

# From Seattle to New York City

## A Love Letter to the Future of American Theater

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**O**n September 15, 2001 I pulled my station wagon up to a small artist-run gallery called Secluded Alley Works, just in time to attend an open mic hosted by some old friends from college. It was my first stop in Seattle. My car was dirty from the road and packed with clothes and books. I hadn't showered in two days.

The room was crowded. I couldn't know then how many of those people would become crucial, beloved players in my life. I had no plans to dig my heels in here. My heart was in New York – my heart my people my career. I had just started building my own solo shows, was freshly returned from a terrific run in Scotland, and had spent the last year planting roots at PS122. I was building momentum. And somehow that wind landed me on the West Coast. At an open mic in the middle of a murderous September.

I performed my *White Girls Blues* that night and felt embraced. By my old friends. By Seattle. I could almost taste my own promise, adrenaline on the tongue. I had arrived.

In Seattle, a good place for things to grow –  
families communities software giants  
rainforests resentments ferns  
wet and infinite shades of green.  
I crashed in a house harboring a half dozen  
artistswritersmusicians determined  
to create an art collective.  
I enjoyed the energy.  
The quality of life  
was high and slow.

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The coffee was dark.  
The beer was local.  
The weed was, well, dank.  
I sank into a routine immediately. Wooed by comforts.  
Wowed by everything I was learning at school.  
Warmed by the strange possibilities of this new place.

Only a year before this, I was first finding my place in New York  
City.

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I get a job waiting tables right away. I am 23  
and the Luckiest Girl in Manhattan to be serving falafel  
above the Comedy Cellar. Three burn scars later (not funny)  
I walk out and spend a week playing guitar and chess.  
An old black man named Shep takes me under  
his Washington Square wing. And I fly  
by the seat of my pants until I get another waitressing gig  
and then two more and then a temp post  
across from Carnegie Hall. I sneak onto the roof  
to smoke to look at the cityscape to wish  
I was somewhere else. Rehearsing.  
I turn down a permanent post. I turn down  
an opportunity to be Charlie Rose's assistant. I wait  
tables and for my big break. I yearn for time and space.  
Performance Space  
122 is my next stop.

In the Winter of 2000, a tiny NYC miracle occurs and I get a job  
as the house manager there. I pass Mark Russell in the hallway everyday.  
I talk about theater and performance art. I host opening night parties and  
critics from the *Times*. I am an incredible house manager. We start  
promptly at eight and somehow both the artists and the audience feel like  
the event is taking place only for them. I meet and work with live genius.  
Live.

Karen Finley. John Kelly. Richard Maxwell. Ann Magnuson. John  
Fleck. The National Theatre of the United States of America. The

Universes. I hang out at Surf Reality and Chashama. I work across the hall from Lee Breuer and Mabou Mines. Richard Foreman hires me to hotglue feathers onto rubber chickens. Finally. I arrive.

At a realization: House managing is intrinsically prohibitive to a career in the theater (obviously). I was working during the hours other artists were performing and creating (obviously). I couldn't audition for any projects because they would conflict with my job (obviously).

Theater theater everywhere but nothing for me to sink  
my teeth into. I develop a chip on my shoulder  
and a mental block the size of Lincoln Center. This great city  
filled with mesmerizing art and performance  
paralyzes me.

The world is not waiting for me.  
This city barely has room for me.  
To make mistakes. Only take tickets and talk sweetly.  
Make sure I don't rub the artists the wrong way. After all,  
it's my job to take care of the talent.

The city is a sexy conspiracy to keep me from sleeping. There is always something incredible happening somewhere. No matter how late I stay I am always leaving too early. It is exciting enough just to survive in this town. I barely make it to work on time let alone to rehearsal for a play. Why make a play? Another drop into the heavy bucket of underfunded deeply hopeful work already flooding the City. Instead I spend my time soaking in all the sweet strong art. I get drunk on it. I wake up too hungover to try.

I am not brave. I am beaten. My cheekbones droop. Exhaustion gets me out of bed in the morning. My frustration grows guns and I start making solo work. I give a middle finger to the auditions for small roles I'm not quite right for. I write. For my own joy. Perform. On subway platforms across Lower Manhattan.

I write my first full length show, *More Money Less Work*. It includes a tap dance, a bra made of handdrawn bullseyes, and several speeches by Emma Goldman. I travel. To the sidewalks of Edinburgh.

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Hostels Guinness artistboys haggis lunabars. I make more money on a Scotland sidewalk day than I make in a New York nonprofit week. I make double my plane fare and dirty absinthe love in a graveyard. I heat up. Hit my stride. Assimilate all the genius tricks I took notes on at PS122. I am starting. Finally. I cannot wait to return to New York.

And then I get into graduate school.  
Off the waitlist.

I stay up through the night at an internet café. Consult all my friends. Call my mom across the pond. Have hushed hostel bed conversations with my Italian lover. I decide to go. To Seattle. I leave on September ninth.

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The first thing I learn in graduate school is how much I don't know. And that I don't like to be told what to do. Then I learn how hungry I am. That I have been starving for a vocabulary to talk about all the things I want need theater to do. I practice Suzuki with Steve Pearson and Robyn Hunt and stop acting with my fucking face for once in my life. Mark Jenkins teaches me subtlety and Stanislavsky. And Jon Jory blows my world wide open.

I take meticulous notes with inside jokes  
squeezed into the margins. I am smarter and fuller  
everytime I leave the room. Jory shows me once  
and for always that actors are not doomed  
to be or not to be  
Gordon Craig's *über*-marionettes.  
Actors are autonomous.  
We are blessed with the pursuit of action.

In our second year, Jon assigns us The Ensemble Project. As a class, we have to found an ensemble theater company. We must find a space and funding. We must create a budget and a functioning artistic structure. We must choose a city to pitch our tent in and a full first season to pitch to our city. After six grueling months we present our

company. The Washington Ensemble Theatre. We will be an ensemble of actors, designers, writers, and directors who act as full co-artistic directors. We will produce new and original works. And we will stay in Seattle, where our resources are – of course.

Months later, Mark Jenkins calls our class together to tell us a tiny theater space has been donated to the university, and the school has no use for it.

We sign the lease in June 2004. We are twelve strong, four from the original Ensemble Project, and we have three months to restore an empty little space and throw open its doors. Before we find an audience, we have to find seats for them to sit in. Which leads us to an old horse stadium about an hour away by ferry, where we load two trucks full of heavy, unwieldy, straw-covered theater seats. As we drag them into the theater, all of us trying to lift with our legs and avoid mouthfuls of dust, I know this is what I've always wanted. To be a part of something big. Bigger than me and greater than the sum of its parts.

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I was six when I first got off a Greyhound and made my way through Manhattan in a pink ruffled party dress. My mom had started enrolling me in beauty contests. Young Li'l Miss Greater Orleans County led to Young Li'l Miss New York State, where I won fourth place. My mother framed the photo of my Shirley Temple haircut and pink gloss lips passed out and drooling against my trophy on the trip home. I put my mental picture of New York City in a locket and held it tightly with both hands. I'd never seen anything so important as those buildings with elevators or felt more beautiful than my hyperspeed reflection in those dark subway windows. My calves never felt that heavy before, fatigued from absorbing the energy and heat floating up from the sidewalk. My clothes smelled like garbage and expensive perfume.

Later my mom and I would travel by car – six hours between our driveway and the George Washington Bridge. I missed 78 days of school in the fifth grade for commercial auditions. Barbie. Cabbage Patch. Cutter's Insect Repellent.

My mother was hoping I'd make it big  
enough to earn a living so we could all finally leave  
my father and his quick blurry temper. Any small nibble  
and we would climb into the car with our fingers crossed.  
I was hoping to make it big  
enough that the city would sink its dirty teeth  
into my bobby-soxed ankle and never let me leave.

The only thing I knew for sure is that I wanted to make theater.  
I'd go see *Charlotte's Web* or *Raisin in the Sun* with my school and I'd point  
and say, "I'm going to do that." And I knew I wanted to do it in New  
York City. I don't know what other little girls wanted, but I wanted to  
make trouble and live fast. Get discovered be forgotten resurface arrive  
over and over again. I wanted to belong there.

I still do.

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The desire runs so deep. I still want to make theater and live  
where it's happening. And after living in New York and so many other  
cities, I know that theater is happening everywhere.

In an increasingly monopolized economy with a rapidly  
decreasing middle class, where we wrestle daily with the complicated  
nightmarealities of war, disaster relief, global warming and fascist  
legislature – theater cannot be contained on Broadway or in our regional  
theater system or even in New York. No, the future of the American  
theater exists in dark corners and on small stages across the county. The  
future of American theater is not paying anybody's rent.

Regional theaters are dying, weighed down by the wet denim of  
the 501(c)3 model and union restrictions. Regional theater cannot afford  
to take a risk.

But for theater to survive in this dizzinglyfastandeasy  
technological age, we must be ready to burn it down at any moment and  
start again. That is the beating heart of live art – the possibility and  
destruction of the moment, the tension between balancing and falling,

inhale and exhale, authenticity and expectation. The potential energy between the heft of success and the air of failure.

If we can't take chances in our artistic choices and leadership, how can we take chances in a rehearsal room? How can we do something new? How can we nurture young playwrights to dream?

As humans, we don't learn by doing things the right way repeatedly. We learn by doing them wrong and then trying again. And again. If, as theater-makers, we can't fall toward the impossible and let our communities (our audiences, collaborators, rivals, families, neighbors, check-out people in the grocery store) catch and lift us and let us learn something from our mistakes – then we are doomed. To formula without tension. Success without innovation. We are doomed to grow old and archaic.

In Seattle I am witnessing a revolution. I am on its frontline, of collaboration and ensemble-generated work. When I lived in the East Village, I was twenty years too late for the revolution of Charles Ludlum or the innovations of Karen Finley. When I was in school, I missed the Beats by thirty years and didn't get into the Dead in time to tour. But now, I have found myself smack-dab in the middle of something big. In Seattle.

And in small corners of neighborhoods in NYC. And in cities up and down the coasts and speckled through the red states. It's happening in places where the standard of living is forgiving enough that a part-time serving gig can actually pay your bills while you schedule, run, and dive into your own rehearsals every night. Where there are young people who are talented, trained, and not interested in waiting around to be hired. Where there is space to breathe and to hide, to go away and to come back with a new idea.

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So we had the idea to throw a party. To wreck-decorate the set for Adam Rapp's *Finer Noble Gases*, the second show of Washington Ensemble Theatre's first season. We had closed our first show, Jane Martin's *Laura's Bush*, to sold-out houses and had been rehearsing for two

weeks. The actors were learning to play instruments so they could perform as a rock band in the show. None of us were getting paid or sleeping much, but we were working. Together. It was like our parents were away and left us keys to the car and a credit card for pizza.

Jennifer Zeyl had designed a perfect run-down East Village apartment, which, we all agreed, was too perfect and needed to be fucked-up. Jessica Trundy was designing a projection effect that would require extensive filming of the band's history in this apartment.

So we did order some pizza. And bought some beer. Set up a video camera. Invited thirty of our closest friends into our little theater. As the director, I sat in the audience chain-smoking cigarettes and pounding PBR while shouting directions to the cast and party-goers. The apartment got wrecked (apparently someone even pissed on the carpet), we captured some great footage, and we felt like we were making our own rules.

Since that party in 2004, I've created more than fifteen shows with those folks. They are my community and my collaborators and the people who push me to be better. And they are here, in Seattle, so that's where I'll be staying for a while.

Every few months, though, I hear a small whisper, "... or you can always move back to New York." But the possibilities continue to roll forward on this coast – *The Time of Your Life* with Tina Landau, *Crave* with Roger Benington, my solo show, *In DisDress*; the title role in *My Name is Rachel Corrie* at the Seattle Repertory Theatre.

In many ways, *Rachel Corrie* was the perfect marriage of fringe energy meets regional financing. At the time, Seattle was the only city willing to fund a production of the script and the Seattle Rep assembled an artistic team of young, hungry, local artists. The collaboration proved both a creative and critical success, and an exhilaration to be a part of.

Creating that role and conjuring Rachel's courage, wit, and enormous heart drew out all of my daring and demanded all of my skill. I have never been so excited to get out of bed in the morning as I was to

attend those rehearsals. To get to be twenty-three years old again. To return to a world full of journals and cigarettes and firsts all the time.

When I was twenty-three, I was living in a New York City dream of performance art and sidewalk revolutions. Staying out all night before falling down

asleep on a crashcouch on the Lower East Side.

Barely eating. Not hungry.

The Luckiest Girl in Manhattan starring in my own movie – maybe Woody Allen or *Reality Bites*.

I am Bob Dylan fresh to the Village. Diane di Prima in better shoes.

I am here. I am next. I am Madonna, fair and fearless. Mary Poppins

fucking up a chalk drawing. I am Holly Golightly on the fire escape

with my own hardwood floors and month-to-month.

Wave to me. I'm on the sure.

Scratching at the talent under my skin and ready for something really, really big to begin.