

# **The Circus Project:**

## **Applying Process Work Techniques to Circus & Theatre Arts with At-risk Youth**

Jenn Cohen

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Process Work Institute, Portland, OR

Thesis Advisor: Caroline Spark, Ph.D.  
Study Committee Members: Caroline Spark, Ph.D., Dawn Menken, Ph.D., Pierre Morin, MD.,  
Ph.D.

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# the Circus Project

*getting youth off the ground*

## MISSION

To enable homeless and at-risk youth to develop their physical and emotional integrity, by providing intensive skill training in circus and performing arts, with an emphasis on empowerment, personal development, and relationship building. We encourage youth participants to create and direct their personal stories in innovative and artistic ways, and offer them an opportunity to reach out to the community through the production of original, theatrical performances.

## CREDO

We believe in art as a powerful vehicle for transformation which cuts across social barriers to inspire new perspectives and creative solutions to conflict. Given the tools to express themselves and a safe space in which to experiment, we believe that marginalized youth will demonstrate profound insight and genuine ability, while contributing significantly to their communities.

[www.thecircusproject.org](http://www.thecircusproject.org)

*getting youth off the ground*

tel: 503. 764. 9174

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## **I. FORWARD (a forward)**

The following essay is intended to accompany my final project in the Process Work Diploma/Master of Arts program; a creative arts venture with both educational and social action components, entitled, “The Circus Project.” The Circus Project, now a registered nonprofit, was designed as an experimental training ground for the creation of an innovative methodology for working with at-risk<sup>1</sup> and homeless youth, based on the integration of circus, theatre, and Process Oriented Psychology.

The intention of the project was to demonstrate how techniques in Process Oriented Psychology could be applied to circus and theatre arts in various aspects of the creation process within the population of homeless and at-risk teens and young adults. It was hoped that the integration of circus arts and Process Work would empower disadvantaged youth in a variety of ways, while offering an emerging methodology which leaders in the fields of theatre and circus arts could successfully utilize to create new and invigorating forms of artistic expression.

In addition to offering a description of my personal background, the project, and a discussion of its relevancy to Process Work, this essay seeks to assert the significant benefits Process Work is capable of contributing to the crafting of meaningful and skilled art that empowers both the participants and the wider audiences for which they perform.

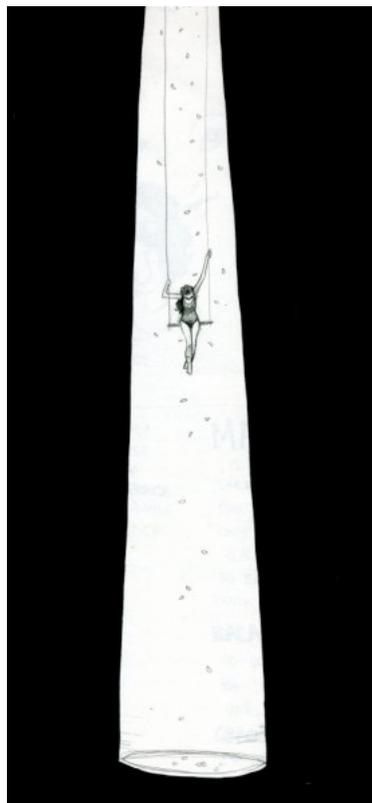
A project of this magnitude could not be embarked upon without the financial, organizational, and emotional support of a number of people. While any attempt to publicly acknowledge the myriad of volunteers, collaborators and funders is bound to be incomplete, there are a few key players whom I feel compelled to mention, without whom, The Circus Project would not have blossomed into fruition.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “at-risk” is purposely broad and used to describe individuals who are at a significant disadvantage due to mental, physical, social, or economic circumstances.

I offer immense gratitude to Arnold Mindell, who birthed Process Work into being, to my study committee, who believed in my ability to pull off such a crazy endeavor and challenged me to evolve in the face of my resistance, to my parents, who offered the financial means to launch the project, and my grandparents, who first ignited my fire for the circus, to Kate Jobe, whose innovations in Process Oriented movement work paved the way for this project to unfold, to my fellow Cohortians, whose love and support carried me through the most difficult moments of my studies, to Peggy Ford and Barbara Burkhardt, whose presence on the board of directors has reminded me that I'm never alone, and to my brave, talented, and remarkably dedicated students, who have remained steadfast and constant despite the myriad of mistakes I've made throughout the process, and who have carried The Circus Project in the moments I feared it might slip away.

Now, as they say in the big top, "On with the show!"



*Circus Project Art, by company member Petra Delarocha*

## II. CHAPTER ONE: The Wind Dance (a personal journey)

With the urgency a pirate would have used to bury a secret treasure, I fastened the clasp on my sports bra, careful to cover any inkling of femininity that might somehow surface. Content with my own proficiency, I threw on a faded sweat outfit, ruffled my short brown hair, and scurried out the door.

A lighthouse on a dark, stormy night, it beckoned me. Standing tall and strong in all its majesty rose the foundation of freedom. Bodies flew through the air in perfect rhythm. They danced upon the treetops, rejoiced under the sun, flirted with the breezes. Mortality lost its place in the dictionary, replaced by words like possibility, autonomy, eternity.

“You have to be thirteen to fly on the trapeze.”

“I am thirteen,” I asserted, not sure whether to be proud or embarrassed by this statement. When God created thirteen, she must have been extremely hung-over, for it is the only age whose identity has been completely neglected. Torn somewhere between childhood innocence and adolescent rebellion, the victim of thirteen is likely to feel confused, misunderstood, and lonely, not to mention the aftershocks that erupt for the next ten years.

“Go get a belt on then,” instructed the man pulling the safety ropes. They called him Louie.

Excitement pulsed through my body at such a high frequency, I found it difficult to fasten the belt securely. My hands were shaking. My stomach was performing a tumbling act that could have won a gold medal in the Olympics. Attempting to quell the acrobat inside, I began to climb the ladder, each step drawing me closer to the whimsical, the unpredictable, the untamed.

“When I say ‘hep,’ you’re going to step off the board”.

Throbbing with the force of determination, I reached for the trapeze bar. Had Louie called “hep” any later, I would have turned blue from lack of oxygen. Within a matter of seconds, all the practicality and logic that had ever been drilled into my little head seeped out, leaving a plethora of room for my imagination to expand and indulge itself.

The wind wrapped me in her arms. She carried me over men and women, through watercolor sunsets, past the confines of time, into the realm of the Nagual. Awkwardness made way for grace, frailty for strength. Boundaries disappeared as the universe opened itself up to me. It was not until the safety ropes tightened around me that the wind began to loose her embrace.

“She’s a natural,” said Louie, removing my belt. A smile crept over his face. A smile just for me. A smile that seemed to say, “I’ve danced with the wind too. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Days passed by unnoticed. I had tasted freedom. I savored its sweetness, hungered for it when it began to compete with the demands of friends and family. When darkness lowered its drapes over the sky, I would sneak away to the trapeze. Dressed in rays of moonlight, I rehearsed inside my head. I sat until every movement was perfected, every beat precise.

The circus is a dangerous enterprise. However the danger lies not as much in the physical risk, but in the mental addiction. Circus is magical. For centuries, magic has been condemned. In days past, women suspected of having any involvement with magic were burned at the stake. When cruelty became outdated, magic was replaced by science. Yet magic, persistent as it is, still survived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by weaving its way into the hearts of the few believers. For me at thirteen, magic had an easy entry. I needed it almost as much as it needed me.



*Louie Schniedman and me on the flying trapeze net. Port St. Lucie, Florida, 1987.*

For the next fifteen years, I worked as a professional circus artist and coach. My passion for performing satiated my longing for the spiritual as well as the physical. Flying through the air was the closest I felt to God, the embodiment of spirit in human form. However, the life of a professional athlete allowed little space to attend to either emotions or physical ailments.

Circus instilled in me the ability to persist through pain. While crucial in enabling me to survive my youth, the tendency to marginalize suffering became somewhat of a hindrance as I blossomed into adulthood. When the curtains closed and the audience dispersed, I was left with a persistent feeling of emptiness that lurked beneath my well-worn cloak of self-assuredness.

I sought a variety of spiritual traditions in an attempt to extricate some meaning from the contradictions inherent in myself and the world in which I existed. Though my studies proved enlightening, I was unable to subscribe to any one philosophy. Just as I began to reconcile with the idea that the comprehensive approach I was seeking did not exist, I walked Process Work with a balding head and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses.

Beneath the thick-rimmed glasses was Dr. Joe Goodbread, a founding member of the Process Work community. Through a series of synchronistic events, Joe introduced me to the world of Process Work in the summer of 2001. The connection was immediate. Process Work offered an integration of the various philosophies with which I resonated, and a fundamental theory of experience I previously lacked words to explain. Not only did it quench my thirst for a spiritual practice, Process Work combined my interests in psychology with social activism, spirituality, and art.

My discovery of Process Work coincided with my tenure at the San Francisco Circus Center. There I served as the advanced aerial coach for the youth and adult programs. Naturally, my interests informed my teaching style. I began to experiment using Process Work techniques to create innovative choreography. I urged students to explore secondary material, rather than merely their skill base, in order to generate material. As I continued

to develop this integration, I became increasingly aware of my own edges and areas where I lacked appropriate skill. The needs of my students invariably became more complex, moving me to pursue a more thorough education in Process Oriented Psychology.

Although I had always intended to return to the arts in some capacity, on the path to becoming a therapist, I lost sight of my ultimate objective. Three years into my journey as an “official” student of Process Work, I felt lost - unable to muster the same passion for counseling I had felt for performing and coaching.

In the fall of 2006, during a routine study committee meeting, Process Work Diplomate, Dawn Menken led me through an exercise in vector work to help illuminate my path in the world. While the specific details of the exercise elude me, I remember the distinct feeling that my path in life was somehow intertwined with that of the wind. With a sudden rush, the memory of my early affair with the wind and the recognition of its repetition throughout my life came flooding through me.

In proper Process Work fashion, I proceeded to shapeshift into the force with which I flirted. This time it was I who caressed the essence of my being. It was I who woke myself up, who gently, yet assuredly, guided the path of my fate. The consensus reality task at hand now flowed freely in connection with my dreaming. With the remaining time, I was able to easily articulate the direction my new leadership would take.

Thus, what began as my Master’s thesis, cultivated in a highly creative study committee meeting, exploded into The Circus Project, a not-for-profit corporation, complete with a board of directors and a ten-year plan. The progression of which, was made possible due to both the level of passion which drives my pursuits in circus, Process Work, and social action, as well as the existing need for a methodology capable of reaching disengaged youth and contributing to the artistic development of circus and theatre arts.

### **III. CHAPTER TWO: “Good Bedfellows”: Process Work’s Entanglement with the Performing Arts**

In her article entitled, “Process Acting,” Arlene Audergon contends that, “Process Work and theater may be such good bedfellows because of the numinous atmosphere they create by bringing awareness and expression to our dream life, mythic background, and personal stories.” Further, she argues, “As in theater, when a process is unfolded to its core, what we see is both utterly personal and touches the universal.”<sup>2</sup>

The intersection of Process Oriented Psychology with the performing arts has been a source of inspiration and growth for both fields as they continue to co-evolve. Theatrical concepts of role embodiment and amplification, along with Moreno’s concept of psychodrama, have no doubt played a significant role in the development of Process Work’s group process and other techniques. Inversely, numerous students and graduates of the Process Work Institute have sought to distill the approaches inherent in Process Oriented Psychology in order to make them palatable to the theatrical community: Amy Mindell, Lane Arye, Arlene Audergon, Kate Jobe, Phelim McDermott, Rhea Shapiro, and most recently, Lisa Blair-Bedrick and Matthew Stella, to name a few.

Indeed, there exist a number of parallel principles shared by both Process Work and theatre; the enmeshment of which, enables a unique approach to working with at-risk youth without the pretense of pathology, or under the auspice of “personal growth”. While the work is deeply personal, the driving force is not an abstract notion of self-development. Instead, the perceived objective is the presentation of a highly developed piece of theatre, whose creation is dependent upon the mastery of certain types of awareness.

What follows, is a brief synopsis of some of the key parallel principles utilized in The Circus Project’s work with homeless and at-risk youth.

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<sup>2</sup> Audergon, “The Journal of Process Oriented Psychology,” 63.

❖ **Actor/Creator ~ Participant/Facilitator:**

The twin concepts of actor/creator and participant/facilitator instill in the actor or client, the ability to co-create their current condition and assume responsibility for themselves and the larger field in the process.

The philosophy of the actor/creator places the actor in a central role in the creative process; the role of a creator as opposed to an interpreter of someone else's creativity. "It calls for theatre artists with the courage to continuously define the creative process and to accept full responsibility for their work. It is a way of working and a way of living that goes beyond the rehearsal hall, the studio, and the stage".<sup>3</sup>

The Process Work philosophy of participant/facilitator similarly espouses the central role of the individual within the context of the larger group and encourages responsibility for oneself and the group. As Mindell states in, *The Deep Democracy of Open Forums*, the participant/facilitator, "... is an ordinary person who feels responsible for caring for all... who turns their own experience of oppression into a gift for others."<sup>4</sup> Both concepts beg us to step out of our role as victim and become conscious of our personal power and the myriad of choices at our disposal.

❖ **Deep Democracy:**

Mindell's concept of deep democracy finds easy application within the realm of theater. Or perhaps, as the following quote illustrates, the artistic concept finds resonance within the field of Process Work. In, *The Leader as Martial Artist*, Mindell uses the artist to demonstrate the principle of Deep Democracy:

*Although an artist must learn the methods of her brush and paints, it is finally her most special feelings that allow her to be a successful artist. Likewise, the tools of worldwork can only succeed with the attitude of*

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<sup>3</sup> Buckley, "Creativity and the Dell' Arte School of Physical Theatre," 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mindell, *The Deep Democracy of Open Forums*, 164.

*deep democracy, that special feeling of belief in the inherent importance of all parts of ourselves and all viewpoints in the world around us.*<sup>5</sup>

Mime extraordinaire, Tony Montanaro mirrors this belief in his book, *Mime Spoken Here: The Performer's Portable Workshop*:

*When you improvise, you must read what is coming at you from all directions, including yourself. You must notice your own tension, your own discomfort. If you take an antagonistic attitude toward anything you feel, you are at a disadvantage. You are also breaking the rules of improvisation by not including all of yourself in what you're doing. Preferring one feeling or impulse over another is the type of prejudice that stifles improvisation*<sup>6</sup>.

❖ **The Metacommunicator, The Imagination, and Awareness:**

Just as the metacommunicator maintains the ability to differentiate a state from the whole of an experience, so must the performer maintain the ability to distinguish the role from the actor/creator. The development of an objective voice who can step outside of the improvisation to consider the overall show encourages the development of individuals capable of self-facilitation under the threat of an impending extreme state.

Montanaro highlights the distinction between use and abuse of the imagination: "The correct use of the imagination warrants vulnerability, attentiveness, and courage... It is a *confrontation* with reality, rather than an escape from it."<sup>7</sup> Clowning Master Sue Morrison echoes this sentiment when she describes the mind of the clown: "complete abandon coupled with complete awareness", or otherwise stated, "innocence after experience, not before."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the ability of the performer to move fluidly between roles, to express themselves fully in each role, and to maintain an overarching

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<sup>5</sup> Mindell, *The Leader as Martial Artist*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Montanaro, *Mime Spoken Here*, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Morrison, Sue. "Clown Through Mask," *Dell' Arte* 1998.

awareness mirrors the goals of the seasoned Process Worker.

As if the overlap of Process Work and theatrical principles weren't sufficient to warrant the creation of a new therapeutic and artistic approach that exceeds the bounds of traditional "drama therapy," the addition of circus arts provides a special allure to disengaged youth.

Throughout history, the circus has held the role of the freak show; a place where marginalized people are celebrated for their strange eccentricities and special talents. Thus, circus provides a vehicle for disenfranchised youth to celebrate their diversity and unique abilities. The circus is at once a lively spectacle of hope, and a stage of mythical proportions in which our "city shadows" are illuminated and reclaimed.

While perhaps overly simplistic, homeless youth become so, either because the mainstream culture has deemed them unacceptable, or vice-versa. Acting as what Sam Keen refers to as, "the church of impossible possibilities,"<sup>9</sup> circus prides itself in defying the accepted limits of humanity and offers a place of prayer for those who share its belief in divine ascension:

*Everywhere in the circus we see fragments of the most ancient religion in the world still being celebrated; sacraments to the body which is capable of behaving like a spirit... Flight was the preoccupation of our shaman ancestors long before Kitty Hawk. The urge to see the body spiritualized, to fly, to break the tyranny of Newton's laws... is in our hollow bones.<sup>10</sup>*

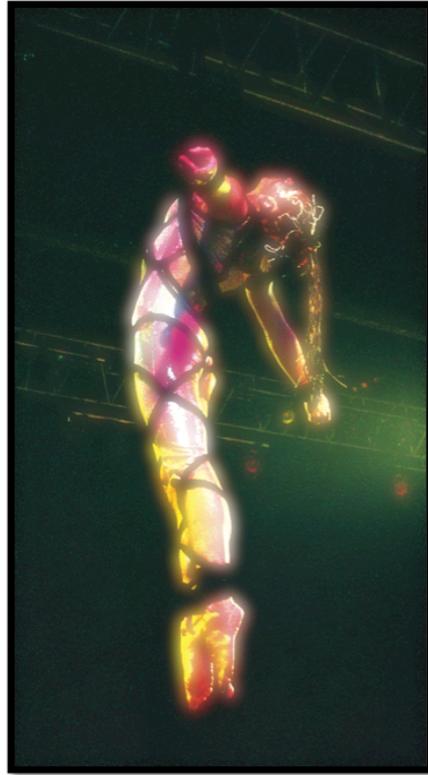
Yet, success in circus cannot be attained by simply rebelling against the laws of gravity. On the contrary, the acquisition of flight, either in dreamland or consensus reality, requires an enormous amount of discipline, commitment, awareness, and self-care, which many street and at-risk youth lack. Developing these qualities for the sake of appealing to, or integrating into the mainstream holds little appeal for most youth. Developing these qualities in order to fly however, is a much more compelling incentive.

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<sup>9</sup> Keen, *Learning to Fly*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Keen, *Learning to Fly*, 23.

Like Process Work, circus invites us to question our most basic presumptions. As Keen so eloquently writes in *Learning to Fly: Reflections on Fear, Trust, and the Joy of Letting Go*, “The Dilemma is as old as Lao Tzu... Am I a dense body dreaming of the impossible freedom of flying, or an airborne spirit incarnate in a world of wonders”?<sup>11</sup>



*Me, performing at the Roseland Theatre in Portland, Oregon.  
Photo Credit: Eva Steinebronn.*

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<sup>11</sup> Keen, *Learning to Fly*, 25.



**IV. CHAPTER THREE:  
The Circus Project: getting youth off the ground  
(a description)**

The mission of The Circus Project is to enable homeless and at-risk youth to develop their physical and emotional integrity, by providing intensive skill training in circus and performing arts. Our emphasis is on empowerment, personal development, and relationship building. We encourage youth participants to create and direct their personal stories in innovative and artistic ways, while offering them an opportunity to reach out to the community through the production of original, theatrical performances.

Our efforts are based on the belief that art is a powerful vehicle for transformation which cuts across social barriers to inspire new perspectives and creative solutions to conflict. Given the tools to express themselves and a safe space in which to experiment, we believe that marginalized youth can evidence profound insight and genuine ability, while contributing significantly to the community of which they are a part.

We strive to expand the definition of art beyond that of the various disciplines to encompass a way of looking at the world, appreciating diversity, and approaching conflict. Training informs the identity of participants on stage, how they relate to others, and how they contribute to the society in which they live.

Classes meet three times per week and focus on artistic, skill, and personal development. Circus, theater, dance, music, and creativity are integrated with life skills such as communication, teamwork, responsibility, and respect. Issues that arise in group discussions are used to inform choreography. Improvisation serves as a springboard for personal sharing. While instructors provide the skill base and process facilitation, the material with which they work comes from the youth themselves: the struggles they face, their dreams, and their relationships. Participant's training culminates in annual performances to engage the larger Portland community.

In addition, we provide internships and career opportunities in performance and coaching. Those youth who complete the initial training period have the opportunity to continue with The Circus Project as interns, and later as paid faculty responsible for recruiting and mentoring other street, at-risk, and community youth. The Circus Project also manages a professional performing troupe, comprised of graduates from our intensive training program for homeless and at-risk youth.

We recognize that in order to engage in the physical and emotional demands of training, basic needs must be addressed. Thus, youth participants receive healthy food, exercise clothing, buss passes, and memberships to Friendly House Community Center which offers a daily respite from the hardships of street life in addition to gym, shower, and internet access. We encourage youth to connect with other nonprofits serving similar demographics and provide referrals to night shelters.

The Circus Project is intended to expand over the course of its development, without sacrificing the quality of the training or safety of participants. The program is unique in that it first targets those youth most in need, and only later expands to include youth whose families might be better able to subsidize their involvement.

Further, The Circus Project is an organic collaboration of diverse sectors of the city of Portland. One of the most gratifying aspects of the planning phase was the generosity and interest of both not-for-profit communities as well as the business community. We work closely with affiliate organizations serving homeless and at-risk youth and collaborate with sustainable businesses, such as Food Front Cooperative Grocery, Forest Park Federal Credit Union, and Friendly House Community Center. The Circus Project represents an exciting partnership between social services, businesses, and individual community members.

The core program of The Circus Project is a yearlong performance workshop, which results in a performance entirely created and performed by a group of 4–8 at-risk youth who rehearse a minimum of three hours a day, three days a week. Participants are culled from

partner programs for homeless and at-risk youth including Outside-In, the Pear Program, New Avenues for Youth, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and the Sexual Minority Resource Center.

Beginning in May 2008, students from partner programs were given the opportunity to attend drop-in circus classes at Friendly House Community Center, a community gathering place that provides educational, recreational, and other life-sustaining services. Students learned basic techniques in aerial and acrobatic work in a supportive and engaging environment with their peers. Interested students also had the opportunity to perform with The Circus Project in local summer festivals to gain publicity for the company, and in our first benefit performance which took place in August of 2008.



*Company member Matt Cottrell performs an aerial tango in our summer benefit show, 2008.*

In the fall of 2008, The Circus Project held auditions within the community of students who attended drop-in classes. The audition served two purposes: first, to identify youth able to function in a highly demanding environment over a significant period of time, and second, to instill a sense of pride and accomplishment in those selected. In order to audition, students were required to create a two-minute piece which showcased their talents (they were encouraged to use material learned in class), sing a song of their choosing, and complete a two page audition form. Neither talent nor skill had any bearing on selections. Ability to take direction, self-motivate, and relate to others were the determining factors.

Although originally scheduled to be complete by September 2008, the audition process ran through December of that year. Finding a substantial group of homeless youth both

interested and able to participate in a pre-professional performance troupe was a more daunting task than I'd anticipated. My original vision for the project was to work primarily with homeless youth. It was this population, I surmised, that was most in need, with least access to the often elitist world of circus arts (though circus classes are expanding exponentially in the U.S., the insurance costs involved with high-risk activities serve to make classes very expensive). However, while I've had a plethora of experiences working with "at-risk" youth (the students with whom I worked in San Francisco had extremely divergent special needs including bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, suicidal depression, and severe Tourettes Syndrome), I had no previous experience with homeless youth.

During the early formation of the project I volunteered with P:ear, an arts-based day program in Portland, Oregon for homeless and transitional youth, in hopes of familiarizing myself with the challenges facing street youth as well as current approaches used to support them. I was well aware of my naïveté with this particular population, and questioned whether my intention to work consistently with a small group of street youth over a long period of time was a realistic proposition. P:ear's director, Pippa Arend, gave me the following advice: "Go for your dream," she said, "and then if it doesn't go as planned, adapt where necessary".

In Process Work terms, I understood this as, "follow yourself, and then follow the feedback". This metaskill has been essential in the development of the project. It allowed me to dream big, and not get stuck in disappointment when the dream didn't always pan out in the way I'd imagined.

Thus, one of the ways in which I adapted was to open the group up to "at-risk" students, a provision I created when drafting our mission statement. After selecting 5 homeless students (we later lost two, one due to illness and one to a job), the remaining three students and I began recruiting additional students through speaking engagements and web-based advertising. By December of 2008, the 2009 company was selected, comprised of a total of seven at-risk youth, three of whom were currently homeless, and all between

the ages of 21-22.



*Circus Project rehearsal, December 2008.*

Because participants were selected on a staggered basis, rather than beginning rehearsals for the performance company simultaneously as planned, an “insider/outsider” dynamic had begun to develop. To remedy the difficulties inherent in this dynamic, the idea of an off-site retreat was born.

One of the intentions in designing The Circus Project was to experiment with using Process Work group process to create and explore the theme of our annual full-length performance. Thus, the annual Circus Project retreat was introduced into the program with the joint intention of using Process Work techniques and theory to address group dynamics as well as to utilize Process Work group process to explore potential themes for our company premiere. This retreat took place in January 2009 for four days in Yachats, Oregon and was co-facilitated by Process Work MACF graduate and Diploma candidate, Jennifer Kleskie and myself.<sup>12</sup>

Ongoing rehearsals have focused on technical skills (aerial, acrobatic, dance, vocal, and theatrical), development of the annual premiere, and show preparation for upcoming

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<sup>12</sup> A thorough description of the retreat can be found in the Script Writing section. The syllabus can be found in Appendix B.

events. A typical day includes:

- **Check in:** The first 15-30 minutes of the program are spent in a talking circle, an opportunity to share about successes and concerns (related to the program or to other life issues). Protein and mineral-rich snacks are provided.
- **Stretching:** 20-30 minutes is spent stretching and warming-up. Different students are chosen to lead this section each day. This provides an opportunity for participants to practice leadership skills as well as to prepare for teaching.
- **Hand Balancing:** The handstand is the foundation of all circus skills. Mastery of the handstand is both a physical and mental feat. Physically, it requires strength, flexibility, balance, and a high level of kinesthetic awareness. Mentally it requires incredible persistence, focus, and repetition in the face of failure. During this period I work one on one with each student, paying special attention to proper technique, endurance, and frame of mind.
- **Core work:** The next hour and a half is focused directly on the creative process including training on equipment and skills, improvisation work, script development, etc. As themes begin to emerge in the show, company members are asked to learn more about these themes through research and assignments done outside the hours of the program.
- **Conditioning:** the remaining half hour is spent conditioning, which consists of strength training and stretching.

Guest faculty specializing in various genres provide additional training as well as opportunities for the youth to experience alternate styles of teaching and performing. Since December of 2008, The Circus Project has funded weekend workshops for company members in aerial fabric, theatrical improvisation, and vocal composition. Process Work Diplomat, Kate Jobe has worked consistently with students over the year to provide additional movement and character development training.

Regular field trips to theatrical and dance performances, as well as weekly internet assignments in which students are required to search YouTube for acts that inspire them, increase participant's exposure to the performing arts and stimulate their imaginations to create their own unique style.

In March of 2008, company members began their internships in coaching in our ongoing drop-in classes for homeless youth, as well as fee-based classes offered to the general

public. Teacher training offers youth the opportunity to continue with The Circus Project as paid faculty, and offers The Circus Project the ability to expand the number of youth reached by increasing the number of classes taught.

In addition to the annual full-length performance (scheduled to premiere December 2009, and January 2010 at PCPA), company members perform at various events and festivals throughout the year.

Following the completion of the yearlong Training Company, company members have the opportunity to work as faculty for the Circus Project, and perform professionally for The Circus Project Performance Troupe.



*Left: Jess Dennis performs with fire for Friendly House's annual Swing into Spring Benefit  
Right: Matthew Cottrell, Reggie Gray, and Curly Top perform at Fall Fest Northwest*



## **V. CHAPTER FOUR: PROCESS WORK IN ACTION**

Over the past thirty years, circus has undergone a major transition, abandoning its centuries old identity as a spectacle brimming with danger laden feats and asserting itself as a highly competitive, theatrical art form. The surge in popularity of aerial arts, in part, due to the economic success of companies like Cirque du Soleil, has enabled the development of a rapidly evolving field with a strong drive for new and unique forms of expression.

No longer is “pretty, skilled, or daring” sufficient to invoke the rapture of an audience. Aerial for aerial’s sake has lost its resonance in popular culture. Today’s audiences demand a more intimate experience than the sensory overload delivered by the three-ring circus. We want to relate to the performer, to see ourselves reflected in her, so that her defiance of physical limitations and ascension to freedom is felt as our own.

The techniques embedded in Process Oriented Psychology offer new and creative approaches for which the fields of theater and circus arts have been hungering, with applications in script writing, character development, and choreography. The following section is intended to provide an overview of the various ways Process Work techniques have been applied to the creation of The Circus Project’s full length show, due to premiere in the Winter of 2009.

### **i. Script Writing:**

There is a saying in the theatrical world that an actor must wait a minimum of seven years before creating a show based on personal material, lest they run the risk of being too immersed in the experience to have adequate perspective. While the value of detachment cannot be underestimated in the creative process, it is equally important that the performer feel an intimate connection to world they create. Without this connection, “acting” becomes a sort of pretending; a lie in which more often than not, the audience ends

up feeling betrayed.

Whatever theme or world the students would choose to create, I wanted to be relevant, not only to the youth, but to their potential audiences as well. Process Work's style of group process offered the possibility of illuminating themes present in both The Circus Project Training Company as well as pertinent issues circulating in the larger world field. In addition, Process Oriented group process demands the acquisition of a number of skills I hoped to instill in our performers: developing fluidity between roles, learning to tolerate and work with conflict, understanding both the personal and impersonal natures of a role, and finding the other in one's self.

Thus, in January of 2008, co-facilitator Jennifer Kleskie and I set out for Oregon Coast with a group of seven homeless and at-risk youth for four days with the goal of teaching basic Process Work group process and using group process to discover the theme, as well as possible roles, for our winter 2009 premiere.

As one student articulated in the feedback form, "[The retreat] was stressful, relaxing, cathartic, and unexpected." Indeed, our journey into the land of group process was filled with a myriad of challenges, momentary resolutions, and surprises, which conspired to evoke a powerful learning experience for both participants and facilitators alike. On a personal level, I can recall few other experiences which have forced me to evolve both as an individual and facilitator in such a brief period of time. On more than one occasion, I felt stretched to my limit, unable to muster the inner strength or wisdom needed to hold the group in my role as facilitator. And on more than one occasion, I found an inner resource whose presence I'd previously failed to detect, and a renewed faith in the wisdom of group process and the techniques of Process Work.

Day one entailed an introduction to Process Work and an inner work exercise on accessing the "Big U."<sup>13</sup> The students were remarkably attentive and interested in the lecture component, asking penetrative questions and engaged in the theoretical discussion. The

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<sup>13</sup> A detailed syllabus of the retreat can be found in Appendix B.

first exercise, “Discovering Why You are Here and Your Vision for the Company,” was both powerful and transformative. Creating masks for the Big U further propelled the process while providing an anchor that students could return to over the course of the seminar. In addition, working with the Big U lay the seeds for the group to withstand the level of conflict that later ensued.



*Big U Mask in day one’s exercise, “Finding Your Purpose for Being Here With The Circus Project”.*

The morning of day two involved an innerwork exercise on dealing with conflict, as well as a fishbowl with an individual working with co-facilitator, Jennifer Kleskie. Themes that emerged then, and later resurfaced in the group process, included extreme states and freedom to be one’s self within the constraints of the “mainstream”.

While Jennifer and I had initially intended on sorting for the topic of our afternoon group process, it became apparent that one particular issue was demanding our attention: “company rules” overlapping with “competing needs.”

Three days prior to our departure, I introduced “The Circus Project Company Member Handbook,” which outlines rules and guidelines for company members as well as consequences that ensue if and when those rules are broken. The drug/alcohol policy in particular, which holds that, “using or bringing drugs or alcohol to any Circus Project rehearsal or event”<sup>14</sup> results in immediate dismissal, proved especially hot in the beginning

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<sup>14</sup> The Circus Project Company Member Handbook can be found in Appendix A.

of the group process.

One participant spoke about the struggle she had with following the rules, and how frustrated and hurt she was that others just ignored them. This prompted another group member to acknowledge his responsibility in his peer's suffering: he admitted that on the first day of the retreat, he had gotten high, creating a conflict among participants that Jennifer and I were unaware of. Over the next two hours, two additional students revealed their involvement with drugs the previous day.

In retrospect, it is easy to chide my naivety for neither anticipating that a student would risk their tenure in the company by breaking the one irreversible rule, nor that I would have to enforce its consequence. Yet, at the time of the reveal, I experienced a state of shock, and felt knocked out of my facilitative role.

Throughout the remainder of the process, I came back intermittently, though unfortunately not consistently. Like the group, I was caught between levels: one part wanting to explore the dreaming behind the process as per the agenda, another part locked in the terror of the consensus reality decision suddenly facing me – to follow through on the consequences outlined in the handbook and lose three students who had woven their way into my heart, or to recede from my role as an authority figure and make an exception to the rule, risking both the safety and respect of the students who were able, or choose to respect the rules.

Following a sleepless night and early morning consultations with our board of directors, I decided to dismiss the students who had used. After an innerwork/integration exercise designed by Jennifer Kleskie to help the group move forward, either with The Circus Project or without, I dropped the three offending students at a bus stop with tickets back to Portland. As one student put it, the retreat had turned a little too “Survivor Yachats.”

I felt my heart breaking as I returned to the group. The three now on their way to Portland had been with me from the inception of the company. In a sense, they were the foundation of the group, and I was simultaneously mourning my personal loss, as well as my vision for

the company in which they had starred. I doubted whether the rest of the company could survive such a loss and felt as if I were watching my dream disintegrate before my eyes.

Emotionally and physically drained, I returned to the group, dreading the atmosphere I assumed would await me. To my great surprise, the remaining four students were energized and eager to get back to work! Over lunch they had bought me a card that read, "Sometimes life gives you a hell sandwich... Hang in there," and inscribed it with the following:

*Thank you for this weekend. Although we had a time of chaos, I believe it made a stronger bond between us. I, like you, have no idea what could happen next. We just have to live in the now and think good thoughts for the future. Thank you for everything, now and later.*

*We got this card while you were driving to Newport... when it certainly seemed as if life had handed to a Hell sandwich and it makes me sad because I'm sure that it wasn't the first, nor will it be the last time that happens. However, I would like to say thank you for hanging in there, believing in us and in the process and in yourself".*

And this is when it happened. This was the moment when the teacher learns that the teacher is not the teacher at all, but the student instead. This was when I finally surrendered, not to failure or depression, but to the wisdom of the group and the Tao of the process. This was the moment I realized that "I" was not the point, that my purpose was not to succeed or fail, or push for my agenda, but to get out of the way and let things happen, to share my vision and let it evolve as it must, without holding it back or pushing it forward. This was the moment I truly understood the difference between directing and facilitating.

The rest of the afternoon consisted of personal sharing. Just 24 hours earlier, the group was engaged in a heated battle over conflicting wills and divisive behaviors. Now, in the aftermath of the storm, the atmosphere had transformed to one of deep appreciation and love. They shared memories of the three who had left, laughed and cried. I later realized, that unbeknownst to us then, we were conducting a funeral of sorts, an opportunity for

those left behind to remember and grieve in order to ultimately move on.

I suggested the group also appreciate those who remained, themselves and one another. This happened in much the same way as the “funeral,” with the group sharing what they loved and appreciated about each individual. As the evening progressed, we dreamed further into each person, creating an archetype of what they represented to each of us. From this process, the characters who would ultimately play in our final show emerged and began to unveil themselves.

As the characters began to evolve, the participants became more and more animated. My interventions were minimal, and helped to deepen “what was” rather than redirect to what I thought “should be.” I was finally beginning to trust the process. A torrent of creativity had swept through the group, and though I was unable to track all of its content, I was able to appreciate and facilitate its flow. Undeniably apparent to me, was the realization that the group of young adults before me needed to establish their own creative process, rather than follow mine. Thus, on day four, I abandoned the route I had so carefully mapped and let the spontaneity of the moment determine our next adventure.

Throughout the retreat, Jennifer and I had recorded various themes, images, and dreams that surfaced in the group on large post-it notes. On the morning of day four, the multitude of post-its had all but obscured the ocean view from our living room windows. I asked the group to walk slowly around the room, and remove any post-its that felt personally irrelevant, regardless of whether or not they resonated with someone else. The remaining notes were to be gathered on the mantle. Like worker bees who understood their purpose without external communication, the students glided seamlessly through the space; a well tuned orchestra whose dissonant tones collide to create a harmonious body of movement.

Taking their cue from a synchronized breath that signaled completion, they stepped back in unison to examine with pride, the masterpiece that lay before them. The challenges and resolutions of the past four days were no longer abstractions longing for context. The results of

their work were now tangible and compelling.



*Foundation for the winter 2009 Circus Project Show*

Within a matter of minutes, a collective story emerged which chronicled a group of young explorers whose paths diverge to find themselves as individuals, confronting their personal demons in order to reunite as a more powerful group from a place of wholeness. Thus, the intentions for the Group Process Retreat had found fulfillment, not through the linear methodology I had prescribed, but through the sometimes chaotic, and always wise Tao that precipitates the vision.

“This has been one of the most amazing experiences in my life,” wrote one participant on the feedback form, “At first I was scared we would kill each other by the end. But we made it work and though we lost some, a new perspective and direction was found”.

Another student shared the following from her journal entry during the exercise on integration, “I’ve learned not to get worked up about things that are out of my control, and I’ve learned that I am not as powerless as I fear.”

Certainly, my lack of expertise in Group Process, coupled with my personal edges created a myriad of challenges that a more seasoned facilitator could have avoided. Under the microscope of video analysis in supervision, it is easy to spot the foibles of the facilitation, and the dreamdoors that tempt with their latent potential had I only the foresight to detect them at the

time. Yet, there is distinct sense of empowerment that comes from having overcome something as group. And for both the participants and myself, the faith in our ability to survive and create in the face of chaos has enabled us to persist through this great experiment called The Circus Project.



*Showing off our new Process Work muscles at the close of the retreat.*

## **ii. Character Development:**

Having surrendered my director's script to the collective dreaming of the group during the retreat, I was now at a loss for how to proceed with character development. Somewhere between the wordless understanding shared by the company members in the post-its exercise and the three hour drive back to Portland, the students had come to a mutual agreement on the content of the show in which I was (unintentionally) excluded.

I am well versed in the hazards of drafting a script before the players become known, and was apprehensive of the level of certainty the students possessed about the progression of a show I had yet to understand. I feared it would produce a piece of theater that was both trite and predictable, in much the same way a Process Work therapist is rightfully weary of the client that knows the outcome before engaging in the actual experience. Still, I was hesitant to discount the

students sense of accomplishment, or obscure the possibility that they might in fact, know better than I.

To bridge the gap between our seemingly divergent approaches, I sought the help of Process Work Diplomate Kate Jobe, who regularly traverses the territories of dance, theater, and Process Work. I had originally intended to develop the characters within the context of a specific genre. Yet the characters proposed by the students eluded the fields of clown, commedia, buffoon, and melodrama in which I was trained. Rather than utilize Process Work techniques to augment my significant toolbox of theatrical approaches as planned, I was forced to rely almost exclusively on Process Work in order to facilitate the creation of a show that balanced the constructs agreed upon by the participants with my personal agenda and aesthetic.

What follows, is thus a reflection on the ways in which Process Oriented Psychology contributes to theatrical character development as well as examples of the methodology employed by Kate and myself to reap the benefits of this collaboration.

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Process Work methods of unfolding signals in order to deepen an experience offer the actor/creator a concrete technique for character development that circumvents the limits of the consensus reality mind and provides a method of accessing the essence of a character.

The Process Work concept of unfolding, is essentially a structure for improvisation with the objective of deepening and expanding upon an experience. Though the goal is similar, I usually refer to unfolding as improvising when working with performers. When creating exercises for The Circus Project, I designed the terms “horizontal” and “vertical” to differentiate between two types of improvisation or unfolding.

***Horizontal improvisation*** exists on the plane between the relationship and world levels. It involves the relationships between characters, as well as the character’s relationship to the audience. Both in life and on stage, significant insights arise through our interactions with and

reactions to our fellow beings.

An example of horizontal improvisation is an exercise adapted from Sacred Clown Master Sue Morrison, entitled, “Saying Goodbye to Someone You Love.”<sup>15</sup> Through a series of meditations, the identity of a being to whom the character feels closest is brought into consciousness. Over a period of about a half an hour, performers engage with their beloveds in a final moment, before placing them on a boat for the remainder of eternity.

“Saying Goodbye to Someone You Love,” is a highly emotional experience, regardless of the character’s supposedly fictional existence. Though potentially risky to conduct with a group of at-risk youth, the discovery of both the character’s beloved and the way in which they deal with loss provided valuable insights into the central conflict facing each player.

One student described her character’s dilemma, “Is the predictability of the familiar worse than the unpredictability of the future?” When the object of his adoration abandoned him, another student was forced to confront the emptiness his character had been avoiding. In his words, “I had to discover who I was when the world wasn’t watching”.

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**Vertical improvisation** happens on the inner level. Like Process Work styles of innerwork, vertical improvisation involves using signal awareness and catching flirts to discover one’s (or one’s character’s) dreaming. An example is the following simple exercise, created and led by Kate Jobe:

1. Find an arm movement
2. Notice a quick flirt or image (i.e., a basket)
3. Keep doing the movement, and expand it into a story (i.e., the basket is on a table in a hut in the forest)

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<sup>15</sup> This exercise can be found in Appendix C: Exercises in Character Development.

There is an argument in the clown world about whether one must find their own clown first before they can work in relationship or whether one finds their clown through relationship. Like Process Work, I believe there are many paths to the sentient core, and both horizontal and vertical improvisation are valuable tools in unfolding a character's essence.

In, *A Path Made by Walking*<sup>16</sup>, Diamond and Jones outline two methods of unfolding that, when applied to character development, open a range of possibility to the actor. ***Unfolding forward***, involves amplifying a signal that arises in one channel into a global experience. The following exercise was used in the beginning of the project in order to train participants in spontaneous action and improvisation. It offers an example of forward unfolding.

*Exercise:*

1. Take a walk around the room, letting yourself relax and walk normally.
2. Notice anything in your walk that is a bit mysterious today, and doesn't go along with how you usually see yourself. Perhaps it's something in your rhythm, a slight limp, a slight pull in one direction. Keep walking, and just take notice.
3. Start to exaggerate the mysterious thing, or whatever doesn't quite go along with your normal way of walking. Augment it about 10% while walking. (kinesthetic channel)
4. Slowly increase the percentage to 50%. Let the experience transform as it gets bigger. Let it move into the rest of your body, your mind, your eyes. (proprioceptive channel)
5. Now take it up to 75%. Let sounds emerge. This could be any sound, speech, or language. (auditory channel)
6. Finally, let this being transform into a character, animal, creature, or other being. Let it inhabit your body 100%. Notice now, what this being notices when it moves in the space. Is it aware of itself, others, objects? Where is its focus? (visual channel)
7. If it's right for this being, let it interact with others, while staying true to itself. If you start to lose it, go back to your own experience. (relationship channel)
8. Now, think of a story or world in which this character lives and relates. Share and demonstrate with the group.
9. After each person demonstrates their character or being, I have the rest of the group copy it, and then let their own experience evolve from it. This gets everyone excited about their experience and brings in the creativity and dreaming of the field to further expand the possible directions for that particular character.

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<sup>16</sup> Diamond & Jones, *A Path Made by Walking*, 109-111.

There exists in theater, a parallel exercise in amplification termed, “0-60”. The title is meant to reflect the process of getting a car from 0 to 60 miles per hour. Both the Process Work and the theatrical exercise are intended to amplify an experience to its fullest capacity or deepest essence. Most of us are all too familiar with the frustration induced from witnessing unused potential, and the satisfaction that results from seeing something through to its completion. Process Work’s contribution to “0-60” brings in a level of authenticity and spontaneity theatrical versions sometimes lack. Additionally, forward unfolding can be used in script development. It is particularly useful in horizontal improvisation as it helps to unfold both the “who” you are (character) and “what’ you do” (content).



*My buffoon character, developed by unfolding forward.*

***Unfolding a signal backward*** to its sentient root provides a subtler vehicle to embodiment of the character, or as Diamond and Jones put it, “the dreaming tendency that gives rise to it.”<sup>17</sup> Unfolding backwards is especially important for vertical improvisation. The following is an example of backwards unfolding Kate and I designed to help students access secondary material they could use to discover their character’s demon:

*Identifying your character’s Demon:*

1. Think of a person or thing that disturbs your character.
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<sup>17</sup> Diamond & Jones, *A Path Made by Walking*, 109.

2. Find a movement phrase that represents the disturbance.
3. Minimize the movement to its smallest component.
4. Feel it in your body, and notice what precedes the smallest component. Perhaps it is a breath, a thought, a mysterious tendency, almost imperceptible.
5. Let the essence move you again, letting go of the original content. Let that essence show you how to walk, let it teach you how to think, let it direct you.

Backwards unfolding has proved useful in anchoring characters as well as using the essence of the character as a springboard for choreography. The distillation process provides additional training in working with subtly, a quality some physical theater performers lack.



*Petra Delarocha drew this representation of my Big U, discovered by unfolding my experience of teaching backwards to its sentient root.*

In sum, Process Work's methods of unfolding experience provide the actor/creator with a plethora of venues to explore character and script development as well as a thorough training in authentic expression necessary for congruency and embodiment.

### **iii. Choreography:**

Process Work methods of amplification specified for use within the movement channel have also yielded impressive results in the creation of original, aerial choreography. What follows is a list of Process Work amplification techniques and their applications to circus

choreography.

- **Verbal Support:** Put simply, I encourage what is happening in the moment, either through sound or words.
- **Inhibiting:** When working in the air, the apparatus serves as the primary inhibitor. I bring awareness to the relationship between the performer and apparatus, encouraging the aerialist to react and express the feelings stimulated by the relationship of flesh to metal and rope.
- **Globalizing and Channel Addition:** A beginning performer will often focus only on one part of the body, or the “trick” at hand. When choreographing, I insist that every action has a motivation, and the performer must be clear about this. Globalizing thus encourages performers to move the energy of the particular movement into all parts of their body, especially the face, which is often neglected in circus arts. While the performer may or may not speak the thoughts or words associated with the movement aloud, they must be aware of their inner dialogue and be intentional with its outward manifestation.
- **Completing:** It is much easier to spot an incomplete movement from the ground than in the air, thus, I have the designated choreographer watch for any movements that feel incomplete, and offer the performer an extension or resolution that would feel satisfying. This is often achieved by having the performer and choreographer switch roles.
- **Forbidding:** For this approach, I use an exercise I designed entitled, “stuck”. In stuck, the performer must have at least one body part stuck to a piece of their apparatus. The intention is for the performer to discover the full range of movement available to them. For example, a student might start in a knee hang on the trapeze. They would then proceed to improvise within the structure of having one knee on the bar at all times. This can be done in a variety of positions and is useful for seasoned performers whose extensive knowledge of the apparatus and their ability is often a double-edged sword in creating new choreography. It also provides a unique vehicle to create transitions.
- **Mirroring:** Mirroring takes some physical rank on the part of the coach. When a

student gets stuck, I put myself in their position, and then ask them to direct me from the ground.

- **Joining:** For this approach, I created an exercise called, “mirroring,” which, due to the restraints of the apparatus, is really an exercise in joining rather than achieving symmetry. One student begins on the ground, slightly in front of the apparatus, the other on the apparatus. While playing very slow music (I have students do this exercise in slow motion for safety), students attempt to mirror each other’s dance. This exercise is helpful for solo artists who are uncomfortable with improvisation and for duets, who are looking to add another dimension (literally or metaphorically) to their act.
- **Talking to a Part:** It takes a tremendous amount of patience to perfect a “trick” in the circus. Even if the intellect can grasp the concept, translating it into physical action can be incredibly frustrating. I often have extended conversations with my student’s body parts, whether it’s encouraging their feet to point along with their toes, or lifting with their back muscles instead of their arms. Not only does this lighten the atmosphere and provide some much needed stress relief, it helps to center the student’s awareness in that part of their body.
- **Changing channels:** Switching from kinesthetic to proprioceptive, auditory, visual, etc., or working with unoccupied channels is a valuable method for filling out the act, progressing when stuck, and bringing a sense of congruency to the various aspects.
- **Guessing or Mis-guessing:** I spend a lot of time dreaming into my student’s movements, and I encourage them to do the same for one another. For instance, when watching an improvisation, I’ll pay careful attention to my inner impulses and sensations, and bring that out. Often a student will respond with an excited, “yes, that’s exactly what I was feeling too!” or “Actually, I had a totally different experience,” which is equally as valuable. (Note: I sometimes get carried away with my own visions and ideas, at which point I have to remind myself to check the feedback!)



*Nicolette Render, demonstrating an adaptation of "Stuck".*

In *Sitting in the Fire*, Arnold Mindell states that, "The Taoist view of life [upon which Process Oriented Psychology is based] assumes that the way things are unfolding contains the basic elements necessary for solving human problems"<sup>18</sup>. Process Work thus has much to offer the domain of aerial arts, in which the predominant drive for athletic perfection all too often obscures the opportunities for innovation inherent in our mishaps and embedded within the disturbances we attempt to marginalize.

During my tenure at The San Francisco Circus Center, the foremost circus training ground in the United States, I was in high demand as a choreography consultant for professional acrobats and aerialists, in part, due to my use of Process Work approaches. It takes a watchful eye to catch the secondary movement signals in a polished performance piece, and a gallant leap of faith to entertain the notion that the unintentional may hold the key to the future evolution of both the artist and the act.

One of the great ironies of the creation process is learning to integrate certain skills, only to invest an equal amount of energy to later unlearn them. It requires the same diligence to free oneself from the bonds of ingrained technique as it does to acquire the proficiency in the first place.

Bearing witness to the difficulty of this path, I wondered whether there might be a way to

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<sup>18</sup> Mindell, *Sitting in the Fire*, 22.

circumvent the seemingly oppressive nature of technical training, thereby freeing the artist to expand their palette of possibilities early on. Despite my studies in Process Work, I too felt the limits of my imagination constricted from almost two decades of traditional circus training which served to reinforce the dominant aesthetic.

Though working with professional performers is where the depth of my passion lies, it is often the very beginners of beginners who serve as my greatest teachers. These students, when given the reins to explore, have produced some of the most innovative choreography I've seen to date.



*Top to Bottom: Aaron Guerrero, Nicolette Render, and Jess Dennis on tissu.*

In the early years of my involvement with Process Work I led a weeklong, experimental workshop in aerial arts with a group of advanced high school dance students in the small town of Crescent City, California. Though the students were considerably proficient in movement work, they lacked previous exposure to circus arts, providing a fertile ground to conduct my research. Rather than start with basic aerial technique or demonstrations, I utilized blank access statements in order to encourage unbiased improvisations. Though I'm reticent to acknowledge, the choreography born in the period of that week was so compelling, I later applied many of the student's innovations to my own act.

For years I became a new breed of aerial activist, advocating the integration of improvisation early on in circus training. Instilling Process Work methods of choreography in the initial phases of training, I rationalized, could potentially serve to

avoid the influx of rigid professionals the industry was producing. Regrettably, the same fate which often befalls the all-too polarized activist was about to envelop The Circus Project. My insistence on the benefits reaped from following the unintentional had marginalized the advantages of training the intentional.

The value of learning “proper’ technique,” I discovered, cannot be underestimated, though the development of creativity must simultaneously be encouraged. The initial months of training in The Circus Project had produced students who, while well versed in following their movement propensities, were unable to follow outside direction or adhere to the standards of the profession. By encouraging them to strive for authenticity, and praising their freedom to explore, I had neglected to instill in them an awareness of their presentation, or the ability to work collaboratively with a director. I had unconsciously given birth to a gaggle of divas whose sense of entitlement proved embarrassing when bringing in guest aerial coaches.

Worse, in the process of neglecting the technical requirements standard in the industry, the students had developed a number of bad habits I am still struggling to undo. Had I demanded pointed toes and straight lines from the onset, I could have avoided the significant amount of time now spent retraining the troupe.

Karmically, perfectly, and rightly so, the same dilemma that has plagued me as a student of Process Work (to follow myself or to follow an authority) was playing itself out under the big top. My fear of imposing my own (or the industry’s) aesthetic and morphing into the authority figures I criticized had created a debilitating limitation for my students. Although I continue to struggle to find the balance between following the primary or secondary movement, I have established that indeed, there must be a balance.

Conforming to the standards of the industry is important for a variety of reasons. The acquisition of aerial technique serves to bring an awareness to the body in its entirety, from the smallest toe to the most subtle glance. It enables performers to be able to work for a variety of different venues and companies that share a similar language. However, as

proven, training only technique produces performers who lack the ingenuity to break out of the mainstream construct. As Lane Arye points out, “Exploring the unintentional with curiosity and love can help us tap into the wellsprings of our deepest creativity, and make our music, our art, and ultimately our lives, more authentic, meaningful, and original.”<sup>19</sup>

The Process Work technique of following the unintentional, when balanced with an appreciation for the technical demands of the art form, not only encourages the creative process, but produces innovative artists and citizens, not limited by the fear of failure.



*Circus Project company members Petra Delarocha, Brandon Vernon, and Aaron Guerrero.*

In addition to utilizing amplification techniques and working with the unintentional, Process Work theory and practice offer an unlimited potential for applications to choreography in a variety of situations. In the early days of my experimentation with the effect of Process Work techniques on the creation of choreography, I had the opportunity to coach three advanced aerial students, whose act, “Triptyc,” won international recognition at the American Youth Organization’s Circus Festival in Minnesota in 2003. In an article

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<sup>19</sup> Arye, *Unintentional Music*, 4.

published in the Pacifica Tribune, I describe Process Work's contribution to the creation of the act:

From the design of their apparatus to choreography, music, even fundraising, the girls participated in every aspect of Triptyc's creation. I utilized a variety of exercises to illicit their ideas and deepen their understanding of the material with which we worked. In addition to training skills, conditioning, and improvisation, the girls completed weekly homework assignments, which ranged from research in Greek mythology to recording their dreams, or finding poetry and text that helped us work with metaphor. We used writing exercises and subtle movement work as foundations for aerial improvisations. We experimented with the layering of color, emotion, character and story. All this proved useful not only for developing the girls' repertoire of material, but also for building confidence in their bodies, their creative abilities, and each other.

The act that is now Triptyc arose from the relationship dynamic within the group. At a certain point in the process, tension developed between the girls. Rather than ignore it or push through, we decided to risk opening the door wider to it with hope of deepening our understanding of their relationships. I introduced the girls to an exercise of "high dreams and low dreams" from Arnold Mindell's Process Work. Each one developed two solo movement pieces, one that expressed their "high dream" (or greatest hope) for their relationship with the others, the other which expressed the "low dream" (or worst fear) of that relationship. The choreography that was born from that exercise was some of the most moving work I have witnessed. The themes in each piece, which we later discussed: loneliness, isolation, and death, vs. mutual growth, harmony and wholeness were so personal to the girls, yet totally universal. It became clear to us all, that the act they were creating should express the unique relationships the girls share. Thus, the act that is Triptyc is an expression of the process that gave rise to it. It is a glimpse into the relationships that sustain us all and the beauty and struggles that make them possible.<sup>20</sup>

Triptyc enjoyed immediate success at the festival. Kevin O'Keefe, founder and past president of The American Youth Circus Organization, later proclaimed, "Jenn Cohen is an outstanding circus teacher and choreographer. Her act, "Triptyc," was the highlight of the AYCO Festival in 2003. If given the proper support, her further contributions to the world of circus will be

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<sup>20</sup> Pacifica Tribune, "Pacifcan Andie Crug Invited to Attend Prestigious American Youth Circus Organization's 2003 Festival." Education: Page 4A.

historic.”

Peggy Ford, Program Director at the San Francisco Circus Center and Circus Project board member described the effects of my use of Process Work techniques in working with students: “Jenn uses the world of circus to bring meaning, growth, and awareness into the lives of her students. As a coach she has managed to craft acts that go far beyond pure skill level. Jenn takes a unique approach to teaching. She works with the physical: imparting skill and technique, as well as the intellect, emotions, and souls of her students.”

Indeed, Process Work techniques, when applied to aerial choreography, not only produce innovative performances; they significantly augment the depth of the material presented and the lives of both the performers engaged in the process, and audience members who bear witness to it.



*Circus Project Art by Petra Delarocha*

## **VI.CHAPTER FIVE: For the Love of Kids or For the Love of Art? (a personal reflection)**

Throughout the course of the project I have continually sought to establish the boundaries of my multiple roles as coach, director, administrator, and therapist. “For the love of the kids or for the love of art,” I’ve often pondered. The answer, though crystal clear in a given moment, is prone to shift as quickly and as often as moods of the adolescents with whom I work.

The most consistent response has been an amalgamation of the two options. My foremost intention was the creation of “high art,” whose product I proposed, would be best achieved by a process which honored and facilitated the growth of its participants, thus the premise of my thesis. Yet at least as often as I have insisted on marginalizing the momentary crises of the student in order to concentrate on the task at hand, I have interrupted the flow of rehearsals to attend to whatever mood insists on stealing focus.

While I originally declared my primary role as coach, rather than personal or group therapist, my tendency to counsel and “fix” the presenting problem, often overrode my intention to remain boundaried in my role as instructor. On more than one occasion, I found myself rationalizing an over-involvement in the lives of my students by insisting that without my interventions, their ability to participate in the program would be compromised.

In retrospect, my lapse in boundaries and flip-flopping intentions acted as a disservice to both the students and myself. While not explicitly felt as such, my desire to “over-care” for my students reaffirmed their identities as “at-risk,” rather than challenging them to take responsibility for themselves and facilitate their independence from social service agencies. I grew to resent the behavior I was unconsciously enabling by indulging their outbursts and my own covert desire to play the hero in their melodrama.

In the future, I feel it would best serve the company for me to communicate early on, that while the training program itself is designed to be therapeutic in nature, my role is that of a

coach, and not a therapist. Additionally, the program caters to homeless and at-risk students only in that it provides a means for economically, mentally, physically, or socially marginalized youth to participate in a pre-professional training course to which they would otherwise be denied access, and not by lowering the expectations for those youth to participate.

Whether or not my prime motivation is the welfare of kids or the perfection of the art however, remains illusive. Perhaps the question is not so much which is primary, but how to best serve both. Ultimately, if indeed my hypothesis proves correct, the two are inexplicably connected, and whatever approach best impacts one, will simultaneously benefit the other.



*Me & TCP company member, Nicolette Render, out for an afternoon stroll...*

## **VII. CHAPTER SIX: Cross-cultural Contributions (the wrap up)**

In the past twenty years, Process Oriented Psychology has made significant contributions to the various creative fields of theatre, dance, music, and visual arts. The Circus Project now adds to those disciplines by extending the application of Process Work to include the rapidly expanding field of circus arts. The Circus Project has succeeded in creating specific and easily applicable Process Work-based techniques for working with homeless and at-risk youth, and demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing Process Oriented Psychology with this demographic.

Of significant benefit to Process Work, has been the development of a model for applying Process Oriented Psychology in a non-therapeutic, educational context. The Circus Project lays the groundwork to create a systematic yet flexible approach in which arts organizations may apply basic Process Work theory to create or enhance their artistic processes and products.

Additionally, the integration of Process Work with circus and theatre arts offers a unique set of tools to those engaged in the social service and educational fields. Art must be taught artistically. If our teachers and administrators cannot muster the creativity to inspire and empower children and young adults in all their uniqueness and varied abilities, they have done little but reinforce the dominant paradigm through which we are shaped.

The Circus Project's use of Process Oriented Psychology brings into the debate the value of both experiential and theoretical learning, as well as highlighting the importance of personal development in education. Art, education, and awareness, should not be at odds with each other, as current funding trends demand, but instead, integrated to the extent that they are inseparable. The Circus Project brings to light the potential for shifting the dominant educational paradigm which fails to engage a significant portion of youth, to one that embraces the varied styles in which we learn, and offers a model for the incorporation of the aforementioned values.

The Circus Project contributes to the lives of its participants in a variety of ways. Company members encounter many milestones, challenges, and resolutions over the course of their tenure, both personal and interpersonal. They acquire strength, flexibility, and agility, both emotional and physical, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of embodiment. Participants are driven by their own ambition, challenged to bring their personal stories into the creative process, and learn to deal with mistakes and failure - seeing them as opportunities for transformation rather than obstacles to success.

While the work is deeply personal, it also challenges participants to work harmoniously with their peers and coaches. Circus is by its nature collaborative; company members need to trust one another to work on techniques such as partner acrobatics, pyramids, double trapeze, and ensemble work.

An additional benefit of circus training for homeless and at-risk youth is learning to negotiate boundaries and to give and receive safe touch. Early in the program, I noticed I seemed to be much more injury prone than usual. I attributed my new vulnerability to aging, until the day I introduced the troupe to back handsprings.

After carefully explaining the protocol of jumping from one's feet backwards onto one's hands, one of my students quite literally, threw himself backwards into my arms. As a coach, it is my responsibility to catch them, to break their falls, and to help them land softly, often using my own body as a cushion. After rearranging my neck, I asked him about his thought process midair and he responded, "I just felt safe and knew you'd catch me no matter what I did." Others nodded in agreement. Apparently, this phenomenon had been happening for some time, and I'd failed to notice. Holding the balance between helping participants to feel held and encouraging them to carry their own, and other's weight, is thus a constant negotiation, both on stage and in life.

Youth engaged in The Circus Project come away from the experience with the technical skills to pursue continued performance, career opportunities in coaching, and the emotional tools to make better choices in their day-to-day lives. Students learn how to

receive care and training as part of the program, as well as how to *give* care and training, thus enabling them to eventually come full circle. As one student recently told me, “I came into this program as an at-risk youth, but now I can no longer identify as at-risk”.

Perhaps no one is better suited to describe The Circus Project’s contributions to the youth it serves, than the youth themselves:

*As a result of being involved with The Circus Project, I now consider myself an athlete, something which I never imagined would be possible. I have become a more complete human being. I have grown to value true athleticism, and I have come to know my own strength. Being involved in The Circus Project has been one of the most challenging, at times discouraging, and ultimately empowering feminist acts I have ever done. –N*

*The experiences I’ve been through with The Circus Project have formed a trust that I cannot live without. Our role in creating the work that we perform helps us to express ourselves. It’s an amazing feeling when we perform something we have developed together. –S*

*The Circus Project has saved me over and over again. –M*

*Circus is something I do with focus and determination. It’s not about competition – it’s about working as a group to find our own expression through performance. – M*

*The only thing that keeps me going is coming here. –S*

*This is my second little family... it’s like I found my little spot in the world – that one spot that makes sense, especially when I’m upside down - that’s when the world makes sense. –A*

At present, The Circus Project is facing the possibility of imminent closure due to an inability to sustain the organization financially. The current economic crisis has significantly reduced available funding for nonprofit corporations, and both individual funding and foundation support has all but receded, despite the project’s undeniable success.

With a heavy heart, I met with students in late April to let them know we would no longer be able to honor the initial contract we created with them, where, in exchange for their participation and commitment, The Circus Project would supply them with healthy snacks

to sustain their energy during rehearsals, and buss passes to provide for their transportation.<sup>21</sup> For homeless youth, these “luxuries” are all but necessities. In addition, we would need to consider dissolving the project if the financial means to sustain ourselves failed to manifest.

In a touching demonstration of faith and love, the students rallied together to provide for the short-term continuance of The Circus Project. They agreed to go without food, transportation, and other benefits we had initially promised to reduce costs. They offered to hold carwashes, bake sales, and other fundraising events to cover the costs of our insurance and rent.

Whether or not their efforts will be able to sustain us past the summer is still unclear. However, I can think of no greater indicator of the success of the program, than the willingness of the youth, most of whom are unable to support themselves, to support the preservation of The Circus Project. And, with the exception of the three students who were dismissed for drug use, the project has retained 100% of the group we started with almost one year ago. I continue to be in touch with the three students who were dismissed, two of whom have resolved to get sober so that they can re-audition in January of 2010.

If indeed The Circus Project is able to survive financially, implications for the future are plentiful. Both Cirque du Soleil and the American Youth Circus Organization have approached me to do presentations on Process Oriented Psychology’s contribution to circus arts at their annual conferences in 2010. Additionally, Cirque du Soleil has asked me to publish a manual for coaches interested in applying Process Work techniques to choreography. Most importantly however, the structure of The Circus Project is such that the program will at minimum, double its capacity each year, allowing us to reach more youth in need as well as providing job opportunities to our graduates.

Perhaps what is needed then, is a renewed belief in the magic of the circus, and the faith that despite the challenges at hand, the show must go on, and will go on, whether we’re

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<sup>21</sup> Appendix A, Circus Project Company Handbook, 50.

riding its coat-tails, or soaring with the greatest of ease.



*Circus Project Company Members and Director, March 2009.*



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# 1. JOB DESCRIPTION

**Welcome!** The Circus Project Performance Company is a pre-professional to professional performance troupe which crafts original, highly skilled, and theatrical circus performances for the general public. Circus Project company members, while not legally employed by The Circus Project, receive numerous benefits and privileges for their participation and are therefore expected to act as employees of the company by demonstrating professionalism at all times.

## **I. Circus Project Company Member's Benefits:**

- Training with some of the world's most respected master teachers in theatre and circus!
- Monthly bus passes.
- Healthy food at all TCP rehearsals and events.
- Memberships to Friendly House Community Center.
- Business cards.
- Free company email.
- An opportunity to be part of a collaborative, creative, talented, and powerful team.

## **II. Expectations/Responsibilities of Company Members:**

- Attend all Circus Project events and rehearsals (unless you have previous permission from the instructor).
- Be on time to all rehearsals and Circus Project events (in the *rare* case that you are running late, you are expected to call the instructor).
- Check your email, and the online TCP calendar regularly to stay apprised of any changes or notices.
- Be focused in class.
- Be open to learning and feedback, able to take direction.
- Being self-motivated, and asking for direction if you feel lost.
- Doing cardio and strength training (cross training) on days off.
- Completing "homework" on time.
- Assist with teaching and spotting when asked.
- Help with set-up, takedown before and after class.
- Follow all safety protocol.
- Work as a team.
- Have fun.

## **III. Causes for Dismissal:**

The Circus Project maintains the right to dismiss anyone who we feel poses a threat to their own or other's safety. Other causes for dismissal include:

- Missing three or more rehearsals without instructor permission/notification.

- Consistently arriving late (without instructor approval).
- Attending any Circus Project rehearsal or event under the influence of drugs or alcohol (unless prescribed by a doctor and approved by instructor).
- Bringing drugs or alcohol to any Circus Project rehearsal or event (unless prescribed by a doctor).
- Physically, verbally, emotionally, or sexually harassing another company member, student, or staff member.
- Practicing unsafe behavior that risks personal injury or injury to another.

## 2. TCP POLICY

### **I. Non-Discrimination Policy:**

The Circus Project strives to provide an atmosphere of safety and creativity in which people feel able to participate, express themselves, and be heard independently of their gender, race, color, size, religion, physical handicap, mental diagnosis, national or ethnic origin, social status, age, sexual orientation, or gender identification.

### **II. Confidentiality:**

On occasion, Circus Project instructors consult with professional colleagues and/or members of the board of directors. Circus Project coaches and staff do not disclose confidential information that reasonably could lead to the identification of a company member or student, or other person or organization with whom they have a confidential relationship unless they have obtained the prior consent of the person or organization, or the disclosure cannot be avoided. When consulting with colleagues, instructors disclose information only to the extent necessary to achieve the purposes of the consultation.

Circus Project company members are expected to honor a policy of confidentiality in order to create a safe space in which members feel free to share personal information and feelings when desired. In other words, what happens during rehearsal stays in rehearsal. You should feel free to discuss your feelings and experiences with others outside of training, but please leave other's stories, names, and experiences out.

### **III. Sexual Relationships:**

Sexual relationships between company members are highly discouraged due to the intimate nature of training and the complex dynamics within the group.

Sexual relationships between company members and staff (instructors, staff, board members, and volunteers) are forbidden.

If you feel you have been sexually pursued or harassed by staff member or volunteer, please contact either the executive director (Jenn Cohen) or the delegated representative from the board of directors (Barbara Burkhardt) immediately.

### **IV. Conflicts:**

When possible, conflicts with fellow company members or instructors should be resolved between those directly involved.

In the case that:

- The conflict cannot be adequately resolved between participants, or

- The conflict affects the safety of any group member or associated person

Please contact lead coach, **Jenn Cohen**.

If the conflict cannot be resolved by consulting Jenn, please contact board representative **Barbara Burkhart**.

# 2. SAFETY

## **I. Circus Safety:**

- Never use aerial equipment or tumble without a mat.
- Do not attempt anything without a spotter unless you have the permission of the instructor.
- Always eye the connections on your equipment before mounting.
- Do not put lotion or moisturizers on hands before going on equipment. Make sure your hands are clean and dry and do not have food or other oils on them.
- Take off all jewelry before training.
- Say “no” to anything that feels unsafe to you.
- Know when you need to rest.
- Report any safety concerns to the instructor.

## **II. Self Care:**

The Circus Project requires a large amount of physical and mental stamina; therefore, it is essential that company members practice self-care. Self-care practices include:

- Eating nutritious, balanced, and regular meals.
- Getting enough sleep.
- Stretching/warming up before and after physical activity.
- Exercising good judgment, avoiding dangerous situations.
- Respecting your physical and psychological limitations.
- Asking for help when needed.

## **III. Sickness:**

Training when sick increases the likelihood of injury and potentially spreads illness among company members and coaches. A basic rule of thumb is: if you’re too sick for stretching and conditioning, you’re too sick to train. If you think you may be contagious, please refrain from direct interaction with equipment or people, and take care to avoid the spreading of germs through coughing, sneezing, etc.. Company members are encouraged to make frequent use of the hand sanitizer provided in class, before and after eating, before using the equipment, and after using the restroom.

## **IV. Injuries:**

The above measures are intended to avoid injury whenever possible. However, in the case that an accident or injury does occur, please notify an instructor as soon as possible, even if you think the injury is minor.

Please notify instructors of any injuries that occur outside of rehearsal time so efforts can be made to protect that body part and avoid further/re-injury.

#### **V. Scabs and Open Wounds:**

The Circus Project has a strict policy of having open wounds and scabs that could potentially rip off covered at all times. Company members are expected to have all wounds that occur outside of training covered before coming to rehearsal. Wounds that occur during training must be treated by the following procedure:

If you rip, tear, blister, or otherwise incur an open wound during rehearsal you must:

- Notify instructor immediately, who will administer first aid.
- If bodily fluids (blood, puss, etc.) have made contact with equipment (aerial, mats, floor, props, etc.), please notify all students to avoid contact with that equipment until area has been sterilized.
- Do not return to training until wound has been cleaned, treated, and adequately covered.

#### **VI. Equipment Cleaning Protocol:**

The Circus Project makes every attempt to reduce the risk of disease transmission by employing proper cleaning protocols. Transmission of things like the cold and flu via circus equipment and training are common. Less likely than the cold and flu, but a LOT more dangerous is MSRA (a strain of staph that's resistant to the broad-spectrum antibiotics commonly used to treat it, which can be fatal). In order to avoid transmission of these and other diseases, Circus Project company members and staff shall ensure that the following tasks are completed thoroughly and on schedule, in addition to any "as needed" cleaning in the case of rips, burns, or other open wounds.

##### **Weekly:**

- Bleach down mats and other surfaces (tables, etc.)

##### **Monthly:**

- Wash all aerial silks (cold water, hang dry, preferably in direct sunlight)
- Bleach all juggling balls/rings/clubs
- Bleach circus equipment
- Bleach and re-tape all bar based equipment, including surface ropes (*bi-monthly*)

Note that this is on top of the "as needed" cleaning that we do. If someone bleeds or deposits other bodily fluids on the equipment, that equipment must be taken out of circulation until it has been properly cleaned. (That goes for trapeze bars, juggling balls, and everything else.)

Keep bleach or other disinfectant handy at all times. When you apply a bleach solution, remember that they all work during the evaporation of the solution. This means they work best on surfaces exposed to the open air, AND you have to let them dry, you can't dry them

with a towel and think you're done.

**VII. In Case of Emergency:**

- Notify instructor immediately. If instructor is injured or unavailable, call 911.
- If someone has fallen, DO NOT attempt to move the person, or encourage them to move themselves (if conscious).
- Emergency medical forms are located in the purple Circus Project binder marked "confidential" (you should not be opening this folder for any reason other than a medical emergency). This binder is located on our TCP self in the locked closet in the Activities Building Gym (which opens with the red key). If the instructor is injured or unavailable, please find the injured person's medical form, which should accompany the person to the hospital.
- Please make sure to alert instructor to any changes on your emergency medical forms such as medications, contact info, etc.

# 5. COMPANY MEMBER CONTRACT

I hereby acknowledge receipt of The Circus Project Company Member Handbook. I understand that it is my continuing responsibility to read and know its contents.

I have read, understand, and agree to all of the above.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



**APPENDIX B:**  
**The Circus Project Group Process Retreat Syllabus**  
**Co-facilitated by Jenn Cohen & Jennifer Kleskie**  
**January 16-19, 2009**

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**DAY 1: JANUARY 16, 2008**

**4pm - 7pm**

**1. Introduction to Retreat:** (Jenn Cohen)

• **Intentions for retreat:**

- I. Getting to know each other, our group, and ourselves on a deeper level: “what kind of magic happens here?” (what’s our group dreaming?) What are we doing together? What’s our vision? [Connecting with nature, let the ocean support you, our dreaming, guide our creativity...]
- II. Learning tools for communication & conflict resolution.
- III. Exploring and deciding on a theme for our winter 2009 show and discovering potential roles... (by Sunday afternoon)  
\*We’ll decide on theme together and we’ll discuss later how to make that decision.

• **Why PW:**

- I’ve used pw in the past with aerialists and with great results (Triptyc).
- Conflict = core of theatre work. Process Work = “sitting in the fire”: learning to tolerate and work in the heat of the conflict. Good theatre = working at this edge, tension captivates audience (tension within the self, in relationship) & moments of temporary resolution/release.
- PW works with emotions without getting too attached/stuck – interested in fluidity. Expanding range. Use emotion to create, then get out the way, get detached.
- The arts are about community, pw can help us focus on our sense of community.

• **Notes:**

- Process work is a tool for creating, just like the grid (Anne Bogart, “Viewpoints”), improvisation, free-writing, etc..
- In this method – PW – don’t worry about being theatrical, being good, right or wrong. The focus is on authenticity and awareness. (Later, if we desire, we can make it more theatrical)

**2. Introduction to Process Work:** (Jennifer Kleskie)

\* Jennifer Kleskie chose not to write out class plan.

**3. Break:** 10 min.

4. **Exercise 1: Discovering why you are here & your vision for the company** (Jenn Cohen)

\*Partially adapted from an exercise created by Jan Dworkin and Ingrid Rose for Cohort X.

**Frame:** Introduce “big U”, i.e., spirit, the Tao, your path. It’s not an accident that you come here to The Circus Project, otherwise you wouldn’t stay. “Something” draws you here. This exercise is to find out more about that something and to get more contact with it. It’s the mystery behind it that makes it authentic and powerful. We all have our rational reasons for doing things, and our irrational things. In this exercise we look for the mysterious, irrational thing - the experience that’s hard to talk about and name.

**Demo:** Jennifer Kleskie leads Jenn Cohen fully through exercise (at least part I)

**Part 1:**

- Describe/demonstrate energy sketch
  - you can always pass on sharing if it doesn’t feel right.
- 1) Ask yourself the question, “Why am I here with The Circus Project?” Write down the answer. (You may think you know why are here, but there may be a reason you have yet to discover.)
  - 2) Now, think of something that has or will or may disturb your reason for being here (blanker access)-(a difficult or critical energy, a role or person, or an obstacle that might get in the way of your reason for being here.) (Ex: bad health, school, an inner critic, feeling unloved or unheard, someone who told you can’t do it) Mention disturber as ally.
  - 3) Share these with the group in a few sentences. (esp. number 1, can skip #2)
  - 4) Spin. Do this by putting one foot down, and begin to pivot around it with you other foot. Go slowly or quickly depending upon your own process. (Do this with abandon & awareness)
  - 5) Feel the earth and the universe and continue moving until you almost feel dizzy. This can be very early or it can take time.
  - 6) At this point of dizziness, remain as lucid as possible and let your body move the way in which the earth and the universe direct it.
  - 7) Notice feelings of the earth, being moved, and let a quick thought or fantasy emerge which describes your movement experience. Let a very short story unfold from that fantasy.
  - 8) Make an energy sketch on a piece of paper of the story (big U).
  - 9) Now redraw it with a face and give it a name.
  - 10) Using a paper plate and the art supplies provided, translate this face into a mask you can wear.
  - 11) Put the mask on, and let it move you again. Feel how it moves, thinks, feels.
  - 12) Now, I’m going to ask this character a question: “What is your purpose/role here?”
  - 13) Find out why IT brought you here. What learning does the spirit want you to receive from The Circus Project? What is your real purpose here?
  - 14) Make a few notes.

15) Share with group.

**Part 2 (in partners)** Demo with facilitator's first!

- 1) Go back and revisit the disturbing energy that could potentially disrupt you in the project.
- 2) Direct partner to play the thing that disrupts (not the effect of the disruption). Does anyone have questions about what that would look like?
- 3) Now put on the (spirit, Tao, biggest- deepest part of you) mask.
- 4) Let those interact. Notice if you go back to your normal self, if you do, separate from partner, go back to the energy of mask, and then try again.
- 5) See what message it has for the disturbing character. How is this different from your everyday self?
- 6) Make a few notes.
- 7) Share with group.

**Part 3 (as a group)** No demo.

- 1) Put on mask and walk around the room. Stay inward, don't focus on others. Make your vision cloudy to stay within.
- 2) Find the way this character walks, moves, it's pace, etc..
- 3) Now slowly start to expand your vision, but keep it soft.
- 4) While walking, begin to notice those around you.
- 5) Now, without touching - slowly begin to let yourself interact, be affected, and affect others. If you lose it, go back to not relating.
- 6) How is that different than your normal way of relating?

5. **Orientation:** rules and helpful suggestions (Jenn Cohen)

✓ **Take Care of Yourselfes**

- Get plenty of sleep
- Get alone time
- Eat well, etc..
- No ocean swimming, esp. at night

✓ **Take Care of Each Other**

- Respect others: esp. if they're different than you. Be respectful of other's boundaries.
- Be on time (taking care of group and teachers)

✓ **Take Care of Property**

- Responsible for clean-up
- Shoes off, take care of house
- No acro!, if you need to burn off energy, go for a beach run

6. **Close:** good night, remember dreams, percolate themes...

## DAY 2: SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2008

11am - 2pm

1. **Check-in:** (Jenn Cohen)

- Check-in: where you're at in the moment
- Share dreams (write down themes on post-its and place on walls)

2. **Exercise 2: Working on conflict internally** (Jenn Kleskie)

**Frame:** There are a few different ways to work on conflicts in the world. One of the more popular pieces of advice given by therapists and trainers all over the world – is to have the conflict out with the other person. This is only one way to deal with a conflict.

Another way to work on conflicts is to do it within yourself. Just like a field atmosphere holds specific roles at particular times, so do individuals – have certain identities that they are familiar with while other parts of their identity remain hidden or less known to them. These can either be positive traits or negative traits that stand out to a person which can create conflict. The conflicting feelings can show up in terms of feeling jealous or competitive with someone. These feelings can also feel like annoyance or irritation. In either case, it is an internal conflict that can easily turn into an external one. One way to address this conflict without having to engage with the other party – is to work deeply on it within yourself by finding the marginalized parts in yourself. We will practice this now. This can be especially useful, if the person you are in a conflict with – could either be dangerous to you, or is not accessible –ie: say you have a crush on someone or admire a specific political figure or professional performer and don't have the option to interact with them. This could also work – if you are grieving the loss or death of someone. Finding the thing you miss about them inside yourself – can have healing benefits.

**Innerwork, Part I:**

1. Bring to mind a person, mythical figure, fictional character, spirit, whom you admire, look up to or wish you could be like.
2. Imagine you could become them. Crawl into their mind and imagine what it would be like to think like them, walk through the world in their shoes. Do that now – act them out a bit – move or walk around as you imagine they might do it. Inhabit the thing they have or do that you want.
3. Notice what this feels like and write it down – make a note about what in yourself feels different.
4. Ask yourself where in your world, within the Circus Project, around your friends, family, etc – where you could use this experience more. Find out where it is missing in your life.

5. Now imagine you could be the thing you imagined in that circumstance – what would you do differently? What advice does this figure, person, have for you in being in that situation?
6. Make a note for yourself of what comes to you.

***Innerwork, Part 2:***

1. This exercise is similar but a bit more challenging.
2. Now think of someone who bothers or irritates you.
3. Again, imagine you could crawl into their skin and become them. Imagine how they think, move, walk, sit, stand, move.
4. Do it now – act like them or move in a way that resembles how you think they are. Sit with this experience for a while and either actually do or imagine doing the thing that is annoying to you. Now do this – until you find something that you like about doing or imagining doing this thing that is annoying to you. Make a note about the thing that you like – the thing that feels good or satisfying to you about this.
5. Now, imagine where you could use that experience that felt right to you in your life. Make a note about that now. Notice if there was something surprising for you. This is getting to the essence of an experience and really knowing how to work deeply on a conflict within yourself.

**Notes:** You don't need to share this experience with anyone else unless there is something helpful or beneficial that the other might gain by hearing of your experience.

3. **Break:** 10 min. (gossip for relationship work partners for fishbowl?)

4. **Fishbowl:** Jennifer Kleskie

- 2 people who want to work on conflict in the middle.
- Metacommunicate: 2 people work for the whole group. Group = important for holding the container.
- Debrief/take questions.

5. **Write themes on board:** (Jenn Cohen)

- Themes/ideas/images that came up in last night's dreams, today's day dreams, exercises, etc.
- Everyone look at themes, and over lunch, think of one you are interested in working on (doesn't have to be yours).

**4pm – 7pm**

1. **Soundscapes:** (Jenn Cohen)

- Purpose: to gather energy back after lunch, connect energetically with group, feel/listen into present atmosphere.
- One person tone.

- Other's add either tone, sound, melody, etc.. RYTHMICALLY
- MAYBE: Once everyone is going, you can experiment with adding on in new ways.

## 2. Intro to Group Process:

- **Purpose/Goals/Definition:** (Jenn Cohen)
  - GP = about finding the deeper and mysterious/un-seeable parts of the process in a group.
  - Goal = to help what's in a group arise and be seen. Personal goal is to not have anything left over. If I have something to say, say it, and early on... so you don't leave with, "if only I had, that person was an ass, etc."
  - Based on the concept of **Deep Democracy:** (*give definition*)
  - *Not about solving all the problems, but focusing on the process.*
- **Applications to Theatre:** (Jenn Cohen)
  - Finding all the angles/polarities/conflicts within a particular theme.
  - Understanding and developing all the different roles.
  - Staying with the conflict/tension and also finding the moments of temporary resolution.
  - Bringing what's in the field up – good theater is about making visible what's invisible in the field (same as gp, Laban).
- **Key Terms:** (Jennifer Kleskie)
  - **Compassion:**
  - **Levels of Experience:**
  - **Levels of Group Work:** individual, small group, relationship, world, etc.. happens on every level. If I'm feeling something, I'm feeling it for the group, but I can also resolve it individually for the group.
  - **Roles:** bigger than the individual and the individual is bigger than the role.
  - **Field**
  - **Hot spots**
  - **Ghosts**
  - **De-escalation:** noticing when things come down just a bit. Now's a time to stop, very imp. If we don't, this is how wars start.
  - **Other terms, etc...**
- **Some things to expect in GP:** (Jenn Cohen)
 

\*Excerpts from a WW handout.

  - Chaos
  - Conflict & intense emotions
  - Avoidance of conflict and intense emotions
  - Many potential leaders present
  - Criticism of facilitation
  - Silent people (often hold the key to group processes)
  - 1-10% of people will be dissatisfied with what happened. These folks carry the beginnings of the next group process.

- **Helpful things to take care of yourself during a Group Process:** (Jenn Cohen)
  - Believe that what you experience is personal, but also a role. Your experiences belong to the group and are needed for the field to know itself. This is esp. true for silent people.
  - Allow yourself to become one-sided and express yourself fully (authentically). In addition, allow yourself to feel pulled to switch sides too. (reference an exercise)
  - If you feel yourself going into a trance, get up and move. Also feel free to come and go from the room (law of two feet, OST).
  - If you feel too shy to speak up, ask someone near you to support you.

3. **Break:** 10 min.

4. **Group Process:** (facilitated by Jenn Cohen & Jenn Kleskie)

- Sort themes on the board using sound first. Narrow down to top 2-4 & spin pen.
- **Notes for us:**
  - Look for ghost roles!!!
  - Levels
  - Hold down moments of temporary resolution/lightness/atmosphere change
- **Options if stuck:** Call a time out. Take 2 min. to feel your mood and find a gesture or movement for it. Can bring in individually or have group process continue non-verbally. OR, where you're at in relationship to the chosen theme.

5. **Debrief:** (Jenn Cohen & Jenn Kleskie)

- Feelings that need attending to
- Framing for the group (us)
- Discuss what we discovered and jot down notes on the board about polarities, roles, etc.. (Post-its)
- Get **feedback** on how it's going so far.

### **DAY 3: SUNDAY, JANUARY 18. 2008**

**11am – 2pm**

1. **Check-in:**

- Check-in: where you're at in the moment
- Share dreams (write down themes)

2. **Exercise 3: Integration** (Jennifer Kleskie)

1. What is the biggest learning that you had from your time with the company so far? Either since you started or during this retreat? Take some time to think and journal about that now. \*how to hold the space for closure – sit with something difficult...feel a feeling – find your strength from that...

2. Identify 3 of your greatest strengths and write that down. How have you used these strengths today, throughout the weekend and during your time with the company? Lots of silence – process this? Speak to the silence...
3. Identify one place where you feel like you are growing/developing or most challenged in your life. Write about that experience now.
4. Now forget about that for a minute.
5. Think about the Big U character that you got in touch with on the first night and its purpose at that time.
6. Either get your mask or access the experience and state that you found by walking around and moving or standing as that character would.
7. From that place, how would your big U character move forward, knowing about the thing that challenges you now and remembering your three greatest strengths. Think about that now and write that story.
8. Now imagine yourself, one year from now: How does your life look at that point?

3. **Break:** 10 min.

4. **Fish Bowl:** (Jennifer Kleskie)

5. **Discuss/Decide how to decide on theme:** (Jenn Cohen)

- Vote
- Spin pen
- Do a group process (help them get into the deepest part of why they want it)

**4pm – 7pm**

1. **Soundscape:** (Jenn Cohen)

- Same concept as before, but first, touch in with your breath to where you are in the moment. Feel into anything that's still disturbing you. Use your voice (no words) to express this through the soundscape. Try to get it all out, so you're not holding it in your body anymore.

2. **Group Process** (Jenn Cohen & Jennifer Kleskie)

3. **Break:** 10 min.

4. **Whatever is needed:** ???

**DAY 4: MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2008**

**11am – 2pm**

1. **Check-in:**

- Check-in: where you're at in the moment
- Share dreams (write down themes)

## 2. **Clean-up:** ????

- Anything that needs to be addressed in the group or between people before we close? (let's keep this short)

## 3. **Exercise with energy sketch for equipment design:** (Jenn Cohen)

- Define flirt: image, feeling that catches your attention
- On a piece of paper, draw 9 big boxes, 3 on top and 3 in the middle and 3 on the bottom.
- In one hand, place the theme of our big show.
- In another hand, place your reason for being here (from ex. 1)
- Slowly move your big U hand, towards the theme of the show hand.
- Catch 3 flirts on the way.
- In each top box, draw a cartoon of the flirt that grabbed your attention
- Now, in the lower boxes, draw an energy sketch of that cartoon.
- Look at that energy sketch, and see if it lends itself to a design for equipment.
- In the bottom boxes, draw that equipment.

## 4. **Break:** 10 min.

## 5. **Finding the Group Direction Exercise (Vectors):** (Jenn Cohen)

\*Exercise designed in collaboration with Kate Jobe.

\*Demo inside first, do exercise on beach.

**Frame:** finding the big U for our group, helping with teamwork.

### ***Part I:***

- 1) Have each person walk one vector for where they bring their "best" and their "worst" to The Circus Project, then walk the sum. (*Frame as: everyone has their gifts and what they're growing around*)

### ***Part II:***

- 1) One at a time, we'll walk the vectors of the group, starting from the last person's ending point, and marking the starting point.
- 2) All together as group, we walk from the starting point to the ending point (sum).
- 3) Each person finds a movement and sound that represents their experience.
- 4) Walk the sum again until all the movements become one movement and sound.
- 5) Discuss/share

## 6. **Feedback Forms**

## 7. **Goodbye!** (go over next week's training schedule – off until Tues, the 27th)

### Alternate Exercises/Possibilities:

- **Discuss High & Low Dreams / Fishbowl:**
  - **High Dream:** Your deepest longing or wish for the relationship. This takes time to find. (the thing that's potent about the high dream is when you go beyond a wish or desire to identify the yearning)
  - **Low Dream:** What happens to you when the high dream doesn't come true or seem possible.
- **JC should work on relationship with someone in the group:** don't use JK to facilitate, model working on own relationship conflict.
- **Open Seat:** Work with someone individually in the center on the theme.
- **Mind Maps:**
  - Costumes, equipment, color, atmosphere, action, roles, names, etc...
  - Start with theme in middle of circle
  - Train of consciousness to separate circles
  - List in order
  - Share
- **Meditation:** guide them through meditation, deep breathing, getting breath in to all body parts (chakras), so/hum. Walking meditation on beach? ("present moment, only moment")
- **Exercise: Working with Conflict** (Jenn Cohen)  
\*Exercise adapted in part from WW training. Notes from Kate Jobe, Frame from Jenn Cohen.

**Frame:** (Jenn Cohen) The goal of this exercise is to learn to stand on both sides in a conflict – the side you feel closest to, and the side you feel furthest from. Notice where it happens organically and then switch. Notice where you are then go back and forth, notice edges between taking your side and other's side too. Goal = for you to stand for both sides, then you're not polarized anymore. Most people have an edge to taking their own side. Once you really take your side, you're no longer polarized.

Note: we can also do this with the polarities we find in themes.

- 1) Think of a conflict you have with someone outside of this group (don't pick a really hot conflict, pick something small - We're practicing skills, then you can go to big things.)
- 2) Ask yourself if it's OK to engage in this. Can you explore it more. If yes, go on, if not, work on why not, or find another one you can work on.
- 3) Think about the conflict, and notice, are you closer to your own side or the other person's side? Start wherever you are.

- 4) Take one side fully (partner helps by playing the other side). Go as far as you can with it. See if you can complete the point of view or, you find yourself changing sides.
- 5) Take the other side fully (partner helps by playing your original side), in a way that's authentic for you. Also ask if OK (not abusive).
- 6) Shapeshift into that being and experiment with this role.

**Notes:**

- Help them deepen each part by noticing the quality of their signals, then help them deepen it. (vs. effort or space)
- Be aware of the tendency to resolve or negotiate in the role play. DIALOGUE Don't get trapped in the words, - keep an eye on the signals(MOVEMENT, TONE). Watch out for consensus reality thinking, activism, and how your own issues may be for or against a particular role.

- **Exercise: Accusations**

**Frame:** (Jenn Cohen)

- NOT EASY, BUT POINT OF BEING HUMAN AND THEATRE, BE ABLE TO EMBODY DIFFERENT ROLES AND NOT JUST STUCK ON YOUR OWN SIDE.
- Accusations are the most basic and common form of conflict. A lot of times people say it's a projection, take it back, but we like to think about it as part of the dreaming process, because it promotes relationship, and other person probably is seeing something about me that I can't see for myself, but not necessarily in a way that's useful because it's hurtful.
- If I deny an accusation, I'm basically denying your reality and saying you're crazy, so what do you do with your perception-- it leaves a gap between us. Picking up the accusation is a way to close the gap and honor the other's perception.
- The first thing we instinctively do is say, "no, you're crazy and wrong", that's normal.
- If it doesn't work: ask yourself do you want to be right or related?

**Demo:** (Jenn Cohen demonstrates with accusation from group member?)

\* Exercise from Kate Jobe.

- 1) Think of something someone has accused you of (small thing). Discuss with your partner.
- 2) If it's right for you (meaning if it's not abusive or doesn't put you down), pick up 1/10 of 1% of that accusation. Find where you agree with it and it's authentic for you... in what way is it right?
- 3) Then see if it has an effect on partner – play it out with partner and see if it changes them. Keep experimenting until you find a way to change them.



## APPENDIX C: Exercises in Character Development

**The following are some exercises in character development Kate Jobe and I came up with to work with The Circus Project:**

**(Kate):**

1. Find an arm movement
2. Notice a flirt (i.e., a basket)
3. Keep doing the movement, and expand it into a story (i.e., the basket is on a table in a hut in the forest)

**Improv rules (Jenn & Kate):**

1. Yes, and
2. Don't stop until it's over
3. Stop when it's over
4. Do it a second time (and third) and each time, exaggerate it.
5. Silent first time, second can add phrases, but not full sentences.

**Future options (Jenn):**

- Grid (Viewpoints)
- Character histories
- Restaurant
- Give them one simple move on equipment – how would their character do it?

**Finding your character in your body (anchoring): Kate**

1. Hold your character in your mind
2. Scan self for where that character is in your body. Irrational (i.e., inside of spinal column)
3. Feel it (you may start to get images)
4. Let character move you. Not how she would move, but her energy.
5. When you're in contact with that, ask: is there a spot on the earth that has a connection to that energy? (i.e., light reflecting on the ocean)
6. → equipment. Find a **signature movement** for that character.
7. Let that signature movement teach you something about your character that you didn't already know.

**Saying goodbye to someone you love: Jenn (adapted from Sue Morrison)**

1. Anchor character
2. Find that character's best friend, most beloved: object, person, animal, creature, etc.. (everyone is attached to something)
3. Sit with them for the last 15 min. ever, before you must put them on the boat forever. Play, dance, talk, cry, (aloud), whatever you and your friend do.

4. Take them to the boat to say goodbye forever.
5. Say goodbye. Walk away.
6. Run back to boat to say, feel, express whatever is left.
7. Walk away for the last time.
8. Write: What did this teach you about your character? What is most beloved? How does this character deal with loss? Etc.

### Vocal warm-up (Jenn):

1. Stretch face, add sound
  2. Massage face, add sound
  3. Jaw exercise
  4. Scales
  5. Massage break
  6. Toning with vowels
  7. Create group phrase (everyone adds words, can be nonsensical) ??
  8. All together: say sentence with tone coming from different chakras, different facial expressions, just to give them an opportunity to try out different vocal styles. ??
  9. **Anchor in character**
  10. **Go back to scales, find character's range** (all at same time, can be same as others – we'll differentiate later)
  11. **What part of body characters breath, voice comes from ??**
- ?? = we can do it or not, depending on time and how it flows with what you want to do.
  - **Bold** = with character (normal = vocal warm-up)

### 12. Write what you learned!!

**Warm-up:** Pass the ball with spontaneous movement.

### Exercise (Kate & Jenn):

- 1) Have kids spread out around room with their invitations in envelopes.
- 2) One at a time (others freeze), when we call their names (we should find something else to call them, so as not to trigger their primary process), they open the envelope, read the invitation, and have a reaction.
- 3) After we go around the room once with that, we'll go to the next thing (what's after their reaction, prepare to leave their spot, go to boat, etc.)
- 4) Then we do the whole exercise one more time, but this time, they all go through it at the same time (to practice not relating...)
- 5) Write what they learned. Set what we liked. Video.

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# March Fourth Marching Band



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