

Nature Theater of Oklahoma

By Kelly Copper

DATEBOOK

1992

As a junior at Dartmouth, I come to New York to spend a semester in the Trinity College/La Mama Performing Arts Program run by the experimental director and writer Leonardo Shapiro. Leo plots a course through the city that exposes us to more art and life than we have ever encountered, including works that remain with me: Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*, Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*, Mabou Mines' *MahabharANTA*. Richard Foreman's *The Mind King*, The Wooster Group's *Emperor Jones*, Penny Arcade's *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*, Jeff Weiss's *Hot Keys*. Writing this list now, I realize my love for long form started during this time. *Einstein on the Beach* exerted a weirdly emotional pull. I remember watching as the monolith was raised bit by bit to upright, and thinking this was over only to realize they were going to raise it up and all the way off the stage just as slowly! The care and slowness and lack of humans on stage at that moment made time feel like something you could touch.

Leo takes us to other "theater" as well: a protest for World AIDS Day, an auction at Sotheby's, a Sunday service at a Baptist church in Harlem, a tour of East Village graffiti, an art installation of American flags made using tanned human skin. During the day we have workshops: voice with Cecil MacKinnon, contact improv with Nina Martin, Eiko and Koma, Cathy Weis, Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Leo frustrates, pokes and inspires. He says the only reason to make performance is to change the world and that if we want anything less we should just fuck off. Some people think he's an asshole. I smoke everything he says like crack. (I also smoke my first joint on Leo's Brooklyn rooftop, with a guy who does comics for Screw magazine. I will never be this cool ever again.)

I take the train back to New Hampshire for Thanksgiving dinner in a friend's dorm kitchen. He's also invited a new student to join us, from Oklahoma. The Oklahoma guy is Pavol.

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1993

Back at Dartmouth, Pavol and I are two of only three students in a seminar on Dada performance. The professor lectures for two hours straight. Pavol and I respond by staging interruptions to his lectures, and slide each other unmarked, newspaper-wrapped packages across the table. We fall in love. I graduate that spring and move to NY.

1993-1994

Pavol comes down often for visits. We see everything we can. The Wooster Group's *Temptation of St.*



On our way to get hitched, 1996. Courtesy Kelly Copper.

Anthony and Brace Up!—both with Ron Vawter—and a performance by noise-music group Borbetomagus at the Context with water and hoses and saxophones that makes us laugh it's so unbelievably loud. In the fall Pavol gets a fellowship to study with the avant-garde writer and director Richard Foreman. He works on *My Head Was a Sledgehammer* and returns the next year for *I've Got the Shakes*. All the work we love is dense, complex, multi-layered, multi-media, created by artists over long periods of time, in lived-in spaces, with deeply decorated sets. We dream our own theater will be like this and try hard to imagine it. Pavol, who is the only one with the space and time to do it, works on something back at school that tries to make this leap.

I get a job on a children's TV pilot. I work days operating the simpler puppets and nights logging shots for the editor. The studios are on the far west side of 42nd Street, and as I walk to work past empty theaters (could we have one?), I regularly get asked if I do blowies and how much. At first I actually stop, naively thinking they are lost and asking for directions. My bad.

I look for an apartment I can afford on my own, and an old girlfriend of Leo's offers me the lease on her tiny, rent-stabilized studio, \$425 a month, a fourth floor walk-up on St. Mark's Place across from the old Electric Circus. For the next sixteen years Pavol and I have an affordable place to live. (Though it will eventually expose us to two fires, the collapse of our bathroom ceiling, and the nail in the coffin: bedbugs.) This apartment—which magically makes everything possible—becomes

the ground plan and storage container for most of the work we will make together.

1995

Lured by a scathing review in the VOICE we see Reza Abdoh's *Quotations from a Ruined City*. We go back again and again, drawn by the energy and necessity of the work. We go early and hear the actors doing vocal warm-ups before the show—despite the fact that 99% of show is pre-recorded and lipsynched. (We didn't figure this out until the third time we saw it, and were fascinated to realize the audio was entirely pre-set.) The performances are amazing. Everyone's all in—the thing is committed beyond anything we have ever seen.

That May, Reza dies of AIDS. Pavol graduates. We go to Reza's memorial and connect with several actors and fans who are close to that work. We start in this vacuum.

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1996

We work on Pavol's play, *Train Station*, as part of the Blueprint Series at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater at St. Mark's Church. Many of the actors and designers

we know through connections with Reza Abdoh and/or Richard Foreman. We all work hard and for nothing and with everything we've got. We make our own densely decorated set from what we can buy at National Wholesale Liquidators (including bacon splatter screens that we tape to our microphone stands thinking it looks cool...and it does!). Pavol and I are married in June. We rehearse the show the same day as our wedding. We don't care. The wedding even turns into a kind of street performance. We organize a parade of bicycle cabs down Broadway. Strangers come up and kiss us for luck.

1997

Hot off the anonymity of *Train Station*, we stage another of Pavol's plays, *Inferno*, at Theater for The New City's downstairs space. We're more ambitious this time and use our own money (plus whatever we can get from friends) to hire one of Reza's production guys to build a set, mostly curtains. We have a German intern who makes a really convincing latex side of beef. We get smoke machines. I play topless accordion and apply gold makeup to Marc Dale's penis backstage. We run four weeks to empty houses, and are so desperate for audience we drag them in off the street. No one reviews the work (A step down from *Train Station!*). But Mark Russell comes, and he invites us to make the next show at PS122.

We discover Anthology Film Archives, and again we devour everything: Jack Smith, Harry Smith, Ken Jacobs, the Kuchar brothers, Robert Breer. It is



At Coney Island with beloved Nizo Super 8 camera, making movies, 1998. Courtesy Kelly Copper.

entirely possible to consume the history of cinema there, and we do.

Inspired, Pavol buys me a film projector for our first anniversary, and we buy movies to project at home on the wall: old home movies, porn pillaged from the 42nd street theaters, one woman's amateur (but exhaustive!) study of midget wrestling and kittens. We feel like pirates with treasure. We make a friend at the flea market, a former boxer with cauliflower ears who knows what we like, and he brings us Styrofoam coolers full of homemade porn from the 1950s and 60s. People are wearing masks. The titles are handmade. Often no one manages to get an erection. We can't believe it's possible to buy a whole box of these amazing movies for just \$50. But it's getting crowded in the apartment, so we curtail our hoarding.

1998

We stage our third show, *Terminal Juncture*, at PS122 in the spring. I "write" the text using mostly overheard speech and fragments of advertising. Pavol and I record audio for the show with a \$10 tape recorder. We take it wherever we go and record the sea, birds, airplanes – everything is alive to us because of this tape recorder. We paint the downstairs space at PS sky blue and hang tulle on clotheslines with oscillating electric fans to simulate heaven (after *Inferno*...). But right before opening the show, a rat or something dies under the sprung floor. No one can get it out. And it's ruining the heaven idea. We buy Coco Mango incense to cover the smell, but the overall effect is that the oscillating fans continually waft the odor of tropical dead rat over the audience. We get our first review in the VOICE. The reviewer says she pities the poor actors for having to be in it. No audience comes. One of the actors quits. Hope or something like it vanishes, and we swear off performance. Fuck it. It's not changing the world. It's just making us sad.

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Pavol takes a full-time job as a security guard at the Met and spends hours every day looking at painting, photography, sculpture. He starts making photographs. I work full time at an entertainment law firm where I learn to read contracts and other bullshit that turns out to be helpful later. I keep trying to get fired so I can go on unemployment, but they won't do it, and they offer to send me to law school. I respond by dressing very unprofessionally. I put plastic fruit in my hair and wear loud colors. This only amuses the lawyers, which aggravates me. I add birds, plastic deer, whatever I can think of ends up in my hairdo, and becomes an ongoing joke – for the next 16 years. I work there for four years, which – honestly – keeps us in groceries. And they even donate some money to our cause.

We buy an old home movie camera at the flea market and start making Super 8 films, inspired by the films at Anthology from the 1960s NY experimental scene, which all seem to be made with a lot of passion, no

money, broken cameras and stolen film. But the aspirations are huge and the works are uncompromised. We model ourselves on these artists and swear off dreams of becoming The Wooster Group or Reza or Richard.

We shoot Super 8 black and white and Kodachrome. We film on the roof of the building at 4 Times Square with Anita Durst, Tony Torn, Julie Atlas Muz, John Wyszniowski, Jocelyn Warroll (Kristin's sister). It's a meltingly hot Fourth of July weekend and eventually (as you do...) everyone ends up naked. We set off a smoke bomb for mystery and pizzazz. Sparklers. We shoot forty-plus reels of film and run out to try to buy more. Someone with a view of the roof calls the cops. Was it the smoke or the nudity?

1999 - 2000

Discouraged by the ever-increasing cost of film and developing, we invest in a video camera and

a computer for editing. Pavol takes courses at the International Center for Photography and learns to develop and print his own photographs. He's taking portraits of our friends: DD Dorvillier, Peter Jacobs, Tony Torn. People are generous with their time.

We make one or two video projects, and screen them at Millenium. Mike Kuchar, whose films we loved at Anthology, is the projectionist. He's a legend to us, and we stumble all over ourselves meeting him. However it's definitely a reminder that the wages of experimental film are no greater shakes than theater.

Pavol deepens his interest in photography and creates more intimate nude portraits of our friends, then double-self portraits of him naked with our friends, which makes the whole thing nicely awkward and the pictures intriguing. I prefer to be alone, now that we're not making performance. I work in the dark, photographing projections from the home movies we screen on our wall. I change the projection speeds, experiment with different color light.

Eventually I have a solo show of these collages at a gallery uptown. I sell some, and one of them is featured in Architectural Digest. It's a measure of success I haven't had in theater, and I wonder if this is a sign I should take this route? It's nice to have some encouragement. It's nice not to worry about actors. Maybe I'm okay not making performance. Pavol still isn't so clear. In fact he's really unclear. He hates his work at the Met and quits. He starts teaching English as a second language to foreign students. We talk about joining the Peace Corps.

One day Pavol runs into Julie Muz and Sarah Michelson, who ask him to make something with them in an abandoned shoe store. He tells them he doesn't make theater anymore, then he changes his mind. He makes a play for the two of them called *Extreme Family Wrestling*. All the movement is chance generated. The set is the empty shoe store with two lights and two chairs. Just the two women. Nothing more. Pavol has cut all the fluff and bullshit (and multi-layered audio and design that we used to love...) leaving just people and empty space. He feels energized to do another show, and I guess I do, too.



Pavol and me and Marsha Stephanie Blake in *The Chicken*, 2001. Courtesy Kelly Copper.



Tony Tom and Zachary Oberzan in *Fragment* at Classic Stage Company, 2006. Courtesy Classic Stage Company.

of Oklahoma, and so we do, and with a new name are allowed to continue. The show gets a feature in the NY Times and starts an interest in Pavol's work. Classic Stage Company invites him to make a show with Chuck Mee based on the text fragments of lost plays of Euripides. Somehow it doesn't work with Chuck and Pavol asks me to do this with him instead.

We make *Fragment* together. CSC casts Juliana Francis and Tony Torn, and finally we are working with two of Reza's leading actors, which seems like a

dream come true. But this time it's an official Equity show, and we are under Equity contract – there are rules about how long we can rehearse, how many breaks we take, and we are not permitted to give notes once the show opens. Since everything is about the actors and their relationship to the audience, the inability to give notes and shape the show after their first encounter with the public is beyond stupid. We are so frustrated we vow never to work under Equity contract again.

really stupid idea, and come up with \$100 for fabric. Pavol and I spend Thanksgiving weekend watching Peter on a ladder painstakingly sewing horrible cheap green fabric around boiler pipes, creating beautiful swooping drape.

2007

We do the festival. A feature in the Village Voice helps attract audience. We start selling out every night (which isn't that hard, as the place only seats 30). European presenters come. Some walk out after 15 minutes, some stay. One who stays whispers to his friends after the first half hour: "If they keep this up... I'm gonna book it." And he does!

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We get offers to perform *No Dice* in two festivals in the US and four in Europe. We have to tell them how much the show costs to tour, but we have no idea. We ask other NYC artists for help and answers, but there's no manual. We try to hire a manager, can't find one, and then when we do we realize they want to be paid 10% of the total booking fee. We didn't price the shows to be able to afford that, so we're stuck doing it all ourselves: the contracts, the travel, the press materials, the website, the video. We hire an intern from The Wooster Group with no experience to be our tour production manager. Peter (the only one of us with a real career) gallantly lets us use his credit card to finance all the things we forgot to budget: show bags, technical stuff, insurance. So much we don't know.

In Philadelphia we draw a less-than-enthusiastic audience of ten per night, and get reviewed in the food section of the paper, since we serve the audience sandwiches. It's humbling. Portland goes a little better.

Opening night in Rotterdam, we lose over half our audience at intermission. The curator asks Pavol and I to lunch the next afternoon, and we expect her to tell us we have to fix the show, or that she's sorry it doesn't work and we'll never work in Europe again. Instead she reiterates her interest in the work, her belief that we will find an audience here, and says that at the next performance she will talk to people at intermission and convince them to stay for the whole thing. This is the first time we've had someone with the same stakes in the show we have. Her working with us to cultivate that audience is deeply moving and motivating. She asks what we're working on next, and we tell her about a diptych, *Rambo/Romeo*. She wants to help.

In Hamburg we are scheduled to perform two shows: *No Dice* and *Poetics*, the dance piece we made at Columbia. However, when we get there, the production team only knows about *Poetics*. They don't even have any available space for *No Dice*. They find a room in which they store old technical equipment, but it's not available one of the nights, so we cancel one of the shows – which is no big deal because they only advertised *Poetics*. The audience for *No Dice* is again down to just ten a night, many of whom speak little to no English.

Again we get called into the office (it feels like a visit to the Principal), but amazingly – same as in Rotterdam – they ask us what we're working on next. They offer to commission new work, ask us to propose a budget, and say they will help us secure other theaters and festivals to co-commission the project. We are amazed to think we can actually pay ourselves to make a show. I am even more amazed that once we make this show, they will pay us again to perform it, and that these are two separate things and two separate budgets. They laugh at me when I ask about this.

2008

We premiere *Rambo Solo* and *Romeo and Juliet* in Hamburg. We make two separate shows simultaneously so that none of the three leading actors from *No Dice* will be left out. Only on opening night do we realize we have made twice as much work for our new production manager and ourselves—a mistake we will repeat over and over again in all of our future work. The shows run back to back with no break.

Pavol and I accept an offer to make a piece on the

2001

September 11th comes and blows our plans up completely. My mom, who was scheduled for a serious surgery, ends up in an ICU for a month. I lose my job. Pavol is supporting both of us teaching English as a foreign language, and he's miserable. Something has to change, but it's unapparent what or how to do it.

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2002

We decide to work on *The Seagull* as a way to figure out if we even want to make performance. We strip the text and only keep what feels relevant to us. We invite a friend who always wanted to be an actress to move to NY and be Nina. She lives with us and we rehearse the play in our tiny studio for three months. We rent the St. Mark's Theater to perform. Every night someone (a dog or human?) slips in and takes a shit on the stage, which we clean ourselves. Is it a test of our devotion? Is that ascribing too much meaning to a recurring shit on our stage? There is no budget for this show outside the cost of renting the theater. The set is a bench and an overhead projector. We name our show *The Chicken*, after the rubber prop we use instead of a seagull. Some people come, mostly friends, and we videotape the show so Pavol can apply to grad school.

2003

Pavol gets into the Columbia directing program with Anne Bogart. He makes an incredible amount of work in the program, spends long hours at it, brings home videos so I can see what he's up to. I privately envy that he's in a world of art again and not conflicted about his path.

I have a few more group shows of my color photography, but nothing major. I get a job at Exhibition Prints, printing for other artists. I work in the absolute dark (there is no safe light in color), alone for hours at a time. I get super depressed and start thinking about school again, too, as a way to get out of the dark.

2004–2005

I apply to Mac Wellman's playwriting program at Brooklyn College. Mac accepts me even though I gave him a piece of writing that has no characters and no plot. I'm grateful to be in the program. Everyone else is also questioning and searching. I have some friends again, and feedback, which is meaningful.

Pavol makes his final projects for his MFA. I help him with *Antigone*, a dance piece called *Poetics: a ballet brut*, and a version of *Three Sisters* that runs at CSC. There is some problem initially with performing *Three Sisters* at CSC, which is an Equity theater. (No one working on the project is getting paid.) This is outside of the theater's regular season and they are offering us use of the theater for free, but Equity is going to shut it down unless we do it under official contract. As a way to work around this issue, we need to disassociate the production from CSC. Pavol and I have always said if we had a company we would call ourselves Nature Theater

2006

Sarah Benson at Soho Rep wants to commission a hip treatment of a Shakespeare play from us – something along the lines of what she says we did with *Three Sisters*. But we're more interested in original work than classic texts, so we decide not to take this opportunity and instead to take a risk on ourselves. We tell Sarah thanks but "no dice" on her offer, and on the walk home decide this is a good name for our next project.

Pavol suggests that we need a restriction to push us in a new direction, and he starts generating text over the phone. He's calling friends, family – anyone who will pick up the phone – for four hours a day and tape recording all of it. Six months of phone calls becomes the unwilling material not only for *No Dice*, but also – though we couldn't have imagined it – for every show we make over the next nine years: *Rambo Solo*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Chorégraphie*, and finally *Life and Times*.

But for now we have no budget and no rehearsal space. Ryan Gillam at Downtown Art suggests that if we work with her company of teen actors, and if we keep the bathrooms clean, we can use their space at night for our own work. (No one is shitting on the floor here, so we feel confident we can do it.) Ryan hosts us for months as we work. She even unwittingly hosts us as we have our apartment sprayed for bedbugs. With no place to go to escape the fumes, we sleep with our cats on the floor of the rehearsal space.

Soho Rep gives us \$2,000 for the right of first refusal on *No Dice*. We spend all that money on peanut butter and bread for the audience, because we need them to stay for four-plus hours. The show is long, but exciting. The language is so boring it begs us to consider extreme acting and extreme preparation. We build an intense physical and vocal warm-up, reminiscent of our experiences listening to Reza's actors warming up before *Quotations*... We're interested in finding something that feels essential and primitive, and we go to the earliest silent films for inspiration, particularly Fritz Lang's *Nibelungen* and a movie called *The Hands of Orlac*. Everything is in the eyes.

People seem interested in the work-in-progress showings we do. Mark Russell comes again, and offers to include the piece in his Under The Radar Festival. He has no money, but he says he will promote the show, and we can just do it at Downtown Art and keep our own box office. He says we need to make a set – that presenters will have a hard time imagining putting the piece in their theaters since the show is built for this particular room – but the idea of building a theater set seems wrong. We talk to our designer, Peter Nigrini. He suggests just making a proscenium to divide the audience from the rest of the room, and that way everything on that side is automatically a "set." We all like this

subject of embarrassment for Tanzquartier Wien. We are given 6,000 Euros to make a whole new hour-long piece. We say yes. (Were we drunk when we said yes? Yes.) I also stupidly mention that the most embarrassing thing I could think of was for me to be on stage in some sort of Las Vegas showgirl costume. And I am. The show is *Chorégraphie*. We perform this show in Vienna and later in a festival curated by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker in Belgium.

While rehearsing for *Romeo and Juliet*, Pavol and I give actor Rob Johanson a page of text from a series of phone calls we made with Kristin Worrall, our sound designer. Pavol had asked her to tell her life story, and she obliged, over sixteen hours. We ask Rob to write music to this. He comes back the next day with something and we immediately see that this would be worth doing. We name the project *The Life and Times of Kristin Worrall* after Robert Wilson's *Life and Times of Josef Stalin*, but shorten it to *Life and Times* when Kristin says she wants to remain anonymous. (She later changes her mind, but we keep the title anyway.)

We spend seven years working on *Life and Times*.

2009-2012

We use the sixteen-plus hours of recorded telephone conversation as a container into which we pour everything we have ever dreamed of doing. We make an opera, a mystery, an animated movie, a dance, an illuminated manuscript. We're given a chance to work with a veteran dancer from Rosas, a Viennese orchestra, a choir... We say yes to everything.

However, almost all the opportunities to make the work come from Europe, which pits us against demands in the lives of fourteen people who must – to keep making the work – spend time away from family, lovers, pets. For seven years.

It's hard work to tour these shows. The stress of this breeds resentment and misunderstanding among friends. It's physically debilitating. We live together like family, but we're not. We have different lives and just this one dream in common. For some the costs eventually outweigh the rewards.

The work and stress finally put Pavol in a Hamburg hospital, where he is diagnosed with vestibular

neuritis. He's dizzy and can barely walk, but we have tour dates, and continue on for another month with him in this condition.

2013

We premiere *Life and Times: Episodes 1-4* at the Public, produced by Soho Rep and as part of Under the Radar. After the run, one of our actors asks to meet with us, and says she needs to quit to spend more time with her new husband, and so they can start a family. We can't imagine how to deal with this. The shows are built so specifically around the people involved. We don't want to replace her, but we have to – we have dates booked starting in May – but it's not enough time for anyone to learn parts in all four shows, and we struggle the rest of the year on tour to strike a new balance.

We decide not to book any more touring in 2014 so we can process the change in the company and devote more time to new episodes. We find funding to shoot Episode 7 as a movie, which we think will help put us in a different creative space. We travel to Vienna and manage to secure a theater commission for Episode 8 with the promise of additional funding to complete the final two episodes there over the next few years.

2014-2015

We meet with presenters in January and people start asking us for 2015 tour dates, so – though this is an official "off" year – we have to start talking with the actors about their availability to tour a year from now. The conversations are difficult. People feel like they are being forced to make a choice between their personal lives and the work. In many ways we realize this is our dream and not theirs, and maybe not even ours anymore.

The Vienna theater which commissioned Episode 8 suffers a financial scandal, and cancels all funding for the project.

My mother calls and tells me she has cancer.

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Finally Pavol and I decide that we have reached an uneasy end to *Life and Times*, this body of work we've all poured seven years of our lives into. We shoot the final three episodes as movies (oddly

ending up back where we were in 1998 with a renewed, burning interest in film and video). I'm editing them now, and as I watch the video of us working together, I find myself thinking a lot about the earlier years, as I do. I've often looked fondly on those times, when we were just starting in New York, as being more simple and free. But I know that's retrospective romance, and I know how things come full circle. You give up and then you give in again. Collaborators fall away and you invite new friends. It's sad, but it's part of life – and it can even be liberating if you can embrace change as an essential part of the work you make.

It has been an incredible experience to have the privilege of making a living performing, teaching and creating work. This was a dream I never saw coming true. Never. I've been changed by every place we visited and everyone we met and had the good fortune to work with.

I don't know where this next chapter will take us, but I do understand with absolute clarity that the next several years could run the gamut – from cleaning feces to changing the world. You gotta be down for all of it, smoke hope like crack, and pray for the best. Sometimes it happens.

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Nature Theater of Oklahoma is an award-winning New York art and performance group under the direction of Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper. Since Poetics: a ballet brut, our first dance piece created as an ensemble, Nature Theater of Oklahoma is devoted to making the work we don't know how to make, putting ourselves in impossible situations, and working from out of our own ignorance and unease. We strive to create an unsettling live situation that demands total presence from everyone in the room. We use the readymade material around us, found space, overheard speech, and observed gesture, and through extreme formal manipulation, and superhuman effort, we affect in our work a shift in the perception of everyday reality that extends beyond the site of performance and into the world in which we live. www.oktheater.org

Edited by Andrew Dinwiddie, a curator, maker, performer, and producer.



Life and Times—Episode 2, in Vienna, Austria, 2010. Courtesy Anna Stocher/Burgtheater Wien.

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