

## Paratheatre Maraton

(from the journals of Jessica Bockler)

On Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> January, I got the chance to spend time with the group, as they met in one of their regular rehearsal spaces at UCP, United Cerebral Palsy, on East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in Manhattan. I knew from Matt that Dzieci worked extensively in clinical settings; as such, the company's base at UCP was no surprise. The meeting began quietly in a circle. Again, looking inward, then looking outward whilst continuing to look inward, the company members made contact with each other. Principles which Matt had explained to me one and a half years ago in our first interview I now witnessed in action. Dzieci works with attention. One of the ensemble members, Bob, described the work as a 'double pointed arrow', pointing at the other, as well as at the self. In all their work, Dzieci members strive to be fully attentive to their colleagues and spectators whilst maintaining self-awareness.

Matt asked the group what was necessary for the marathon. Some group members raised individual concerns about their attendance, explaining that they would struggle to be present for the entire 24 hours. Matt firmly questioned their level of commitment to the work. Full attendance was not a personal choice, but a matter of necessity. What would the marathon demand of each person? What would it demand of the group?

Several working principles were discussed. The marathon would be facilitated non-verbally. No words of explanation would be spoken. Matt likened it to a *Beehive*, rooting it firmly in Grotowski's paratheatrical working phase. The group agreed that the marathon would be less structured than previous ones, allowing for the spontaneous development of actions and relationships. The group noted that the lack of structure would need to be balanced with keen attention to the energy of the group and of individual participants. 24 hours is a long time. A rhythm of action and repose would need to be established and maintained throughout for the marathon to function. Matt requested that Dzieci members would take care of the participants. Leaving participants should be guided from the room. Entry and exit should unfold with full awareness, thus containing group energy by causing as little disruption as possible.

At one point in the discussion, the group was joined by a patient of UCP who was curious about Dzieci's work. His name was Michael. He was welcomed into the circle and after a round of introductions Matt prompted Bob to introduce the group to the song we would be working with during the marathon: It was the Balkan folk song "Lume, Lume". – When I heard that we would be working with a song which the Dzieci members did not know ... I was surprised and sceptical. How much of the song could be transmitted if those who taught it only learned it a few days earlier?

Definitely not a Workcenter approach! Could the song still function as a work on the self? Or perhaps that wasn't its purpose here?

Matt closed the meeting, giving the group a preparatory task: From now until the marathon we were to pause and check in with ourselves at every door knob we would come across. I loved the task – it resonated with me, for prior to my departure, Les and I had affixed a Mezuzah at our front door; and I had repeatedly forgotten to remember, pause and check in when crossing the threshold. This would be a good practice for me! – And so it would be for others. As we left the room ... Matt promptly forgot about the door knob. Ah, it is the intention that counts ... isn't it? ☺

It is the morning of the marathon. Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009. I have been up since 5.15am and travelled with Dzieci member Jesse from the Bronx to our marathon workshop space. Jesse ... I have not mentioned him before, my most charming and unusual host: a walking encyclopaedia of religious and spiritual practices from around the world! A recently initiated Babaolorisha, or priest, in the Caribbean religion known as Santería, Jesse seems to know as much about esoteric Islam, Buddhism, witchcraft, medieval mysticism, the occult, alchemy and herbalism ... as he does about his own current spiritual practice. Dzieci's members are most fascinating characters!

We have arrived at our workshop space. I'm not sure where we are – still half asleep I followed Jesse out of the house and into a taxi which took us straight to some high-rise building in downtown Manhattan. Downtown ... or midtown? We climbed out of the car and into an elevator, right up to the tenth floor. Tenth or eleventh? Here's to a good start! We're out of the elevator and into a medium sized rehearsal studio, half the room is covered in blue velvet curtains which conceal mirrors. At the far end of the space is a large table, onto which the Dziecis are unpacking food stuffs for the day to come. The group are chatting as they set up the space. At 6.45am Matt turns to me, sends me outside to where the rest of the participants will be. I take my belongings, step outside of the space and wait. A few minutes later some of the Dziecis emerge, now changed into workshop clothes. They stand or sit in silence. We wait. Slowly the marathon participants arrive, largely men and women my age, some a little younger, some a little older. Two women stand out to me as distinctly older than the rest of the group. They all wait patiently as Matt quietly checks in with each individual, answering questions, connecting, taking payment. Dzieci member Bob guides me to Matt, then into the room to the back where I change into my workshop clothes. I leave my journal and take only a pullover and a pair of socks into the working area. I have decided not to take notes during the marathon, for notes would take me into a too detached, too analytical space. I need to be immersed, I am certain that I will remember whatever is necessary. "What is necessary." A phrase I have adopted from Matt. I like it. It is undoubtedly a Gurdjieff thing.

Following Bob, I begin to move through the space, connecting with others, making eye contact and attempting to move in unison. Bob and Megan share with me a movement which I believe I am to copy. It seems simple at first – a greeting, a bow, just a way to say ‘hello’ ... but I soon see more of the complexity of the movement which I sense ought to be followed precisely. One hand on the heart, let’s say the right, the left raised above the head, palm facing outward ... as if shielding the eyes from the sun? A step back with the right foot, a sort of bow, looking downward, a pause. Then two steps forward with the right leg whilst the left hand travels to the heart, swaps place with the right. The right hand now rises above the head whilst I step back with my left foot, a bow, a pause. The right hand returns to the heart whilst the left foot takes two steps forward. --- So the movement continues, and continues, and continues ... alternating ... meeting the others ... seeing all ... moving with them for some time. Some amusement rises within me. A number of the participants seem to mistake me for a Dzieci. They’re taking their cues for movement from me, they follow my patterns, my mistakes. How many others are there? Perhaps 15? And how many Dziecis? Maybe 10? I’m getting slightly bored. How much longer are we going to move this way ... when will the energy pick up? I want more ... I want to be swept away ... I want to lose myself. - Really? Jessica, always impatient!

Eventually the energy picks up, we are moving faster as a group, swarming amongst each other. I try to see the group as a whole whilst remaining aware of the individuals and myself. I try to follow the currents of the swarm. I love swarming! A circle forms and people begin to dance in its centre ... on their own, then in twos. I am drawn into the centre, Rebecca is there, suddenly, her presence is raising my physical energy, this is what I was hungering for ... vibrant exchange ... high energy, more more! Rebecca pushes me out of the circle – I realise that I lost myself for a moment, I feel embarrassed. Have I taken up too much space and time? Have I been inconsiderate? I try to let go and return to the present moment, but my commentary niggles just under the surface. “Why are you here? What do you want?” – I want ... I want to work like this all the time! But I can’t! I have no committed group of people to work with - and I don’t have the time to build a group whilst writing my PhD. I tried to build a group, it worked - but only for a brief while. Writing has to be my practice, at least for now, but it’s not what I want. Or is it? – I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like wanting to explode. Lose myself. Get rid of that constant commentary which seems to come with the task of writing a PhD. Nonsense, the commentary would be there anyway. It has nothing to do with the PhD – BUT BUT ... the PhD seems to bring it out! Always analytical, always reflective. Always witnessing AND categorising. – Enough! Shut up!

We stand in silence. A circle of bodies, faces, eyes, alive from hours of movement.

Bob shares with us the first part of *Lume*. I listen intently, try to capture every nuance, articulation, inflection, pitch, melody, I try to catch the quality of the song, its earthy presence. Soon, my throat feels slightly sore – my throat, it is my weak point, my Achilles heel. Singing, I have always loved it – and I have always feared it. I remembered one of my acting teachers at LIPA questioning my partaking in an audition for a musical --- “Jessica, why did you do it? You’re not a singer!” --- I remember the shock which her words instilled ... I had participated in singing classes, I had developed some confidence in my voice ... for the first time in my life I had begun to sing alone in front of others ... and she had knocked me back. One thoughtless comment. I remembered my subsequent visit to an ENT specialist ... because my throat was aching, constantly contracting, forcing me to swallow - and there always seemed to be a lump ... and I couldn’t sing without having to swallow over and over ... cutting the songs, swallowing them into pieces. And what did the specialist say? --- “Jessica, you shouldn’t go for a profession which requires you to speak much – your vocal chords are not very strong.” --- How is that for advice when you’re half way through an acting degree?

I battled on. I became more aware. I began to understand the deeper connections between my voice and my vocation, my calling ... my struggles and challenges in this lifetime. I continued to sing. I was surprised by moments of freedom when all aching contractions momentarily subsided and I was flowing. I had discovered glimpses of such freedom when working with Gey Pin Ang, a former member of the Grotowski Workcenter in Pontedera. She had pushed me, shouted at me, relentlessly, pulling my hair, correcting my spine and posture, admonishing me when my attention wandered from the service of the song to something I thought it needed. It needed nothing. Nothing but my service, my utter attention to every detail, every subtle note as it unfolded in the space around, my complete surrender to its life which was also mine - but not the ego’s life, driven by needs and desires. I was free in those moments ... when the grip of the ego subsided and Jessica could be more fully present. And I knew that this was the work, something of the core of the work on the self.

We sing *Lume* ... I try to let it sink into the body, I try to be with the song – but it is so difficult to hear. So many voices, so many subtle deviations from the melody, creating so much white noise! Why are we singing? What is the purpose of *Lume*? What can it give to the group? What can we give? --- Why am I so worried? Why am I once more imposing the ways of the Workcenter upon Dzieci?

The group begins to move. Swarm once more through the space. Singing. Always singing. Bodies are now falling into outstretched arms, forwards, sideways, backwards. Matt offers me his hands – I

climb into his palm even before other palms are in place. So eager, eh? I climb higher, soon stand on shoulders, looking down into the crowd. Matt signals for me to drop backwards. A sudden rush of excitement, a moment of arrest, breath held, hands raised to cover my face – no ... YES! Sure! Hurray! I let go, breathe, and drop backwards, no idea who is in place to catch me. I have in recent years found that I trust others more than I trust myself. – Really?? Come on Jessica! It's all part of your drama!! – Anyway, I let go with ease. Dropping backwards is fun!

One by one the others are lifted, climb onto shoulders, drop backwards into outstretched arms. I let one woman climb onto my shoulders, two helping hands immediately hold my waist, stabilise my core as the woman's body weighs heavily on me. The next moment she has fallen, the group rocks her like a baby, then lowers her feet to the ground, then tosses her backward, forward, sideways before coming to momentary stillness. She stands, receives the group, still singing, she beams, radiates delight, merges with the group. Another takes her place. I see some Dzieci members hold one of the older women, comforting her, she looks thunderstruck. She doesn't want to face the climb? The fall?

I am in the centre again. One of the other workshop participants has pulled me out of the crowd. I would love to climb and fall again – but I know whose turn it is. I move towards the older woman, I smile, "No, no..." she whispers, I kneel before her. Her hesitant, unsteady feet climb upon my back. She sways, moves along. The group takes her higher. Singing, always singing. She cries. "No, I can't..." She falls and is caught, so many arms and hands holding her firmly, lowering her to the ground, gently. I am moved by her journey. We all need to practice letting go.

We split into groups of three or four. I am with Rebecca and one other participant. Rebecca lowers her to the floor, we stretch her, massage her, singing. Always singing. My voice is no longer aching. I have dropped into a soft chant, I am no longer concerned with finding the right nuances in the song. So, this is 'passive stretching' ... I'm now busy trying to find the right stretches for the relaxed person on the ground. Matt joins our group. My turn! I intend to lower myself to the ground but Matt stops me, signals that I should simply let myself fall – I'm more than happy to please! I am caught almost immediately by Rebecca. I'm lowered to the ground, stretched, twisted, shaken. Matt digs his fingers into my face, it hurts... but I am used to pain. It's part of my Aikido practice. I feel the pain, breathe into it. I have to keep singing! - Oh, but it doesn't sound good! - What's good? What's the point? Just let go! Matt now digs his fingers into points all over my body – some make me giggle – I'm really ticklish!

Was it before the stretches that we had our first break, or after? 24 hours are a long time to remember in fully-fledged detail without a single written note! Frequent breaks punctuate our activities. Soon I become aware of a purposeful rhythm of action and repose; and the repose does not break the rhythm of our interaction. It is part of our journey. Early on, two Dziecis pass around the circle with a bowl and a jug of water, letting each person drink as the others remain present and witness. Similarly, food is brought into the circle and shared. We do not help ourselves ... we feed each other. It's fun to be fed, certainly in this context, fun, a bit awkward perhaps – feeding is an act of intimacy. I feel more connected to some people in the circle than others. I sense that some don't want to make intimate contact. They avoid eye contact. I am not shy. I like the inquisitive, sensual play of our feeding time.

When we come to eat our first larger meal, I feel some confusion. Some of the Dziecis appear to be preparing food for the rest of the group – whilst others are clearly focused on filling their own plates. I see Matt angry, admonishing their complacency? Some Dziecis appear more alert and proactive than others, Rebecca certainly seems a driving force in the group. I see her observe, notice and act on impulse – but not arbitrarily. Instead, she seems attuned to Matt, his intentions, his intuitions on where to take the group. I see both act on impulse ... following the energy of the group, helping it take whatever next step may be necessary.

The energy of the group is a precarious business. The door into the working space is opened and closed almost continuously throughout the day, and all too often I am aware of its energy-draining pulse – for most of the people entering and exiting appear to make little effort to cross the threshold without disturbance. Could this not have been made clear to the participants at the beginning? A number of times I feel the energy of the group dip particularly low ... and I ponder upon the effectiveness of Matt's choice to let this marathon be less structured than others. The lack of structure does not appear to encourage the participants to take the lead and shape the activities of the group. I know only from my presence at the planning meeting that such proactivity would have been welcomed by Dzieci. But throughout the marathon I see no obvious invitation by the group which could have empowered the participants to take the initiative. The seeming lack of invitation inhibits my own impulses and actions throughout the marathon. I constrain myself to following the swarm, reminding myself that I am here to see Dzieci and not to share what I may have to offer. – Really? But is that not missing the point? Does my full participation and presence not also necessitate my taking the initiative where appropriate? – What exactly would have been appropriate ... and what would have been crossing the line?

Matt turns the group's attention to exercise mats stored at one side of the room. Quickly they are unfolded and lined up, creating a corridor in the space. Matt and Rebecca demonstrate the next task: Still singing *Lume* they tumble along the corridor, bodies relaxed, continuously falling and rising back to their feet, bodies intertwined, looking incredibly drunk. Of course, the purpose of the exercise is not to simulate intoxication, I remind myself, but an attempt to approach 'physical relaxation in action' ... a lovely pair of opposites to explore! Yes? - As soon as I stand at the edge of the mat I become caught up in what some part of me thinks may be expected ... 'playing at being drunk' – surely not?!? "I'm no good at playing drunk," flashes through my mind – because ... I have never been drunk! I have no idea what it's like. I've never felt compelled to try! – Such a simple exercise, and I'm already beating myself up. "I didn't do that well. I missed the point. Why can't I just be here?!"

Throughout we're still singing. Always singing. We end up each on our own, spending a few moments on the mat, singing to the group, alone. For the first time individual voices can be heard. There are some lovely sounds in the group! But retention of the song is poor, many people distort the words and melody. The song is passed to me ... I pick it up ... I'm shaking. My heart is beating fast, I feel a sudden rush of energy from my chest through my arms into my hands – just the way I felt when I was looking at the mural at the Rockefeller Center earlier in the week (a task which Matt had set: to visit the mural and to observe my physical response). A reminder of the work which lies before me? My hands are on fire! I breathe, try to release my fearful grip, I try to allow the song to take flight – am I again trying too hard? Something loosens up. I see Jesse seeing me ... I am for a moment only aware of the song's echo in his eyes. I want to remain there – but I am compelled to turn, make contact with the rest of the group – which is what I ought to do? ... I move too quickly, my eyes begin to dart across the space, they stray for a split second in Matt's direction, then drift back without having made contact; and, as if with a mind of their own they come back into focus on one of the other participants - a hesitant connection. Awkward. Moments later I have passed on the song, I see others take the space and take their time and play! – I judge myself once more. "There was a possibility for something. I killed it. Why didn't I take the time I needed? Why was I afraid to let the song speak through me?" – And why am I always so hard on myself? Why is nothing ever good enough?

The mats are rearranged into a square. Our next challenge ... appears to me like a fight in twos. Pair by pair, attack by attack. Jesse calls me onto the mat. I'm overcome by my Aikido practice, I bow as I would when entering a dojo, then throw a series of kicks and punches at Jesse. As he retaliates I throw myself in forward ukemis across the mat. "You're showing off, Jessica! Stop it – be with Jesse

and notice what he is doing, respond appropriately!” But I was just beginning to have some fun! Jesse is off the mat, another opponent attacks. I’ve once more lost focus. God, am I wrapped up in myself!!

Here we are again, singing. Bob is teaching us another section of *Lume*. The group’s progress seems slow, tedious. My throat aches once more. I notice the clock and the slow passing of time. I wonder why I am here.

We’re back up on the mat in pairs. I am sneaking up on Matt. I followed an impulse ... for a brief moment I am once more flowing freely ... playing. I try to sneak up further, but my feet move noisily across the mat. Now he has become aware of me. I have a bow and arrow, I point it at Matt and --- as soon as he turns and sees me, the river of impulses arrests. Nothing comes. Caught in his gaze like a deer in the headlights of a car I freeze – I know I need to act but I remain perfectly still. Beyond the point of no return. Matt takes the initiative – I respond, forgetting all about my bow and arrow. My actions don’t make sense, I no longer understand what I am doing – what was the task? What am I doing? Am I supposed to emerge from this fight as the winner? Matt is off the mat, and I’m just lying there. In all my stupidity! Nothing is coming!!! Someone else is on the mat. – Ah, I am still supposed to be alive! And now I can die – yeah, anything, just get me off this mat. Hopeless. - I just don’t do this often enough. If I could have another go ...

Yvonne arrives, joins the group. The series of showdowns end with her and Jesse – who makes a valiant effort in teaching Yvonne *Lume* through call and response, paired with actions for each phrase. The singing continues, floods and ebbs through the room. We are once more preparing food. The chopping and cutting of vegetables feels more real to me than most of what I have done thus far. There is no ambiguity here: Food needs to be prepared, so that it can be eaten. I don’t need to demonstrate anything, so I just do. The song flows naturally with my actions. I’m at ease. Of course, I didn’t have to demonstrate anything earlier, either. Hm...

We flow into stretches, gymnastic and acrobatic exercises. I feel utterly at ease here. I’m keen to try different lifts, stretches and backward bends. I love challenging myself through such exercises. I attempt to lift several people onto my thighs whilst standing, we wobble about, eventually we manage. I want to try again! Keep trying. The mats are once more rearranged ... back into a corridor. It’s time for ... forward rolls! Oh yes! Someone takes position half way along the mat: offering a body bridge, across which we need to leap and land in a forward roll. I can’t wait ... and eagerly line up. People are flying across the bridge with ease. It’s Rebecca’s turn. Her rather more timid and cautious forward roll complete surprises me. And then it’s my turn ... and Jesse is there. He stands in front of



me with a big grin. "You can do this one!" I hear him say in my mind ... Yeah sure. I know this one. A tiger leap. He'll stand there and he'll drop to the floor as soon as I approach and leap into the forward roll. Easy! I run, jump ... and crash into Jesse with an almighty bump. I hear roaring laughter in the group. I'm grinning, in a stunned sort of way – I haven't hurt myself and Jesse seems OK – but I'm confused. He didn't do what I expected him to! Insecurity surges up inside. Damn it. I so love doing this – just let me have another go and roll over a normal bridge! But Matt is already on the mat in a headstand legs split. Could I leap through his legs? Yes, probably – but my confidence is knocked. I don't want to hurt him or myself. I hesitate, I can't bring myself to try. Several other Dzieci members have a go. Megan throws herself in a courageous leap and earns the applause of the group. I signal that I want to try a lower hurdle first! Two guys line up in bridges, one behind the next. I finally have another go. This time I land badly. I have spent so much time in Aikido, unlearning the forward roll in favour of a roll over the left or right shoulder that I mess up my first attempt at a straight roll. Great! But what does it matter? I'm frustrated. It matters to me. So, more relentless self-judgement then, eh? We move on ... in my eyes too quickly. I wasn't done! I wanted more! I hadn't overcome my inhibition, my frustration.

We play with another trust exercise: One by one people run and leap forward into a corridor of arms. Lovely. No problem. Any time. Certainly easier than tiger leaps! I realise that some of the group had not participated in the forward rolls – this seems more appropriate for them. Is this why Rebecca had done such a careful forward roll? To encourage those less confident? Well, now everybody has a go, the groups seems in high spirit, energised.

The energy changes as the supportive hands change into a tunnel of resistance. Once more, each person is charged with running up to the group, but this time, the corridor becomes an obstacle. As each person struggles to reach the other end of the tunnel, hands cling on, hold back, forcing the person to fight their way through to the other end. It's hard work. At the other end waits one person with open arms, ready to embrace the struggling soul. After fighting their way through people drop into the open arms like babies, singing *Lume*, singing softly. I drop into Megan's arms, I sing, but I am not relaxed, then tears well up, I let myself drop a little, be held and cry. I am fed up with trying so hard. It's all a part of my wanting to be liked. Aha...

It is now late at night. We have been working continuously for over 16 hours, I'm tired yet also energised, more quiet inside yet still commenting, laughing at myself, and yet crying. Having let go, a part of me still ponders what it means to let go. Crazy...

We begin what feels like a walking meditation, walking very slowly, lining up behind Matt, rotating inward in an ever narrower circle. I feel the shift of my weight from one leg to the next as I follow Matt's step with as much precision as I can muster. I look straight ahead, I try to see him as a whole, not only his feet or legs, moving. I try to see beyond his movements, too, sensing the rhythm of the group as a whole. Just as I wonder where the ever narrower circle might end up, Matt reverses back out, the tight spiral unravels, breaks up. We come to another pause. It is time for our midnight snack.

Jesse has withdrawn from the group and set up his painting equipment. We eat, I allow myself to lie down for the first time – but not to sleep. I have promised myself to stay awake all the way through the marathon. I won't break that promise. Jesse pulls me away from the group – and involves me in an elaborate painting ritual, the details of which I do not fully recall. He places a bone in my left hand, a stone in my right. The left he centres on the heart, the right on my solar plexus. He takes a sip of absinthe – and spits it onto my feet. He paints my face, arms and neck with black lines and circles. He dusts my hands with white powder. He brushes me over. I'm curiously lost in the painting ritual. Only fragments remain in conscious memory.

The ritual becomes the initiatory gateway for a four (or five?) hour long drumming circle. The Dziecis have set up four chairs in a square in the centre of the room. At the heart of the square they place several candles. Now four people take the seat and hold a shamanic drum between them. The drumming begins. Slowly at first ... yet intensity ever increasing. Other people begin to move around the drummers in a circle, each finding ever new ways of relating to the drum through movement and sound. More instruments - drums, rattles, a gong, cow bells? - join the steadily swelling river of movement and drumming until it opens up into an endless ocean of ecstatic waves, contractions and expansions of a rapidly moving pulse. I remember little of these five hours. I remember timeless circles around ever changing centre. I remember oscillating between the centre, being at the heart of the pulse and returning to its circumference, dancing through a sea of resting bodies, dancing on the trail of others in front, dancing for the drum, dancing for the circle of dancers. I remember whirling for some time and discovering a beautiful stillness at the heart of my turning self. No thoughts penetrate here. Such is the stillness that I am able to whirl and see the space around, as if through glass washed by a rain shower which has now ceased and turned the outside landscape into a radial blur, with many details nonetheless. From this stillness emerges a path around the drum. So I circle, whirling, fully present, fully absent, no thought clouding my sight. No thought. No thought. With every turn the world comes more into focus. My commentary has ceased. Blissful stillness at the heart of the pulse.

My whirling ends, a sudden end caused by the emergence of a question: "Am I still in relationship?"

I bow to the ground, I touch the earth. Someone rushes to my side, I feel no sickness, no dizziness. I am back, now feeling empty and yet alive, tired and yet stirred, wary and yet delighted, once more commenting and nonetheless content. Such is the paradox that is Jessica. I am who I am despite of myself. I am becoming more of me ... when I relinquish my self. In my surrender lies my creation.

The morning has come. Matt and Megan open the curtains, revealing a window to the outside world. The view is surreal. From the 10<sup>th</sup> story of a Manhattan skyscraper one still sees only the gray walls of the building opposite. Glimpses of sky high above through glass clouded by city dirt. Megan recites a text ... its beautiful, clear words wash over me like dew. What was said, I don't recall. I remember feeling stirred and yet at peace.

Now silence.