Pinky and me would be hilarious. Maybe Pinky might win. That would be funny.) I think I could have convinced Liz to try it – without much convincing needed - if this idea had come to me before the improv and I had outlined it to her before improvising as something I would like to try. This brings up the question how much exploration is allowed in an improv. The argument Liz and I had was for me off-point. I understand her feelings and respect them, but think that the problem arose because WH don't have any improv rules or agreements, because we don't use improv as a tool. To me there is really no right and wrong to pretending to hit a piece of material, even if it is a bra and a puppet to boot and an extension of Liz. In other words there was no reason for me to fight with Pinky except I thought I was in a secure place to explore this idea when it arose and went forward with it not thinking I needed Liz's permission or assuming I had it.

Liz was and remains aghast that I would hit Pinky. She still finds it hard to conceive that I actually did it. That's why she was so upset with me. She trusted me and I let her down.

If I had recognized her feelings of betrayal and hurt, perhaps she wouldn't have been so angry with me. On the other hand if I had told her to stop coming on so heavy that would have helped too. I would have been relieved because I expressed my feelings and she would have realized that I wasn't unaffected by her reaction. That I was instead, just keeping it in.

I would like the WH to use improv as a tool. I think we're pretty damn good at it. I do not want to do unplanned bits in performance – but I would like to use it as a way of exploring our natural rhythms and contradictions as a team. We need to determine what the rules are to get same page as far as what is allowed in an improv. On the other hand Liz says that basically anything physical has to be discussed and other than that “we don't need more agreements or boundaries or rules. What we need to do is get back to work asap.” Finally, three months later, I think she is right. About getting back to work that is.

### **What is the WH philosophy beyond our manifesto?**

What do the WH's agree on? Disagree on? Previous to the lab, I felt we must agree. Now, I acknowledge that we don't. Our approaches are different. We have some essential values in common – they are in our manifesto. I found Brian's final words very appropriate... That all the successful comedy duos that he can think of had success based on their differences. We're probably not that different compared to other humans, but compared to each other, we are. There's nothing to fear in exploring that and everything to be gained.

The lab was more personal than experimental at many points. I think this is why the reflection on what happened is very significant to the inquiries that we made.

## **PART TWO – OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS**

We created a number of new bits:

- 1) Aristocrats
- 2) Repetition is a comic device
- 3) Blah-blah-blah. The universal sound...
- 4) Comedy is evil
- 5) When you get older you can't see as well as you used to...
- 6) Helen at the airport
- 7) Helen at the airport with swearing
- 8) The Widens
- 9) Blow-up mattress

Liz and I are very different people. In many ways we are opposites. I often feel compelled to look for our similarities, but now I think it would be helpful to explore our differences. It likely that our differences are a gold mine of comic scenarios. I think we should allow our differences a platform. This is a scary idea which means it's got teeth.

Liz and I do not have the same background in improvisation, although we expressed the same attitudes to it. We both thought it could be a tool for exploring WH relationship, but not during performance.

Lois renewed her commitment to her material as funny.

Liz's commitment to videotaping the WH performances is underused as a tool for analysis and making the WH funnier, more skillful and more daring.

Pinky is a bonified part of the WH family. (The Black Bags, which had hoped would be a part of the family, has yet to become so.)

Analyzing the physical set-up, the gaps in the line-up and the nature of our audience has more significance for our work, but we have not given it due attention in the past. We write quickly and prolifically. We can focus on other issues without any degradation of the WH as a venue for new material and of our writing habits.

This conclusion is intimated in several of the others, but here it is on it's own: We, the WHs, should explore our relationship.

Audiences prefer to laugh when at a comedy show.

A comic must be fearless. Transformation is key to comedy – the transformation starts within. Fear is transformed... Even in the case of having heard the material before, the audience has a momentary amnesia if emotionally engaged in joyful communication. Pinocchio X 9 was evidence of this.

### **PART THREE – New Directions**

Labratories, especially in the social sciences often have outcomes that demand recommendations. I think there are some recommendations that come out of my reflection on the WH *Pure Research*. I am calling these recommendations, new directions – but their not always new – sometimes they are more like hitting the refresh button.

1. Invite Brian to spend a day in workshop with us during Magnetic North: we can explore our differences through improvisation and discussion or small audience strategies.
2. Spend a coffee talking about improv.
3. Develop some good habits for analyzing WH performances, material, relationship, audience, and venue.
4. Watch the videotapes together as a habit.
5. Develop a program of exploration in areas other than writing or creating material.
6. Explore the nature of the small audience.