

Susanne Schaup

Double Edge Theater

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provided
you are prepared to work
hard for it."*

As an outsider and an amateur, I admit that I found the training intimidating when I joined Double Edge Theater for a three-week intensive seminar at their homestead, a 105 acre farm in Ashfield, Massachusetts, in summer 2005.

Training is the foundation of everything that is done at Double Edge. It is structured around the idea that hard physical exercise leads to heightened creative configurations, and individuals are joined in a living organism. The practitioners find their own form of physical expression and at the same time their place in an organic whole. Spontaneity does not preclude being part of a whole. There is a constant give and take, a movement of systole and diastole, an awareness of oneself and the rest of the group.

Students are invited to choose among a variety of objects and to establish a relationship with their chosen object and spend time exploring it. The improvisation evolves from this creative dialogue with an object, its transformations, the moments of intensity when we have a sudden insight or a feeling we did not know before. It may seem like a strange ritual, performed by a motley group of revellers interacting with objects, such as old hats, odd pieces of clothing, flags, poles and sticks, rocks, bottles, empty trunks, but for the participants it is a supremely meaningful process of liberating their creative energies.

There is no doubt about the *reality* of this training. We developed a sense of identity by interacting with others, and this 'other', as we experience in the second week, could also be an inanimate object. It was up to us to make it come alive. Whatever we did, we were encouraged to put our heart into it, to appropriate the act and make it our own. If authenticity is thus established in the interactions during the training, it will gradually transform our actions in 'real life', too.

This is what made Double Edge Theater such a special experience for me: the theatrical act, the creation of a dramatic image or scene is rooted in authenticity, in the identification of the performers with their act. Towards the end of the three weeks the improvisations came together in

a unified and stratified whole, supervised and woven together by Stacy Klein, the artistic director and founder of Double Edge Theater.

We had been given a loose framework of ideas within which to work: the imaginative world of the Polish writer and artist Bruno Schulz. Stacy Klein supervises the training and gives her comments at the end of the sessions. She uses words sparingly, but pointedly. After presenting an improvisation of a few minutes to the group, she could ask: "What is your idea?", if the act was too complex or muddled. We felt encouraged to continue working on our ideas using an object that appealed to us, exploring moments that gave us a sense of identity.

"We use the physical to reach the untapped spirit and imagination of the human potential," Stacy says and continues to explain that it is necessary to transcend one's limits. "In our training you leave the known behind and enter the unknown." This takes courage and a sustained effort, but it is precisely this transition which opens up the spirit. "We are using only a fraction of our imagination" Stacy says and continues, "it is imagination which makes us human. It distinguishes us from all other living beings." She believes that "we all have a bottomless well of creativity," and that "everyone can tap this well". She literally means every human being, irrespective of age and social or cultural background.

"You can achieve whatever you want to achieve, provided you are prepared to work hard for it. Technology has practically eliminated the necessity to move in order to survive. Survival is all in the computer." We are left with the choice either to submit to inertia, the slow death of body, spirit and soul, or to make an effort to regain our humanness. The training of Double Edge Theater is designed to regain this basic human aliveness: "What we are doing here is not an invention. It is not a discovery we

made, but a return to what is natural and human." Stacy Klein has a holistic view, in which art and theatre are not seen as opposed to the real world.

The technique of the training was elaborated over the years, after Stacy Klein and some of the company had made contact with the Polish Teatr Laboratorium directed by Jerzy Grotowski and trained with another Polish company, Gardzienice Theatre Association.

As a training in survival, the farm grounds are included in the work as well as the performances, and the audience follows the actors to the various sites: the former silo or the pond at the far end of the premises. The whole farm is a stage.

All the performances of Double Edge Theater, most notably *The Song Trilogy* of the 1980s and 90s, *Master & Margarita* (based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel) and *The UnPossessed* (based on Miguel de Cervantes), evolved from long periods of training, although only a small percentage of the material worked on is actually used in the performance. Maintaining an innovative theatre such as Double Edge is an uphill struggle, but Stacy Klein is undaunted and has been working with her company for twenty-two years.

The Double Edge practice is not only a training in authentic, spontaneous theatre, but a school for discovering and exploring the creative potential dormant in all of us.

SUSANNE SCHAUP (Austria) was born in 1940. She graduated in English and American Literature and has worked in Germany, USA and Austria as a freelance writer and translator. She is the author of several books, including *Sophia - Aspects of the Divine Feminine* (Nicolas-Hays, York Beach, Maine, 1997).