RICHARD M. WERNER

In 1986, I began staging conceptual theatre art pieces as part of the midnight theatre series in New Paltz, New York where I continued to direct experimental theatre works produced entirely by the State University of New York (SUNY) theatre dept. student body. In L.A, I guest starred on several television shows and acted in numerous Indie-film projects. I have been a devout member of Theatre of NOTE, one of the west coast’s most celebrated theatre ensembles for 17 years, winning numerous L.A acting awards and producing several main stage and late night shows including *Macbeth* and If You *Don’t Know…* In my time at NOTE, I became the founder and producer of the Annual Hollywood Performance Marathon, a semi-famous Hollywood event, now approaching its eighteenth year.

Richard M. Werner: a self-interview

Q: Why did you go into Theatre?

It has never felt like I went into it, I was always there. When I was seven-years-old, when the other little boys were playing baseball I was learning the box step and practicing swordplay. Now 37 years later, my every thought is first as a theatre artist.

Q: What was your most recent show?

A: I just finished Stage Managing one of Theatre of NOTE’s famous late night shows*…And They Were Never Heard From Again.* Seven short plays about last words, lost moments, and mysterious exits. The show ran for a month on Friday and Saturday nights. I did all of the lighting and sound up in the booth and Stage Managed each of these small plays.

Q: What was the most challenging role that you have played recently?

A: DC in *FUBAR*. I played a boxer named DC. I played a kind of a burnt out palooka living in San Francisco in 1999.  For the role I had to transform my body and my medium. Trained at a gym since December, I looked like a walking death machine. The real challenge it turned out for me was playing this repressed a figure on stage. Anyone who knows me knows I am an extremely cathartic, emotive man and I seldom get through a conversation without laughing/crying four or five times. This guy didn’t do that. This guy lives in a whole other zone. Cast as DC, I learned about the power of stillness. Very exciting. 

Q: What show(s) are you just dying to do?

It would be fun to a do Sam Shepard play as a classic. I consider Shepard’s work to be classic American drama. *Tooth of Crime* still rocks my world but maybe *Buried Child* or *Lie of The Mind.* Also, as an actor, I'd still like to play Hamlet. I look young enough to pull it off, and I run deep enough to play the part.  
  
A: What was one of your best acting experiences?

When I was 24, I was cast as Eugene Morris Jerome, the lead character in Neil Simon’s Brighton Beach Trilogy. It was the first time it had been presented in its entirety with Doc Simon’s blessing. I got to play a character who ages from thirteen years to eighteen and in the military to twenty-four as an up and coming writer.

Q: What is the most surprising role you have ever been offered?

A: All of them. It feels like an effing miracle every time I get cast. That being said, in 1997, I was cast as one of the witches in Macbeth—one of three men in loincloths, hanging from the ceiling covered in war paint and blood. It was an extremely physical role; which taxed everyone emotionally, vocally, and psychologically. It was a visceral “Shakespeareience”.

Q: In the late 1970s and early 1980s you toured with a children’s theatre troupe, what were some of the highlights of the experience?

A: Riding a big blue bus painted with beautiful harlequin characters, driving hundreds of miles every summer to perform musicals in public and

Private parks, camps, hospitals, events, beaches and Burroughs with the company. One night out in Montauk Long Island, we broke down and all had to sleep on the bus. I remember us lined up head-to-toe, little actors all in a row. Since I was a child, I have experienced thousands of theatre stories, events, scares, elations, romances and bus rides but nothing so romantic as it felt that night on the bus.  
  
  
Q: Name a few of your worst show memories?

A: I had to suddenly step out of a show for opening weekend because of a family health emergency.  The producer stepped in to fill my role in a short play called Japanese Poltergeist. Really cool play. When I returned one week later, he refused to let me play the role and did the entire run playing a part I rehearsed for weeks. I'll never forgive him. 

Another time a reckless performer decided to bounce a real sword on my bare chest during a performance of a show. When I exited the stage, blood trickling down my chest I explained to him he could really hurt or kill me doing that. In retro, a part of me feels I should have thanked him for doing that to me on stage. 

Q: What were some of your scariest moments in a performance?

A: I wore a loincloth in a college play and had it break on me while I was in the middle of a scene with several minutes to go. Did the rest of the scene *a buffo*. I’ve been naked and crazy on stage dozens of times since then.

I was doing an NYU film project, which involved me running across the street in west Greenwich Village with a prop gun. When I got to the sidewalk I was met by five police officers with their guns drawn pointed at my head. The film crew and director came running up and explained the misunderstanding. At the time all I could think of was “Man, I hope the DP is getting this all on film.”

Q: You have acted on stage and on film. What are the differences?

A: Film acting is like running a sixty-yard dash. Stage acting is like running a marathon. Film acting is scene by scene. An actor has to be right in the moment when the camera turns on. Look at Hugh Jackman’s performance in the current release of Les Miserables, he doesn’t get to do all of the scenes that we have just seen him do for two hours in a stage play—he already shot that or he hasn’t even shot it yet. As a film actor you have that one moment, you have that one scene, you have that one situation and you have to instantly deal with it. Whatever happens to that character before that, you have to craft it for yourself; you have to be able to craft four or five things that you can use for that scene and then do it.

Jackman, or anybody in that film, has to get himself or herself there in every scene—sometimes shooting a scene multiple times. And on the stage, it is another experience. It is always exciting to see a big man break on stage. To see a really great actor like George C. Scott, for instance, ride that arc from the beginning of *Death of a Salesman* to the last scene of the performance as Willy Loman it makes the performance an event to witness as an actor.

Q: Other than your own company, what theatre groups have inspired you the most?

I have always considered myself an ensemble actor. It is the American Ensembles that I have looked to for the most inspiration. The Group Theatre, lead by the fearless Harold Clurman, expressed the American experience during the depression. The Living Theatre, Mabou Mines, Joe Chaikin’s Open Theatre, The Performance Group, and ultimately The Wooster Group, reflected changing social atmosphere as well as an evolving multimedia canvas to express these esthetics.

Q: What is one of your proudest theatrical experiences?

A: Hands down, *Stadium Devildare Battle for Godzilla X.* The most rewarding project I had ever worked on. Co-conceiving/directing the west coast premieres of Stadium Devildare by Ruth Margraff. Karen Martinson, my co-conceiver and I worked with Ruth for over a year via Internet (we in Los Angeles, She in Greece, NY and Chicago) expanding the text to fit a larger group of actors than the earlier 2004 *Rude Mechanical’s, Austin, TX*production.

We saw an excellent opportunity in Ruth's play, inspired by Japanese pop culture mixed with American pop culture, supposedly taking place in the future as a part of a sporting event—what it really was was an attack on the Bush Administration and the video-game mentality that was used to sell the Iraq War.

We staged a highly theatrical, multi media ensemble work, relevant to our times because it touches on themes of pop culture and media manipulation, and it worked.

We also brought in writer, composer Joshua Fardon to create and perform an original score to the work. Mask, magic, puppet, Pilates, and Martial arts workshops were given to help the performers prepare.

By the time the show opened, Feb, 2008 we had a quasi-operatic sci-fi, cutting-edge panto complete with ninja cheerleaders, giant monsters, Evil Knievel and Elvis' hybrid clone, with Lone Wolf Reiko T shirts sold in the Lobby.

Oh, yes. And Godzilla of course.

Audiences were addressed as if they were attending a live sporting event, encouraged to take sides and cheer for teams, buy merchandise for their favorite warrior. It was phenomenal.

It was after the success of *Stadium Devildare Battle for Godzilla X*, that I first considered a Masters in Theatre. My collaborator, Karen Jean Martinson received her M.A in Humanities at U of Chicago and her PhD in Theatre History, Literature, and Theory at the U of Minnesota. She said she recognized an untapped talent in me. Saying that I had the knack to communicate the craft and the willingness to guide younger artists within.

Q: Why do you believe we have Theatre?

People work and they live hard lives. People experience all kinds of tragedies; triumphs, happiness, sadness, all these things and people struggle to pay the rent, to pay bills, and to just survive living. The theatre, literature, poetry, and music answer the question why we do all of these things.

Q: What can you say about some of your mentors?

A: It is very clear to me that the muscles involved with teaching technique differ from the muscles involved in practicing it. I believe a teacher is very similar to a trainer or coach—someone who helps to build muscles through exercise, repetition, and self-discipline.

There are three people who I consider my mentors. Robert X. Modica, a graduate of Sanford Meisner’s Neighborhood Playhouse and also a Korean War Veteran, taught me the Meisner Technique over four years. I felt I was just beginning to understand it when I was leaving.

The late Bobby Lewis of The Group Theatre was a famous director and one of the premiere acting teachers in this country. He shared the experiences he had as a struggling actor during the depression. The ensemble he helped form set the standard for all acting ensembles and teachers to follow.

And by far the most unusual mentor to me was the late jazz saxophonist Teddy Edwards. I worked as a host at a jazz club on the sunset strip in the mid 1990s. Mr. Edwards had just returned after a long battle with cancer when he stepped onto the floor of the club, accompanied by equally brilliant musicians, I watched in fascination and understanding as he made eye contact with each of the players and launched into a multi-layered musical ensemble work. I have rarely seen in any medium, this level of mastery. I knew then that I wanted to learn to do this with actors and a text in the theatre. I can only hope to mentor younger artists the same way that I myself was motivated to my craft.

Q: Why are you pursuing the Masters in Theatre program at Central Washington University?

I am intrigued by the Central Theatre Ensemble because of the approach to modern theatre that it presents a well-rounded foundation for the artists to work from. Continuing my own art and education is important to me. I have called myself a theatre artist because I have called myself an actor, Director, Stage Manager, Box office staff or administrator, producer, each of those roles does not describe who I am; collectively they are what I am a theatre artist. I wish to continue to be all of those things, learn from the people that I teach, create the foundation for young artists to become theatre artists. I have become very comfortable—not complacent—with my life as a frustrated actor over the last several years. For me, to continue with this work I need to move out of my comfort zone, put my head once again on the chopping block and lead by example for younger students to be the theatre artists they need to be. Help them to work, compete and evolve with an ever-evolving medium. I feel I can prepare younger actors to do that, and then I can collaborate with these young artists that I have helped to develop and continue to do new works that excite me.