

FROM SAFE AS HOUSES: One Artist's Life in New York City 1980-1990 (an edited version of this excerpt was published in *Movement Research Journal* #22)

#### CHAPTER 4: PERFORMANCE SPACE 122 (MORE SONGS ABOUT BUILDINGS AND FOOD)

*Author's note: The following is an excerpt from a work-in-progress memoir, centered around two pieces of real estate; my low-income apartment building and P.S. 122. Some of the opinions expressed about specific people are based on how I felt at the time, and should not be construed as a judgment of their present character; this is a highly biased account.*

My attention was split. P.S. 122 had become my home away from home, filled with its own problems. I was one of a large group of artists and neighborhood activists circling in and around this 5-story, 22,000 square foot building, trying to refashion it into a viable community and arts center. In 1979, the building had been partially resuscitated by the movie *Fame*, when the film crew rehabilitated the second floor auditorium's floor. A local choreographer, Charles Moulton, began rehearsing there after the film shoot finished, bringing in other dance and performance people. The auditorium space, which would eventually be referred to as Performance Space 122, distinguishing it from Painting Space 122, the Children's' Liberation Day Care Center, and other organizations eventually located in the building, became the center of my new life as a performer.

Although a mere two blocks away from my apartment on 11th Street, P.S. 122 was where I could be with my kind, my tribe; others who had come to New York for the same reasons. Not that the place was a haven of communication and collective bliss. The building's Board of Directors was white, chaired by the vice-president of the local Democratic Club, a woman who, it was observed with both mild derision and wonder, did not speak Spanish, an indication of the old-world power balance of the neighborhood. The super, a local Puerto Rican man, certainly did speak Spanish. The sharp division between his job, the people he hired, and those of us who used the building, made everyone a little uncomfortable.

Lines of ownership and control created the minimalist grid laid over lower Manhattan. Like my small apartment building, P.S. 122 belonged to the City of New York. It occupied a much bigger footprint, physically and historically, having educated local children from 1895-1976 at the corner of Ninth Street and First Avenue. Arguments simmered over its new identity as a mostly white cultural center in a very non-white area. Artists were considered elitist and not really part of "the community." The concept of multiculturalism, the very word itself, hadn't quite formed yet, but many of us hungered for that term's vaguely palliative effect. "Racism" and "discrimination" were the words more often used (or lingering underneath less explicit terms), usually in anger or to front an agenda that reversed, but did not really mitigate, the balance of exclusion. "Community" was the key word, a word used to constantly define, divide, and dish up the rather scant resources of an empty city building. If the entire building, now referred to as the 122 Community Center, were to serve the community, who should define that term? Everyone wanted space and cheap rent; visual artists, theater companies, dancers, social service organizations, neighborhood groups (arts groups, though made up of residents in the neighborhood, seemed never to be acknowledged as from "the community"). This space was cheap, with the initial month-to-month lease from the city only \$600 a month, although running it, especially during the Winter, required considerably more. On the second floor, we just wanted to dance, perform, and experiment. Why did everything always involve money and meetings? In comparison, East 11th Street seemed relatively simple, self-contained, do-able.

Every week, a rapidly growing group of dancers and performance artists held an improvisational dance event called Open Movement. Almost since the moment I arrived in New York, these nights were the center of my artistic and social life, which were one and the same. Open Movement evolved from Open House, a project of Robert Wilson's group, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds that had come to an end in the aftermath of *Einstein On The Beach*, his massive collaboration with Philip Glass in 1976. Many of the performers from *Einstein* remained in New York, while Wilson pursued work in Europe. One, Charles Dennis, resurrected Open House (sometimes called Open Dancing) as Open Movement, moving it from various studios in Soho and Tribeca to P.S. 122 at the end of 1979. Every Tuesday night, a core group gathered there to simply move; no music, no teachers, no pre-determined choreography. It was anarchic, exploratory, and unpredictable. There were always old friends and unfamiliar faces, new bodies, fresh styles of moving. This was what I had come to this town for; to move with a group of imaginative, creative people. What we did wasn't always "dance," modern, post-modern, or otherwise. Dance was too restrictive a term, too formal, laden with technique, bad metaphor, careerism, and aging divas. Our shifting group was based on movement, developing thought through the motor of constant motion and careful, conscious moments of stillness. Stillness as dynamic and restless pauses before the rocket took off. Several of my new friends had recently traveled to Poland to study with Jerzy Grotowski of the Polish Lab Theatre, returning full of a mysterious language about non-theatrical presence, and movement as a form of human interaction less intentionally "dramatic" than modern dance. Theories seeped their way out through the body, and Tuesday nights at P.S. 122 were like swimming in an ocean alternately roiling and becalmed; a kinetic heaven.

People straggled in around 8:00 in the evening, with more arriving as the evening progressed (by 9:00, there were between 30-40 of us). The first 45 minutes were reserved for a series of personal warm-ups, which most of us began by lying on the floor. It was like preparing to pray, or perhaps prayer itself. Shucking the detritus of the daily world, the life on the street, took time, and that shift was the center of what we were doing. This was a place of re-creation; once a week, we could, together, abandon the practical relationship of time and motion that controlled life outside. Here was pure exploration, a suspension of commerce in favor of collaborative competition, the eager race to see how far we could all go, together. Someone would begin twitching, or standing and falling, over and over. Across the room, another body began responding, echoing, mirroring, refracting. Then another variation as someone rolled to standing, walking, or running. The room was like a language forming itself, the entire body a tongue that on these magic Tuesday nights rehearsed the syntax and the syllables. Slowly, solos, duets, trios, and larger groups would form, all following a vocabulary of flux and recombination. Bodies rolled against each other in slow contact improvisations, others raced around the room, repelling off other bodies in a tag team slalom. This form of greeting, of identifying who was there that week, what mood you were in (kinetically more than emotionally), and where you wanted to go was joyously erotic and intimate, yet profound and theatrical. Gestures, which began as random thoughts suddenly, cohered into larger connected sequences. A spiraling dynamo rumbled into life, as more and more bodies moved faster and faster in a large oval, cranking an engine driven by the sparks flickering around the room. This dynamo would build and then diminish, stall and restart, reverse and abruptly pop into overdrive; nearly constant motion for two-and-a-half or three hours, with people whirling off only to be sucked in yet again. I danced with people I saw every week yet often didn't learn their name. I danced explosively with people I never saw again. Enormous psychological explorations took physical form without the stale poses and attitudes of modern dance or theater, there

being no set choreography, no script. Everything happened from the moving moment, and not from some rehearsed pattern hauled in from elsewhere (if someone attempted to choreograph, they found themselves isolated in a corner, or gently mocked). This was a laboratory, not a showcase.

But we did show off. Pulling out of the flow to observe, it was not hard to see who was trying just a little too hard to be inventive, who was working out a technical problem or a subtle (and not so subtle) seduction. Open Movement was a free form international jam session of motion, gesture, and pure dance. It was heaven. I could do things there that I could never reproduce in my own work; lifting, falling and recovering, whirling around other bodies, colliding and avoiding without any injury or a false step. Some of us came very close to flying, which no longer seemed an impossible goal. This was the kind of movement that was liberating and sexy, egalitarian and anti-materialist. We were an experiment in motion, with shining and ephemeral moments which lived only in a kind of kinesthetic memory. Could I ever dance like this outside, or on Eleventh Street?

But Heaven, like hell, has its guards. Down the hall from the Performance Space, at the top of the stairs that led up from the street, lurked the Ogre, Raul. I don't recall his full name, only his hard and bitter face. He was a fairly young man, but one whose existence at P.S. 122 was based on a very different set of expectations and circumstances than the dancers who filed past his door. P.S. 122 might have been a kind of heaven for us, but it was a lapsarian, Lower East Side version. The old neighborhood wanted in, and Raul, though young, represented that sense of ownership in the most antagonistic manner. Officially, he tutored kids in the large classroom he occupied as part of the Multi-Service Center, mandated to provide educational, social, and economic services to the neighborhood, but we seldom saw anyone enter his room. He was living there illegally. The City's rental agreement made it quite clear no one could set up housekeeping in the old school, that it was a business and not a dwelling. But Raul was a friend of Bobby's; Bobby was neighborhood, Puerto Rican, and had a history here. Bobby was the Super, with the keys and the controls to the heat and Bobby knew how the physical plant ran. So he ran it. The East Village in the early 80's was a neighborhood in transition where we artist types could populate the clouds of heaven, but someone had to stoke the furnace and keep the machinery running. And watch the doors. Raul decided to be the doorkeeper to a party he wasn't invited to.

We ruled the auditorium, but to get there one had to pass three doors. The door at the bottom, on the street, presented no problem, as it could be buzzed-open remotely from the auditorium. But at the second floor landing, another door, opening into the hall that led to our performance space, prevented passage. In order to provide access to our events, we left this door open. This made Raul apoplectic, slamming the door and spitting obscenities at whoever had propped it open. He challenged anyone who passed with barely reigned-in fury, "What are you doing here? Who gave you keys?" It did not matter that he saw us many, many times. We were still invaders, and he refused to acknowledge that we belonged there, that this turf was shared. And of course we brought other invaders with us, an entire roomful. We were adamant about our right to leave the door open, but "rights" mean very little in turf wars. Raul was always there; he never seemed to leave. Was his animosity racial, political, cultural? We assumed it to be all those things, but didn't know how to heal a historical wound we didn't feel directly. Raul was pale and very "white," as were the vast majority of the dancers and artists going past his door. And yet, unlike most of us, he was local, Lower East Side, tough. It was hard to know what he was, beside angry, balled up with the tense bearing of a former Marine, with haircut to match. Perhaps it was the way we moved and dressed, or our mere presence and what we represented. P.S. 122 may have been an idealized artists' haven to us, but it remained a product and vehicle of gentrification to many

others. Raul behaved as if the building belonged only to himself, Bobby, and their friends, playing the role of snarling concierge. To get to heaven, I held my breath.

There were many complaints about the situation, and Raul's tenure at P.S. 122 was brief; by the end of 1981 he was gone. A ten-year lease had been signed at the end of 1980, a day care center moved in to the back of the building, and the pressure from "the community" calmed down (and the rent went up; \$1,500 a month for the whole building, heat and maintenance not included). But Raul's possessiveness and bitter assumption of ownership lingered and translated into other forms. In any ideal place, someone always wants to police the doors.

There were strong personalities within our circle as well. I had moved to New York partly at the urging of my friend from high school, Tim Miller, who had himself moved to New York almost two years earlier. I met Tim's boyfriend, Peter Rose, soon after arriving in the city. In the early years of Open Movement at P.S. 122, Peter was the dominating personality of the Jerzy Grotowski/Polish Lab Theater returnees. Although very few of the participants were actually Polish, Poland served as the mythic landscape underneath much of our activities, breaking us into two groups; those whom had experienced Grotowski in Poland and those who had not. As with any intense experience, the pilgrims from Poland owned a vocabulary of coded words, the meaning of which filtered out slowly. Words like "presence" and "action/non-action" dominated the discussions following our Tuesday night. Peter was very convincing in his ability to transfer the absolute importance of his own interpretation of Grotowskian concepts to the larger group, yet it often felt like a test of some kind, with Peter bearing down with an almost religious conviction. He policed the interpretation of those concepts almost as ferociously as Raul policed the doors, as if he had a proprietary interest in these abstractions. Was this commitment or control?

These discussions often happened in one of the several Polish restaurants, Poles being another large presence in the area at the time, having bought up some choice real estate. Lech Walesa and the Solidarity Union's strikes at the Gdansk shipyards, and their subsequent battles with strongman General Jaruzelski and martial law made them heroes, and here we were in the midst of so many refugees from that battleground, waiting on us and recreating a small part of their culture for us to consume. We felt involved in world events while gulping down borscht and challah bread at bargain rates. Whose place was this East Village? Our group ceded the default position of struggling and exotic other to the Poles; at least they were not contesting our claims on P.S. 122. Ethnicity, of whatever kind, was a coin of fluctuating worth.

After a night of dancing, my friends and I were sweating and hungry. Dancing moved my mental preoccupations deeper into my body, and what I found there, as soon as the dancing stopped, was real hunger; for food, for sex, for a new environment that would be both strange and comforting. There was a particular restaurant that promised mystery, a dark and dingy place where history could be made on the cheap. The Baltyk was not a place we went very often, but it left a melancholy mark on my consciousness in a way that the bustling Veselka, on 2nd Avenue, a place we went much more frequently, did not. The Baltyk had decrepit banquettes, glacial service, and devoutly prepared food that issued forth from the kitchen like a much prayed over offering. I recall only the soups, which were like slurping up an entire culture by the spoonful, burning the lips and warming the empty spaces in our eager bodies. I had come to New York for tastes of the exotic. One felt somehow very eastern, very foreign there. The Baltyk was located next door to The Club Baths, whose steaming interior I was hungry for as well, yet never penetrated. After an evening of Open Movement, I assumed that the cruisey and reductive physical language of a gay bathhouse would be desperate, inarticulate and inartistic. And I met almost all of my lovers on those complicated

Tuesday nights, rolling around on the floor of P.S. 122 in an orgy of hygienic safety (the significance of which had not yet been revealed to us). When I did finally go to the St. Mark's Baths, later that first New York year, I had a glorious (and completely safe) time, but the return trip was a disappointment, and I never went again. That environment was too temporary, too enclosed, and I couldn't own it with my body. Unlike dancing at P.S. 122, and the relationships I formed there, the world of the gay bathhouse was too fluid, too determined. In order to sustain my sense of self, I preferred to dance; my sexuality was wrapped up in my artistic self, and they flourished together best in the hot house of P.S. 122.

P.S. 122 was my alternative home, my artistic nest where I incubated along with my peers as we tried out new moves, new relationships, and variations on the same old attitudes. It seems, in retrospect, that I was there almost every night of the week, except for the nights at my restaurant job, making me part of the inner circle, but on the outer part of it. The Grotowski gang, which included some people, like Tim, who had not actually been to Poland, began meeting on Sunday afternoons. I worked a double shift on that holy day, and so could not participate. I suspected this might be a tactical mistake, exiling myself from an inner sanctum, but I needed income as well as presence and integrity. I was also just a little bit leery of getting too wrapped up in the arms of a body of experience I had not actually experienced; I hadn't been to Poland.

But there were other events. Night Project was an occasional extension of Open Movement into an all-night experience. Beginning on Saturday evening, an invited group (who did the inviting? I believe it was the Sunday gang) gathered to dance, talk, tell stories, cook in the kitchen (now a dressing room) adjoining the performance space, sleep, and move around. By Sunday morning, everyone was transformed in some way: exhausted, exhilarated, energized and enervated. All that collective change passed through me as well, yet the most difficult change was into the workday; I was due at 11:00 in the West Village to serve eggs benedict.

Monday nights were very active. Tim used his rehearsal times to begin presenting a series of open rehearsal/performances, *Me and Mayakovsky*. These performances flung the doors open on his restless intelligence in a series of partially improvised pieces blending Tim's eager ego with that of the doomed Russian, projecting him into the contemporary Lower East Side and the battlefield of Nicaragua. The early, pre-Stalin days of the Soviet Union, its cultural manifestos and experiments, were a thrilling inspiration, and also a healthy tonic to the sometimes dour strictures of Grotowski. Tim's work was truly postmodern, though a very kinetic interpretation of that theory-laden term. What moved us was movement, action, the running of the blood through the muscles, the reinvention of society through art that twitched and shouted and banged on the table while whispering love poems.

We could overdo our blending of art and society. During one Open Movement late in 1980, Tim and I thought it would be good to haul in a television, as we wanted to watch the Reagan/Carter presidential debate (no one had VCR's back then). This, we thought, would create a new context for our movement. Our efforts were not appreciated, as there are limits to the attention one can pay to talking heads while whirling about the room. That night, Open Movement came to a screeching halt, and we were lambasted for our arrogance. This event, we found, did not belong exclusively to us.

Our attempts at control seemed light-handed compared to Peter, whose seriousness was getting oppressive. His early solo work, which I saw soon after first coming to New York, had been beautiful and poetic. Dark, Jewish, and volcanically moody, he had grown up in Far Rockaway and so was a real New Yorker, not an import like so many of us. This was his turf. He had seen *The Talking Heads* at CBGB in 1977,

and had the tapes to prove it. Tim found him fascinating, erotically charged and exotic, I thought he was a little scary (not necessarily mutually exclusive conditions). Perhaps I found his very authenticity frightening. ). Peter created an aura of purposeful enigma around himself, mythologizing his personal history while appearing, and perhaps being, totally sincere; the words "honest" and "present" being the preferred terms, ringing with Grotowskian fervor. Once he made claim to something, everyone around him felt pulled in to examine and elaborate. If Peter mispronounced a word, perhaps someone's name, gradually everyone else followed his example (the choreographer Carole Armitage, for example, became Ca-roll. So that first Christmas, I sarcastically suggested we go Christmas ca-roll-ing). There was something authoritarian and judgmental about this boy-man, belying the aesthetic anarchy of P.S. 122, particularly Open Movement. Although he provided a strong center to revolve around, his need for control was troubling, verging on the proprietary. Tim, upon whom Peter had the greatest influence, was growing restive, having an enormous gift of charisma, talent, and commitment himself. A breakup was inevitable, after which Peter began a series of disappearances; to Berlin (still walled, and the East Village of Europe), to Poland, and, finally to the West Coast. This seemed like good timing, as his intensity no longer fit the careering ambitions of our group. I appreciated his absence more than his presence. So, I think, did Tim, who folded Peter's role at 122 into his own. Both of them were superb in getting friends and colleagues wrapped up in their own obsessions, yet Tim was more generous, less doctrinaire; a teacher more than a mystic. Tim was also my best friend, my beloved buddy from suburban California high school days (a fact that surely affected my feelings toward Peter). We spoke pretty much the same language, with an ironic mockery where Peter had been so much high seriousness. At least at 122, there had been a fairly bloodless succession. Very soon, there was a Board of Directors (Tim, Charles Dennis, and Charles Moulton), and though I did not end up on it, I had a direct line through Tim.

In both buildings, P.S. 122 and 11th Street, we newcomers were mostly under thirty, white, and middle class in heritage if not actual income. We were eager, and that eagerness must have been a bit trying. We were here for history, context, but certain that after traveling down that street, it would always be possible to retrace our steps. We would surely be able to rub up against the rank yet thrilling tang of New York's not entirely clean civic body, take a long hot shower after, and examine the drain at a later time. Such confident enthusiasm could be both enthralling and irritating to the rest of the people in the street or in the building, whose own history may not have supported such bright projections. We were learning to share while claiming our share, a balancing act on a surface selected for its very instability.

A FEW YEARS LATER:

I did not want to be simply a survivor, nor did I want to be a wreck, and that wreckage was beginning to pile up. Peter, who had vanished from New York in 1984 to Europe and then California, returned in 1986, his raw brilliance now compressed into an unpredictable, bitter aggression. One afternoon, attempting to rehearse at P.S. 122, I came to the aid of Vivian Trimble, the very young administrative assistant at whom he was ranting about some minor thing; she had no idea who he was (years later, Vivian would be a member of the band Luscious Jackson). Peter turned his wrath on me, spitting out accusations and invective about how the place had been stolen from him: "You, what did you do for this place? You're just second string, following the leader. You and your precious careers and funding. You're a bunch of fucking fakes; just a little dancer from California. This place wouldn't be here without me. I started this place. You know that, don't you?" His voice was tight with fury, and his eyes bored through me, seeking a soft spot; I knew, and he knew, there were many. I thought this was what we came inside to get away from, this threat and violence of the street. What was it doing

here, at our safe space of art? I tried to be diplomatic, knowing there was some truth to his accusations, while recognizing Peter as a rancid remnant of what he had been. This man, who had advocated pure "presence," an ego-less performing state inspired by his time with Grotowski, could not let go of his own version of history in which his role had not been properly credited. Having exiled himself for several years, during which the hard work of making an institution out of an idea had been done, he wanted to resume his historical role. Performance Space 122 now had an administrator, Mark Russell, one of the original Grotowski group, and a small staff. There was a Board of Directors, still the original triumvirate of Tim, Charles, and Charlie, and if anyone were to be added to that, it was not going to be Peter. There were several (myself, John Bernd, Stephanie Skura) who had stuck around, having the position of "Associate Director" bestowed on us in 1982; it didn't mean much in terms of power, but did acknowledge ongoing commitment. But the returned patriarch wanted to guard the gates from the rabble that had not passed his now anachronistic entrance test, the rules of which were not posted. Yet now that leadership role had been recast, doubled and tripled, new people were involved. He had little left but rage, and that rage was powerful.

That particular day, Peter's anger eventually subsided, but his fury had shaken up my sense of order, of promise, of forward motion. It also placed an annotation on my memories of our small group in the preceding year; had it always been about control? Life in New York had taught me how to talk people down from rage, how to moderate my own emotions to placate the explosions of others, but I was always left diminished, acting on reaction and not action. There was inevitably a new explosion going off somewhere, just around the corner, always something lurking outside to try to pull you into the street, or into the fermenting cesspool of memory. Someone always had something on you, whether it was knowledge, position, history, or a knife. Peter and Raul were frightening because they seemed to know something about me that I did not want known. The look in their eyes drilled through my identity as an artist, ripped up my very sense of self. In their eyes, I could see myself as just another middle class interloper, a suburban bourgeois slumming in their house.

Bohemia was the dream that brought me to Manhattan, and now, having bought my apartment in 1982 when the City sold us the building, I owned a part of it; I was both landlord and bohemian. I had dreamed that the landscape would both transform and be transformed by me, and that I would determine the rate of that exchange. Had that happened? This Bohemia was a behemoth of obstructions, aggressions, fraudulence, violation, and sickness. All of that just to create art, to make love and a career grow from the dazzling promise of youth into the accomplishment of adulthood. How could I be open to new experience in this place where constant vigilance was required? How could anyone make progress in such a place? Inside our little co-op on 11th Street was disorganization and duplicity. On the street lurked excitement, but mixed with violence and threat. At P.S. 122, everyone wanted a piece of the real estate and the press release. I had come to this city wanting to be opened up; was I now closing down, guarding the gates? Was labeling everything with your name and claiming credit the only way to survive? Yet P.S. 122 belonged, in some way, to anyone who performed there, a claim best staked in the work itself.