

Peter Petralia

talking with Paul Benney

Paul Benney: I thought a good place to start today would be to talk about where you started as an artist and the different experiences you had leading up to where you are now as a theater director, writer and producer.

Peter Petralia: I started out as a performer, a long time ago, and I went to NYU, and I went to this crazy college called Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, and I was studying to be a performer. Then somewhere along the line - it was actually at NYU - two things happened. One is, I couldn't really afford to go back to school. Actually, three things happened: I couldn't afford to go back to school; I got offered the opportunity to work with a circus in San Francisco as a performer; and a teacher who I had studied with named Raina Van Waldenberger encouraged me to start writing, based on the character that I was developing in her class. So, I moved to San Francisco to work with the circus. I found that I couldn't go back to NYU because I didn't have any money, and I started writing in San Francisco. While I was out there, I performed with the circus and then things kind of went horribly wrong. They offered me a job, and then they found out they didn't have any money, so I had relocated there and then was stranded without work. So, I started doing a lot of technical work. I was in San Francisco for about three years, and I think that was this period where I was shifting around trying to figure out what I wanted to do. By doing technical work, actually, I got to work with a lot of really interesting people who I wouldn't have gotten to work with otherwise - a lot of dance, a lot of theater and performance people. I worked with Theater Artaud and The Cowell. All the San Francisco places, I worked there. And every San Francisco group of some kind, I worked with in some capacity. I saw a lot of different styles and forms, and saw a lot of things I liked and didn't like, and then some friends of mine from New York, who I had worked with here, in school, came out to San Francisco, and we did a play together at 111 Minna, which was a gallery that just opened. We were the first performance that happened there.

Paul: When was that?

Peter: '96 or '97. I think it was '97.

Paul: Sounds right.

Peter: It might have been late '96, actually. It wasn't a very good show, and I was a performer in it, but I really liked working with these two other people. At that point, I decided that what I needed to do was start making my own work. I wasn't going to find parts that I liked. I wasn't going to see the kind of theater I liked unless I made the kind of theater I liked, so I started working harder on writing and trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I couldn't find so many opportunities in San Francisco for somebody who... I had a lot of performance experience, I had a lot of technical experience, but I didn't have a lot of directing, writing, or producing experience.

Paul: And you were becoming known as a tech person?

Peter: I was becoming known as a tech person, which I definitely didn't want. So, I applied to the American Living Room Festival in New York, and to the Fringe Festival. I convinced my boyfriend at the time to move back to New York, got into both festivals, and did my first show that I wrote and directed, which was called *Poor Angels*, and it was pretty awful. It was a great experience though, because I realized that it's a lot harder to do what you want to do. You can be really critical of other people, but it's really hard. It was also a good experience because I met a bunch of interesting people, and a lighting designer who I really liked. So, I took about a year and a half, and stewed a little bit in my failure... and then wrote another show, which I did at HERE Arts Center called *Bunny's Last Night in Limbo*, and by doing the American Living Room Festival, I connected with HERE and found a little bit of a safe haven to try some stuff. *Bunny* actually was really successful. The play was published. It solidified this group of

people that I was working with, and it made us really a company as opposed to just being me and a couple of collaborators. It started a process of eight shows that came after that up until now, with the same lighting designer, mostly the same composer, (a couple of other composers have dropped in here and there), many of the same performers... Actually, most people who have worked with us are still involved in some way, and that is since 2000, so that's pretty good.

Paul: That's great. That's a long run.

Peter: Yeah. The work has evolved a lot. The very first show, *Poor Angels* was very "performance art-y", very physical, "Grotowski stuff", and it had a lot of multimedia stuff in it. Then *Bunny* was more of a very personal story that was chopped up and performed with a twisted performance style. It wasn't a very traditional performance style, but the narrative was very simple and traditional, yet very personal. I think from there I realized that what I needed to be doing was telling things that were personal, and that was what was going to work for me. It was a nice revelation. The work has split now into a couple of different forms. There's this really physical, spectacle-based work that uses a lot of circus, and those productions tend to be bigger in scale and more visually like candy, but they still have a lot of text, they still have lots of movement, lots of different components. There's another stripe of work, which is much more pared-down and simple, and it's often just a couple of people talking straight to the audience either reading a text or with memorized text, it depends. The show that I'm working on for P.S. 122 falls somewhere between the two of them. They do a lot of things physically, but the performance style is very direct. There isn't a lot of acting. Actually, there are only a few moments of acting, and they're really bracketed off as in, "Ok, now we're going to do some acting here." They serve a very specific purpose. I'm finding it to be very interesting because I've always questioned acting. Theater can be really awful and "fake-y", and icky, but it can also be really amazing and transformative, so I'm trying to figure out how to get past my own judgments of the form, and make something that I can be excited about, but that's also stretching myself a little bit. I also think this show has a really strong narrative, which is a little bit different for me. My shows always have stories, but in this one, the narrative is really clear and really linear. At a certain point, it's like the story starts and carries you all the way through to the end, as opposed to being super chopped-up, and messed around all over the place.

Paul: So, I know one of the stories within this new piece, *Invisible Messages*... or at least one of the areas that you explored, was through a trip that you took. So, do you want to talk about the great train trip a little bit, and how that came about?

Peter: Yeah. It's interesting that you took the Trans-Siberian trip as well, and ended up finding this.

Paul: In fact, I think this is the reason why I'm interviewing you. I think Alejandra was like, "Oh, Paul, you just did the Trans-Siberian, and here's this great piece." But, you know, that's a great commonality, I think.

Peter: The trip was totally life changing, and definitely interests a lot of people, and a lot of people want to talk about it. What happened was this: I'm on all these different list-serves, and I got an email saying that there was going to be a conference on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and I thought it was kind of strange and interesting, and I checked it out a little further. It turned out that it was a real thing. It was a conference where they were asking artists and academics to come together and propose papers they wanted to read, or projects they wanted to do that had something to do with globalization or arts and culture. I somehow, I don't know why, just from reading it, I came up with this idea of doing this project, where I would make these packages that were little documentaries about what was going on for me as I was on the trip, and then I would give them to people who I had arranged to meet at train stations. Initially, I thought I would make these packages, and then whoever was in the train station, I would just give them a package with instructions of what to do, but after thinking about it, and doing a little more research, I decided that was a little too risky...

Paul: You might not hear from them, yeah.

Peter: I didn't know enough Russian, Mongolian, or Chinese to do that, so what it ended up being was that I made these packages... Oh, so I applied for conference, they accepted me, and then I wrote a grant to the Theater Communications Group—they have this program, TCG/ITI Travel Grant—and I got the grant, and then I could go, which was pretty great.

Paul: Yeah, covered everything. That's great.

Peter: Yeah, so the trip was insane. There were 45 of us who were part of the conference from all different parts of the world.

Paul: All traveling from Moscow to Beijing?

Peter: All traveling from Moscow to Beijing. We met in Moscow at Hotel Russia, which is this giant hotel that has since been torn down, and we met in a room and the conference began. From then on it was this intense experience that didn't end until I got home. The "conference" kind of changed midway through. At first, it was organized and planned, and then that kind of fell apart, because the train is so hard to control, and there are so many things that occur on the train that you just can't pass up. So, the organization of the conference as planned sort of fell apart. It became about more of a social experiment between all these different people, which fit in nicely with what I was doing, because the packages that I ended up making became these really personal, very personal, kind of confessional projects—little art projects that were about what was going on for me.

Paul: Going on for you then at that moment on the train?

Peter: On the train. They took the form of a Polaroid series or a little video or an audio recording, or whatever I could make with I had brought along with me. And whatever I thought might be received well by the artist who was going to take the package, because I knew certain people couldn't speak any English, or I knew certain people were in more of an urban context or more of a rural context. So I was trying to think of ways to frame what was going on for me in such a way that they could understand it. What happened was these little things I made were actually kind of a narrative, and there was a little bit of a story involved that just happened. Every artist met me, which was kind of surprising.

Paul: Phenomenal.

Peter: Considering some of the stops were at 5:00 AM in the middle of nowhere, and also considering that the time on the train is really confusing because everything takes place in Moscow time.

Paul: Meanwhile you're going through many, many time zones.

Peter: I didn't know what to tell the artists. I didn't know. Should they meet me at 5:00 PM Moscow time? Would they know what that meant? Should I give them the local time? It turned out that everybody knew Moscow time, and that was the way to go. I gave them these packages, and then I asked them each to send a package back to me that was a response in some way to what I did, and I got back 5 or 6 of them, which was pretty good.

Paul: Out of how many?

Peter: Out of 10. So, it was higher than I expected. They are very cool, and I really wanted to do an exhibition of those associated with this show, but there just wasn't the time or the resources to get that done, but many of the packages that I made, end up as projections in the show.

Paul: Nice. Was the intention from the get-go for these packages and all this information that you got on the trip, was it all going to go into a performance project, or was there a question of how you would gather this information and how you would put it out? Did you have the thought from the beginning that it would take the shape of a theater piece?

Peter: Yeah. I had the idea that I would make something out of it, a performance of some sort, but I wasn't sure what it would be. In a way I was thinking, "the trip itself is the performance," but I knew that I would need to do something with it when I came back because it was just too... there was too much material, that is too interesting. When I came back, I initially tried to make something very documentary-based, really just trying to describe what happened to me, but it was really boring. It was like a slideshow that you'd go to your friend's house to see. I felt like "not so interesting." What was more interesting was figuring out what the essential experience of the trip was, and trying to translate that into a performance. This idea of culling together these packages that were based on what was happening in the moment, and this sense of dislocation and disorientation that happens on the train, and this feeling like you could be anywhere at any time. Those were the things that I ended up latching on to. It feels like it, and you really do, disappear on the train. You can't call anybody. You can't get email. You're completely cut off from all of the trappings of modern America. For me, who's somebody who's glued to my computer, that was a liberating and frightening experience. So that's what the piece ended up being more about: this idea of disappearing.

Paul: So, these three people in the piece, as you say in the press release, are in the process of disappearing?

Peter: Yes, one way or another. There are three of them, and they are each on their own journey, and then they link up in Siberia, which is an interesting place to meet, as you know.

Paul: I actually met some interesting people in Siberia.

Peter: They meet in Novosibirsk.

Paul: Oh, even better.

Peter: There's one person, who's based on myself and my trip, who is actively trying to disappear and is doing that by really running away from everything, changing his identity, and going to the Gobi Desert, where he will find no one, he hopes. Then there are two other people who are slightly more complicated. One of them actually is trying to reappear. She has this severe case of depression and has lived her life not feeling anything and has recently had this brain surgery, that they're actually doing now, which I read about in the *New York Times*, and then started researching. They implant electrodes into this area of your brain called Area 25, and the electrodes are attached to a pacemaker. They emit a slow current that keeps going, and it stimulates that part of the brain in a certain way that changes your mood.

Paul: Wow!

Peter: People who have this surgery describe it as the lights are suddenly coming on, or they can suddenly feel things. One of the quotes that was in that article was somebody saying, "I knew that people were in the room before, but now I can really feel that people are in the room." This character in the play is based on that surgery and on that experience. She has recently had this surgery and is going back, traveling around the world trying to relive these experiences that were important in her life that she never felt - things like losing her virginity, etc., etc. That takes her through Siberia. Then there's a third person, who is based loosely on somebody who fell into a well, who's name I won't say, in the '80s. but very loosely, it's not biographical. In the show, the character finds out, as an adult, that the reason that she'd had all these strange surgeries as a kid was because she had fallen in a well and spent a couple of days below the surface, and she had no idea. Nobody ever told her. She finds out by watching this made-for-TV-movie. So what she is doing, is going on this trip trying to find all of the people who donated parts of their body to her to repair her through all the surgeries, and she's taking a photo of each of them with a Polaroid camera, and combining them into one photo that makes up who she really is. Like I said, they all link, and all their plans change, as is what happens. Some of these things come really from the trip, like this Polaroid thing.

Paul: I was going to say, that's directly from the trip.

Peter: One of the packages of me is me cut up into all of these different Polaroids, but for the audience, no one would ever know that.

Paul: But the idea, the inspiration originated from that project that you did. That's great.

Peter: There are lots of things like that. There's a lot in the piece about time and how disorienting time is, and that comes directly from the feeling on the train of not knowing where the ground was. And then specific locations and experiences that happened to me make their way into the show, but they're kind of masked in different ways. The way we made the show actually was very much like the trip. I felt like I couldn't just write something that was fictional, because it would be kind of ridiculous. So, instead, we got in a room, and I gave the performers all of these rules, very much like I gave myself rules on the trip, and I asked them to create these different little things. For maybe three months, or so, we worked a lot and made these full hour-and-a-half-long performances that were based on rules. And things that came up in that ended up inspiring the writing that I did of the show. It was metaphorically similar...

Paul: ...to what you went through on the trip, yeah. Did you actually give the performers packets as well, as you did on the trip, or was it just the set of rules?

Peter: Just the set of rules. I did ask them to do experiments out in the world, which were funny. Those didn't end up in the show, but they did inform the way the performers do the work. For instance, the character who is trying to disappear, I asked him to try to do a couple of things. One is that I asked him to try to notice all the security cameras that track him during the day, and try to not get his image caught in a single day, which proved to be impossible. I also asked him to take a trip to someplace where he would normally not go, and to dress in a way that he would normally not dress, and to see if he could be invisible. That's a dramatic term for it, but try to be inconspicuous, and see what his experience was like—take photos and write down what it feels like, which is very interesting. The character who has lived her life not feeling anything, I asked her to also change the way she dressed, and to go into a really fancy boutique and see what happens. She's a really beautiful young girl, and so I asked her to dress in a way that makes her more invisible, and experience what it is like to not be recognized or responded to, which was also very interesting. It was kind of awful for her. We did little experiments like that in the real world with each of them, which were fascinating.

Paul: Yeah, it sounds great.

Peter: That makes a whole show, in itself.

Paul: Do you like working with small groups of people, or do you work with a variety of numbers? Is there a preference?

Peter: No, I think it depends on the show. I've tended to work with smaller groups. I think the largest group that's ever been in a show was five, and that felt fine. It didn't feel like too many, or maybe six. Yeah, six was the largest. I think it depends on what the piece is. I think however many people need to be in it, need to be in it. I haven't made so many pieces where you get a bunch of people together and you improv and see what comes out. If I did that, I would probably want to keep the group relatively small. I wouldn't want to go above five.

Paul: The work seems so... it's a personal investment in the work, so that's why I asked if that was an intention on your part of just wanting... because three seems like kind of a perfect number in some ways in terms of organizing something like this.

Peter: Definitely odd numbers are better.

Paul: For sure.

Peter: Even numbers...

Paul: It never works out.

Peter: It never works out.

Paul: Yeah, it's true. I've found that too.

Peter: I definitely like to work with the same people. If I had my preference, I would always work with the same people and just bring in a new person every now and then to just keep things interesting, but the reality in New York is that you can't. On the flip side of that, I'm really lucky because when I do find new people - like in this show, two of the people I haven't worked with before - they're amazing. I find that it challenges me, and it stretches me, and it changes the dynamic of the shows in interesting ways, so that's kind of cool.

Paul: Yeah. I was going to ask, have you thought about organizing all of the information from your trip into another form, other than a live piece? It seems so ripe or so perfect for some kind of published document.

Peter: Yeah. I would really like to do that. I did write a 3- or 4-page essay for *Framework*, which is the Finnish review of art, but it was a very quick thing that I did right after the trip, because it was due right away. And that described my experience briefly, and had some photos, but I would love to make a more intense "something" out of it. I thought about making an interactive journal, like an e-book or something, that goes into... I think part of what's interesting about the trip is being able to see the things that I made and things that I got back, and I couldn't do that in a book. When I was on the trip, I did write some really, really long emails—10- or 15-page emails— about what was going on. I would write every day in an email, and when I would get to a place that actually had the thing called internet, I would send it. Those have some good stuff in them that I would like to mine in some way. I was planning on writing something to submit to the journal in New York called *TDR [The Drama Review]*, but I didn't get it together in time. I missed the deadline. But I definitely would like to do something with it. I kind of want to go do the trip again, now that I've done it, and also not without a whole group of people, and see how it changes it. I'm really interested in revisiting all of the people who I met, because they were all so incredibly generous. Some of them brought gifts. They were all really just... One of them, near Irkutsk—she was a festival curator, and the festival was going on while I was there—brought the festival to the train platform, because I couldn't go see the festival, which was really cool and very, very generous. It makes you realize how much when you're traveling, you're at the mercy of fate or luck or the good nature of people.

Paul: Yeah, and how traveling brings that out both in yourself and in other people that you're coming in contact with.

Peter: This whole feeling of needing to be accommodating to the moment, that was really nice. I hope that makes it into the piece. I tried to put that in there.

Paul: Is the piece still being made, then?

Peter: The piece is still being made. It's a lot better than when we interviewed the first time. It was in a really chaotic phase. Now, things are really starting to gel in a way that's exciting. The set for the piece is actually fairly integral to the show. There's a really steep rake. It looks like a skateboard ramp, it's so steep. And then there's a ceiling that meets the ramp, and there are projections that happen on those two surfaces. Early this week, we installed that, and having that to play with makes such a difference.

Paul: Oh, I'm sure.

Peter: It creates this horizon line that we are always visually working with, and it gives the performers this sense of the different worlds that they are in to play with. They go between several different performance styles, and they have to go through them pretty quickly. Having the space allows them to make that transition much easier, and it's nice to see the projections. To see everything fully realized in a rehearsal space is a lucky thing. I have a great rehearsal space.

Paul: To have that before... three weeks? Does the show open in three weeks?

Peter: It's a little less than three weeks now.

Paul: That's a nice amount of time to have all the pieces together to rehearse with.

Peter: Yeah, it's very lucky, and it's only because the Can Factory... the guy who runs the Can Factory is fantastic and is letting me build this big thing in there and leave it there without having to pay anything extra, which is just, in New York, is unheard of. Thank you, Nathan! The show is still being made. Last week, I cut about a half an hour of the show out because it was running long. When I first wrote the script it was three hours long, which is crazy, and now it's an hour and a half, which is what it should be. It's always a fun feeling for me to trim the fat out of a show. I'm kind of brutal. I get rid of anything that's not really necessary. It's sad in a way because there are things that I really like, but it feels also good to be able to say, "Don't need that. Don't need that. I need this. This is what it's about." It's about getting clarity and understanding what it is that you're really trying to say.

Paul: Yeah, definitely, and you can't really have that unless you have all the fat to begin with, to get to that point.

Peter: Lots of fat. (Laughs.) Also, having good performers helps. It helps, and it makes it hard. In a way, you start to think, "Oh, but that fat is so lovely."

Paul: It's hard to cut that.

Peter: It's hard, but then you realize, people are going to be asleep. It's just too much. There's an element of interactivity in the show that has really changed a lot. Initially, there were a lot of things that the audience was asked to do, which I'd never done before.

Paul: What inspired that?

Peter: Well, it was this thing of the reciprocal nature of my art project. I did half of it, and then the other artists did the other half, so I wanted to keep that in some way. Now, there is an element of it. There's something that people get to take with them that they can do on their own, that is a little surprise message that they have to decode.

Paul: Nice.

Peter: I think it will be fun and not cheesy. There were many, many, many things that the audience was asked to do, and it just started to become gimmicky and heavy-handed, and now that it's trimmed down to the really essential ones, it feels pretty strong.

Paul: That's exciting.

Peter: You'll have to see what you get.

Paul: Yeah, exactly. I'm so excited. I really am. I feel like having taken the train trip and been to Siberia so recently, that I have this front-row seat in the piece, so I'm very excited.

Peter: I'll be interested afterwards to talk to you and see if the ideas, the things that it inspired in me, if you can see how it did, because it's not a documentary piece. It's not about riding the Trans-Siberian Railroad. That's not what the piece is, but it's inspired by all those feelings. So, I'm interested to hear from you if you're like, "Oh yeah. I understand where you could get this sense or that feeling, or that kind of experience." Because, sometimes on the trip, I definitely had moments where I thought, "I must be just an emotional wreck," because it was a really intense experience.

Paul: Well, you're so lucky to be able to live with that experience in a way or to have an opportunity to process it afterwards. I feel like I miss it, I miss traveling. Whenever I get back from a trip, maybe you feel the same way, there is sort of post-partum of, "Wow, all that happened, and it was very important to me as I was experiencing it, and now it's gone." It's so ephemeral and all those things are so important and then they're gone. But it seems to me that with this piece you're being able to kind of relive it again and again, and apply it into your current life.

Peter: I am. When I got back, I was supremely depressed. I spent two weeks unsure of how to proceed with my life, more than normal. Normally, after a trip, I feel this feeling that you're talking about, "Oh, the rest of the world kept going." In this case, I haven't exactly put my finger on it yet of what it is about it, but it really messed me up. It made me think, "I need to change what I'm doing with my life, somehow. I'm not fully reaching the potential I need to reach." Part of it was feeling that I'm missing out on all the theory and the really intense discussions I had on the trip, because there were all these academics. My experience of New York is that theater artists don't talk to each other. We don't have any kind of dialogue about what it is we're actually doing, except for maybe in these encounters. So, it made me feel like, "God, I really need that, and I miss that." And it made me question, "How do I get it?" It also was really hard to have to go back to work, and to not be able to be the spoiled artist doing this crazy thing. I don't get to do that very much. But you're right, I got lucky that P.S. 122 was willing to let me make this piece. We had talked about doing a show, and we had an agreement that I was going to make a piece. I didn't know what it would be, and there were many options on the table, including doing one of my older shows that I felt never really got its full due—that was what I thought I was going to do. Then after the trip, I went back to Vallejo [Gantner, Artistic Director of P.S. 122] and said, "I think I want to do it about this." He never questioned it. He was like, "Ok, if that's what you want to do, then you should do it."

Paul: Wow, that is amazing, yeah.

Peter: That never happens. So, I've been lucky in that way. It's nice to feel supported.

Paul: Well it's nice to hear that P.S. 122 is still doing what they do so well and supporting the artists in that way.

Peter: I think they are. Like with any organization, there are problems, and especially resource issues, because they don't have a lot of money. The government in this country doesn't value the arts. There are issues, but I've been producing my own work forever and ever, and it's nice to feel like I have a partner in it. I'm definitely still producing it, but I'm getting some help, which feels nice.

Paul: Makes a big difference.

Peter: So, are you making a piece?

Paul: Yeah, we are. We're working away on a new project.

Peter: This is the walking thing?

Paul: We're doing a walking project. We're doing a line. We're investigating line. We're going back to something really basic and simple. You have to know how to draw a line before you can draw a picture.

Peter: That's true. That's my problem. I always draw a picture, and then I realize I never figured out how to draw a line.

Paul: I worked with a partner in San Francisco making dance work for 15 years before I came here, and I was always the total out-there dreamer: "Let's take the roof off of the theater and then this can come in", and Jessica, my partner, was always the practical person. We always met in this middle ground that produced some version of both of those things, and now not working with her anymore, and working with other people, but having lived through that, I find that my impulse is to just go really basic.

Peter: That's an interesting switch.

Paul: Yeah, it is. It's liberating.

Peter: Do you think that has to do with living in New York where everything is so complicated that you just need something simple?

Paul: I think it has to do with that definitely. I think it has to do with the fact that New York in itself is hard to compete with, and also, primarily, we've been doing public performances, so it has to be simple in order for it to stand out, because if it tries to compete with the chaos that's there, forget it. Slow it down, simplify it, and then people will see it.

Peter: That's interesting because one of the things that I'm often criticized for, not by critics, but by artist friends or collaborators that I work with, is that my work is really complicated. It's partly because I think life is really complicated, and my excuse, or why I would say, it's ok that my work is complicated, is because when people come to the theater they expect a really specific experience, and the room is in a really specific way, and it's already so simplified already. You come into this empty, simplified space that allows you to make something complicated. Whereas, if you're making a performance in the street, you don't have that luxury. Nothing's been simplified. Everything's in a context that they're currently in, whatever that might be in that moment. Whereas when you come into a theater, everything's funneled. It's like you go through a sieve when you go through the theater doors.

Paul: The expectations change...

Peter: Everything changes, and you're suddenly in this frame that you don't have in the public space.

Paul: Right, yeah. I think that's a perfect opportunity to blow minds. (Laughs.) Peter, it's really great to talk with you.

Peter: Thanks, Paul.