

Cruising Through The Lost and Found with Lisa D'Amour

By C. Denby Swanson
August/September 2003

Outside the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, I have exactly one hour to talk to the Obie-award winning combo of Lisa D'Amour and director Katie Pearl (who were recognized this spring, along with fellow collaborator Kathy Randels, for *Nita & Zita*). We've known each other for a while and share common theater roots in Austin, Texas; they've worked together extensively. We are all working on projects at PlayLabs: theirs is Lisa's new play, *Cataract*; mine is as dramaturg for Laurie Carlos.

"Ok, here's the plan," Lisa tells me. "You're going to come with us. We're going to drop off Carlos [Trevino, an actor who came up from Austin, Texas for the workshop] and then we can talk." Stopwatch set. One hour. Go.

We get into Lisa's Delta '88 Royal Brougham, maroon with an Ivory Landau roof and one white door that Lisa describes as "the result of an unfortunate accident with an uninsured motorist." We head over to the Augsburg College campus, where Carlos has been assigned a dorm room. In the wide backseat, I am wearing blue sunglasses. Katie's match the red letters on her black T-shirt: L-O-N-D-O-N. We could easily be in some summer music video. Cruising the city streets. Oh, yeah. We pull up to the dorm.

Carlos can't find his key.

Driving back to the Playwrights Center, retracing our steps, the patina on our music video is fading. We are quickly losing energy. Lisa and Katie are tired from their afternoon's script-work; I am anticipating mine. Carlos is starting to feel his early-morning flight. The sun and midwestern humidity seem to conspire, adding to our lethargy. The windows are all rolled down (electric, oh yeah) as we skim back past the Somali Starbucks, the Lutheran church on the corner, the "Accident Reduction Project Area" signs above the stop-light at Franklin Ave. and 29th. The stopwatch runs on. Half an hour has already gone by.

Back at the Center, I perch on the side stoop with Katie. "You can talk to me," she offers. Summer is big and brash in Minnesota; in a very short time it will be cold again. Right now, it's very bright. I take out my tape recorder as Lisa and Carlos split up to look for the missing key. As she heads inside, Lisa happens to glance down into the grass by an uneven patch of sidewalk. Something glints. "Here," she says. "This has to be it."

Lisa has a magical way with objects. An attraction to them, maybe. A method of invocation. A process of discovery. The way she uses them in her writing is both alarmingly skillful and disarmingly simple. In *16 Spells to Charm the Beast*, a woman extracts her children from her pockets—the script calls for things that are small and hand-held; in the Austin production, many were kitchen utensils. "Why this choice?" Lisa will ask herself later on, as we discuss her work via email. "Perhaps because of the sheer number of kids, also in that particular scene Norma feels particularly overwhelmed by them, and perhaps disconnected by them," she speculates. "The choice also seemed in keeping with the angular, surreal world of the play which seems to live as much in the world of installation art/architecture as theater."

When I am in doubt— about my own work, about what's possible, about the power of the imagination— I go back to Lisa's writing. What makes her vision so distinct and resuscitating? "Lisa's beauty sort of rests in her bizarre events," Katie says to me. "The juxtaposition of images, the way she allows objects to reveal things." Dissonance. Playfulness. The thin bridge we walk on over the waterfall: anything could happen. The result is not simply a play but a full experience— one miracle, a bunch of miracles, a bunch of realizations all at once.

For her performance piece *Slabber*, for example, which I saw in Austin several years ago (it changed, depending on the city), the audience gathered at one location only to receive directions to another, mysterious place, where the play's sole character, *Our Lady*, awaited. We were issued cassette tapes that included a bit of "sweet" music, an introduction by Dave Fruchter (another Austin collaborator), and a few tantalizing words from *Our Lady*, perfectly timed for the ride:

Take a moment, as you drive in your car to try and feel the speed with which you are moving through the universe. Let the container of the car fall away and feel yourself hurtling through space, without boundaries, without form. And as you hurl through the universe, all of the opposing forces in your body— love and hate, goodness and evil, memory and action— are activated in such a way that your body begins to force itself apart. You feel the spaces between all your joints widening, creating gaps in the places where your bones connect to other bones. And you are fighting to pull yourself back together, into your original state, inside the car, but the opposing forces are stronger than you— (Pause) This is how I feel all the time. Constant motion, emanating in all directions, like electricity, or a disease.

At the art gallery where the piece would be performed, *Our Lady* was sitting in a chair, still and silent. She was wrapped in cloth and plastic; several mannequin limbs were attached to hers— a leg, an arm. She wore sunglasses. It was as if she was trying to insulate herself and protect herself from heat at the same time. Dave was our intermediary: "This suitcase, here, contains artifacts from a very old story. Please think of the artifacts as visual aids in our collective journey. These artifacts should allow you to come very close to her, without ever leaving your chair. OK."

Ok. Go. What do you want this to be? What do you bring to the piece? How are you a collaborator in it also? What are your senses and how will you engage them? These are the challenges that Lisa continues to bring to her audience.

This fall, New Georges will produce and Katie will again direct Lisa's play *Anna Bella Eema*, an enthralling piece set both in and out of a trailer home. It includes objects, music, and three strong, idiosyncratic female characters. This is how it starts, by a woman identified in the script simply as "One":

My name is Irene and I have been alive here in this trailer home for as long as I can remember. When you are alive in one space for such a long time the things that you remember mix with the things that are happening now, and the things that you dream about. What I mean is, sometimes the things that are happening are equal to the things that are not happening. So as I speak to you please do not ask me to come clear on such points as "happened" "did not happen" "is happening" "will happen." They are all simmering in one pot. Here on the electric radar range inside this trailer home.

You sense already that this writing is theatrical, even just reading it. It's charged. It's active and alive. You feel it take you off the page. It makes you want to look up from the text toward the bodies that are surely already in motion in front of you. Irene's story doesn't have a beginning, it has an entrance. You are physically present in a strange, stunning, marvelous world. At one point, Irene says that she touches her thumb to the tips of her other fingers; I find myself doing that also. One. Two. Three. Four.

Anna Bella Eema is told in narrative form. Characters for the most part speak out, in first person, rather than in traditional dialogue with each other. The form breaks our confinement to one location, one reality, one time. Moreover, "each character is like a gem," Katie says, meaning that you turn them back and forth in the light; sometimes you get dialogue, sometimes you get a song. Facets. Because, you know, people are complicated. Occasionally, the play's three characters, as if merging, speak at once:

This is what it means to be an individual, Annabella. This is what it means to be free: To be free is to be origin. To be origin is to be a slayer of images. To be a slayer of images is to be more than another set of bones wandering across the earth. The be more than another set of bones wandering across the earth is to realize that you are just another set of bones wandering across the earth. To be just another set of bones wandering across the earth is to be human. To be human is to be alive. To be alive is to have the capacity to create something outside of yourself. To have the capacity to create something outside of yourself is to be magic. To be magic is to be of the earth. To be of the earth is to be of the stars. To be of the stars is to be simultaneously ancient and eternal. To be simultaneously ancient and eternal is to be origin. To be origin is to be free.

Katie suggests that Lisa's sensibility comes partly out of growing up in New Orleans, which is also a strange place full of unexpected things. You're driving to the store, say, "and then there's this crazy parade. The environment is overripe."

Lisa describes the city as a place where rejoicing happens for the sake of rejoicing. "I associate [the city] more with dancing," she offers. "Dancing and really good, really rich food. And underneath all that is something really scary, like ghosts, or really not nice to look at, like poverty. Jazz funerals. Let's dance 'em to their grave."

"New Orleans gave her permission to come up with really outlandish images," Katie says. "Things happen there in a way they don't really happen in Oklahoma."

In another place, the grass may have already been burnt by summer sun; Carlos's brass key would have been hidden. In another place, maybe Lisa would have found something else instead. In this one, Carlos gets in to his room. Meanwhile, Lisa will find objects hidden to other naked eyes, and she is sure to weave them into a landscape of her own creation: a theater, a world.

I'll be happy to go along for the ride.