

# 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.

.....

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 Bruce 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 42<sup>nd</sup> 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.

.....

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.

.....

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.



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.

.....

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.



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.

.....

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.