

The Rhythms of the Gods

Just as anyone who listens to the muse
will hear, you can write out of your own
intention or out of inspiration. There is such
a thing. It comes up and talks. And those who
have heard deeply the rhythms and hymns of the
gods, the words of the gods, can recite those
hymns in such a way that the gods will be
attracted.

Joseph Campbell 1983

It's February - the month he loathes.

If he doesn't work in February, he hibernates and waits for the whole depressingly dark dingy month to be over.

The month of purification.

It was in some book he read: *februa*, expiatory offerings, possibly of Sabine origin.

May be that's why he finds it so difficult to navigate his way through this month.

He was never good at atoning.

For what?

Failed marriages, absent fatherhood, impatience, selfishness?

For refusing to reconcile with God?

For refusing to answer the question?

Wasn't that the answer?

Atonement?

No.

Purification?

Yes, and this is usually the month he tends to purify.

This year he's losing weight, starving and pummeling his complaining body down from 169 lbs to a weight of 150. For most people of his height and age, his present weight is perfectly acceptable, but there is a look he wants to achieve in his overall physical appearance. A look - that when the audience sees him on stage, they see a more angular shape, lean and lithe. Any excess weight he has not only goes to the stomach of course, but also on his face.

Vanity?

Certainly... but he has also observed that he moves in a different way when he's lighter. His energy, his stage energy, that energy that he would have so much difficulty describing if he was ever asked – and he never has been - that secret part of himself that houses all his actor's emotional baggage, becomes more electric blue... rather than heavy red.

So it is February and I am once more on the road. This is my fourth national tour with the Aquila Theatre Company. Surprisingly I am enjoying it as much as the first tour I was involved with in 2001.

I hadn't expected to tour at all. Early on last year it seemed as if it wasn't going to happen. I had been quite determined to follow my instincts and they seemed to be taking me in another direction. Hence I found myself not in New York last summer, but out in New Canaan, Connecticut, for my first open air theatre experience - playing Oberon.

However in a space of a week all was changed. The offer was made for the Aquila Fall tour to play Claudius in Hamlet and various characters in The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr. Hyde. I was surprised that when I listened this time to my instincts, they all said 'yes'. I suppose one should say instinct, but I feel in my case there is more than one.

The reasons for going?... great parts, great cast, nice people and...timing.

I'm reading Joseph Campbell's life story at the moment, the great American professor, writer, and orator best known for his work in the fields of comparative mythology and comparative religion.

His most famous quote was "Follow your bliss".

Campbell believed that at the heart of what he called the hero myth was just that message. After his Power of Myth series aired, "Follow your bliss" became a catch-phrase. Campbell intended it to mean that one should follow the natural order and cycles of life, though, like Aleister Crowley's "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," it has been misunderstood by critics as a call to craven libertinism...

and there are many critics of him in the more puritanical Christian States.

His view on religion and the mythologies of the world, ancient and modern, make perfect sense to me. The trouble Campbell had with most religions was their beliefs are taken and passed on as facts instead of a myth – a symbol.

"If you concretize the symbol, then the symbol loses its power."

He tells a wonderful story of being interviewed for a radio program on the subject of "Myths".

The interviewer starts the program by declaring that a myth is a lie. Campbell replies that a myth is a metaphor.

"No," the interviewer says, "it is a lie."

Campbell then asks the interviewer to give him an example of a metaphor. The interviewer is uncomfortable and tries to deflect the question, but Campbell is relentless.

"Give me an example of a metaphor."

The interviewer says, "I'll try."

He thinks for a moment.

"So and so runs very fast. People say he runs like a deer."

"That is not a metaphor. The metaphor is so and so is a deer."

"That's a lie," cries the interviewer.

"That's a metaphor," says Campbell .

His point? That whatever your idea of God is, it is a metaphor for a mystery that transcends all human categories of thought. It's putting you in touch with the mystery that is the ground of your own being. If it isn't, then it's a lie.

As I said, Campbell's famous phrase was 'Follow your Bliss.' He connected that to the artistic pursuits in one's life. His opinion was that if you are doing a job just for the sake of money, then you aren't really living, just being – and he compares this to a mythical hero quest.

It's strange that when I think back to the start of this American adventure, with all the difficulties and tragedies that I encountered, I compared it to setting out on a quest similar to Frodo at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*.

I am following my Bliss...

... although I'm not sure I like the phrase...or the way it's phrased.

I am acting Shakespeare.

I am acting in good parts.

I am acting.

My version is "Follow your instincts." It's what I say over and over again in the workshops that we hold all over the country. I have to tell them that actor also means doer...not thinker... the main problem that the young theatre actor has is thinking too much and not enough 'doing'.

Although when you're rootless and traveling from place to place, following your instincts is sometimes a hard mantra to put into practice.

It used to bother me that I didn't know where I was going to end up. I still don't know.

Rootless.

I'm currently homeless. But it doesn't bother me any more.

If you can see the road ahead, chances are you're on the wrong road.

The Aquila 2005 Fall tour was a hard traveling tour, made even harder because it took us into the unknown chaos of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. We were to be the first acting theatre company to tour around that area of Louisiana . No one knew if there would be rooms available in the hotels. They were given to the refugees from New Orleans, who had priority over visitors. The theatres had beds made up in the dressing rooms just in case we were turned away.

In Lafayette, Louisiana the theatre itself had been taken over as a hostel, so we were asked to put on a free outdoor production of *Hamlet* for the town.

Our technical director, Robert, did an amazing job of turning a concrete platform into a makeshift theatre. Metal scaffolding was erected and lights hung. We were told that a massive black backdrop that was used for masking behind our scrim had been fished out of the waters of New Orleans. We tried not to think what could have caused the mixture of smells that emanated from it.

It was while we were in Louisiana that we got wind (sorry) of another hurricane barreling its way across the Gulf of Mexico towards Florida . A quick adjustment of the schedule, and we were doing a mad 12 hour dash across Louisiana to Tampa , Florida . A brief sleep of four hours and then out to the airport to catch a plane for a welcome week's stop at one of our favorite places on the tour, Anchorage , Alaska.

A week later we flew back to Tampa via Salt Lake City, a journey that had me leaving my camera on the plane. Miraculously it was returned to me by the airline some three months later. We then made our way across to West Palm Beach, which the recent hurricane had hit badly. It was uncertain whether the theatre was going to have its power restored in time for our shows. It did, just in time. However we were forced to change hotels because of the lack of running water.

The last part of the tour consisted of some grueling driving and performing on the same day as we worked our way back up to New York. For the technical staff that meant loading out the show from the theatre around 11pm and getting up again anywhere between 4.30am and 7am to travel and load in at the next venue. The interns would follow them two hours later. This would have much harder if it hadn't been for the wonderful spirit that made up this particular touring company. I hadn't experienced a company that genuinely liked each other since the 2001/2002 *Tempest* tour. Touring life can be hard and that last stretch was particularly gruesome, but usually you find that other times on the tour balance it out, with days off in interesting, beautiful places and short driving days.

Hamlet has evolved into a very solid show. Cut down to two and three quarter hours and without Fortinbras, it became more of a domestic drama. With little set and a black & white lighting, the words are thrown into the foreground.

The strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr. Hyde I also liked because of the theatrical slant – but that was always work in progress.

On my return to Manhattan I had imagined that my next job would be with Aquila for their revival of their 60's Much Ado About Nothing at La Jolla Playhouse in California. However it transpired that Andrew Price, our Polonius and the lead of Jekyll & Hyde, was unable to return for the 2006 Spring tour. In a meeting with Aquila management discussing all the options, it became clear that I would serve the company best by staying with the tour and taking on Andrew's part in Jekyll & Hyde. When asked, I voiced my thoughts of where I personally felt the play should go in its development, but Peter, our artistic director, was way ahead of me. I found that all the ideas I had been thinking of in terms of style and character development were already in the melting pot and were to be tried out in a workshop week on the play that December.

The premise for our Jekyll & Hyde is an interesting and entertaining one. Richard Mansfield... The Ripper ... Bram Stoker...

I play the actor Richard Mansfield, who was born in Berlin . He was the son of the famous soprano Erminia Rudersdorff Mansfield and her second husband, the wine merchant Maurice Mansfield. He was known as one of the great American actors of the 19th century. He was educated in England, and studied painting in London. Unfortunately his painting could not sustain him and he eventually drifted into acting. His big break came when he was engaged by D'Oyly Carte in April 1879 to appear as Sir Joseph Porter in Gilbert & Sullivan's H.M.S. Pinafore He was a smash hit with the audiences and continued to play the leading comedy roles for the traveling opera company.

Following the death of his mother in Boston, Mansfield headed for America. and began to focus on the legitimate stage. His first major success came as Baron Chevrial in A Parisian Romance. He subsequently bought the rights of Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, and with the writer Russell Sullivan writing the adaptation, he produced and starred in a production that became a sensation both in New York and London.

When it was first published in the year 1886, Robert Louis Stevenson's novella The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Stevenson's original title omitted the "The") aroused a storm of controversy. Quaint Victorian sensibilities were outraged by its premise that every human being has a demon lurking within, longing to break loose and indulge in forbidden pleasures. By scientific means, the tale's protagonist, the kindly Dr. Jekyll, frees his suppressed self and plunges into an orgy of uncontrollable licentiousness that ends in an untimely death.

The action of our play takes place in August of 1888, when Mansfield brought the play to London's Lyceum Theatre. The Lyceum's manager was, believe it or not, the author of Dracula, Bram Stoker. Mansfield was a great hit in the role and his transformation from Jekyll into Hyde was the talk of the town. A scary spectacle. Women fainted, and men would speculate on what trickery was used in the remarkable metamorphosis.

On August 31, however, a murder was committed.

Jack the Ripper's reign of terror had begun. By October, three more Ripper murders had occurred. Mansfield became one of the suspects when an anonymous letter was sent to Scotland Yard. It pointed out that Mansfield was off stage at the time of the murders and made the comparison between his portrayal of Mr. Hyde and the demonic nature of the Ripper's murders.

Louis, with Peter's guiding hand, has combined the three elements of Jekyll & Hyde, Mansfield and the Ripper and turned it into a weird and wonderful evening of melodrama, farce, comedy and psychological intrigue.

Louis writes in the program that *"...we decided to attempt to merge the Jekyll and Hyde story with "The Theatre" by creating a play-within-a-play. In this way, we could explore the idea of addiction and transformation, and we could watch Mansfield at work, both off-stage and on. We could see him struggle with the life of his production of Jekyll and Hyde, we could relish in his frustration when Jack the Ripper*

starts scaring off his audience and the intrigue when he becomes a suspect in the case. Moreover, we might enjoy the complications that ensue as the off-stage and on-stage worlds start to collide – and ultimately merge.”

Ultimately it means that I have ended up with a wonderful part where I play the three roles of Mansfield, Jekyll & Hyde...with a bit of Lear thrown in. The question of Hyde and how to play him was resolved by returning to the book and reading a graphic description of the man and the way he sounded. If you throw into the mix, red contact lenses that only audiences close to the action have any chance of seeing, false teeth that make the top lip protrude, my hair - which I have grown (a hippy Claudius now) - made wild... and add the voice strangled, lowered an octave and raspy, and the body hunched and low to the ground, but with a lightness of foot.... and my Mr. Hyde is complete.

I had some trouble in the beginning with the teeth. One performance they flew out in mid sentence. Somehow I managed to catch them in mid air, put them back in and continue with hardly a break. One of the actors witnessed this and couldn't stop laughing for the rest of the performance. This problem through trial and error was eventually resolved by renewing the teeth putty for every show. At \$5.95 a time a bit of a luxury, but fortunately we have a good deal fewer J&H shows. I say fortunately, but to tell you the truth I would love to have more. I think the show grows every time we perform it and has great potential.

Mansfield himself ended up in America where he continued as one of the great actor managers of his day. He obviously wasn't an easy person and some critics never warmed to him. His acting process was meticulous and quite modern in its total pursuit of the character. How this finally materialized on the stage we only have the critics' words left to judge.

Perhaps a better measure of the esteem in which he was held by the general public and the theatre world can be gauged by this fact. The Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway was previously called the Mansfield, named after the actor when it was built by Henry and Irwin Chanin in 1926.

I'm also reading Peter Ackroyd's excellent biography on Shakespeare. Of all the biographies on Shakespeare I have read, this one is my favorite.

My life has a kind of parallel.

I find myself away from home roots – as Shakespeare was away from Stratford – and at the centre of a thriving bustling city - New York for me, London for Will.

Shakespeare too would tour with the Globe actors when the plague closed the theatres in London. They would tour a little slower than us, but probably just as strenuous.

A force on tour with tour de force.

We are really an American echo of those Elizabethan actors.

I have already mentioned the trip to the White House to perform for the President and First Lady last year and how this contrasted with Shakespeare Christmas trips to Queen Elizabeth's palace, and subsequently more frequent performances for King James 1. The way we put the plays together is more akin to Shakespeare's time than the modern.

In rehearsal, the process is extremely collaborative. Certain actors have certain skills –as Louis with choreography of movement sequences and comedy, Tony with music, Lisa with everything. Robert our director - probably because we have known and worked with him over a long period of time - seems more akin to the role that Shakespeare seems to have had. One who guides us through the text, takes what we give him as actors and pushes us in a direction. We don't for example turn up on the first day of rehearsal and see a model of the set and drawings of the costumes. Those are elements that will be discovered in rehearsal. There may be an idea of a concept at the beginning, but rarely is it set in stone. Rather, it is an image that is out of focus, but will become apparent as we experiment with ideas, shapes, characters and situations. Robert's imagination works in a wonderfully strange lateral way, more often than not it is surreal and absurdist. Peter, our artistic director, acts as creative overseer and provides the glue which holds it all together. Between them, they give the shows the magic dust and the finishing sparkle. Peter has the final word on the creative production, but as in Shakespeare's time, the productions are always evolving and changing. Hamlet was rewritten and changed at least three times by Shakespeare. Lear also had some major reworking. I think had Shakespeare lived longer he would have continued to tinker with the plays. I remember asking Robert when he felt a production was complete. His answer? When he moved onto the next production.

I suppose unlike most artistic mediums that is true in acting. Because we are also in the act of repetition over long periods of time, it is necessary to keep refining, exploring, to change, to experiment with subtle shift in emphasis.

I once asked Peter Hall when *The Master Builder* was up and running and he visited us on the pre-West End tour whether he minded me changing some of his blocking for my scenes.

“No, I don’t mind... as long as the intentions remain the same, but the intentions must remain the same.”

He woke with a start.

The hotel room was now in darkness. Where was he?

Another hotel room.

Newark, murder capital of the States, was outside the window. Grey, grim and grotesque in its ugliness.

Horrible in its distortion.

He had slept for an hour and his nerves were shot.

It was strange being an exile.

It was not something that he acknowledged consciously. He knew he had come here for a reason. But there it was, that voice in his head.

One day you have to return.

An exile.

He still felt a pull from across the Atlantic. He loved working with American actors, but was fascinated to see what effect his time in the States, working with American actors in American theatres, would have - if any – when he eventually flew back to the UK.

He still had the ambition of returning to the town of his birth – Stratford on the Avon.

Like Shakespeare, he would need to return one day.

The Return of the Native.

The RSC was still an ambition he had yet to fulfill. He believed it could happen at any time and for no obvious reason, just an underlying belief.

His ex-wife had just recently achieved her ambition.

She had finally made it to Broadway.

So dreams did come true.

He had been dreaming.

To sleep, perchance to dream.

The undiscovered country.

Would this traveller return or lose the name of the action?

It was strange being an exile.

He woke with a start... and wondered if he was still dreaming.

I finally took the plunge and made use of the health benefits that I had accrued. I now could afford to go to the doctors. All those years of the British National Health Service left me unprepared for the commercial dynamics that make up the American system.

One afternoon I went for my first medical appointment in seven years. I had received a health card and registered myself with a doctor. It was simple enough. I just took pot luck with a list and picked where I thought would be the easiest place to travel to in Manhattan. I chose a woman doctor, Yvette Gordon MD on West 28th Street, and booked myself in for a check up. The last time I had had a check up was in the UK and that consisted of my blood pressure being taken and a cursory listen through a stethoscope.

I didn't know what to expect over here. I had to get there half an hour early to fill all the paper work and let them check up on the insurance. I handed over \$20 and was taken away by a nurse and put into a small room

with a medical bed in one corner. The nurse took my temperature and blood pressure and then left, telling me on her way out that the doctor would be with me shortly.

Time passed.

For some reason I felt very lonely and vulnerable in that little room waiting for the doctor. I thought of the people I know who have dealt with illness recently.

Time passed.

This was what they probably had to go through: uncertainty, apprehensiveness and the helplessness one feels.

Time passed.

Eventually there was a light knock at the door and a tall elegant 30-something black woman came in and introduced herself. Her eyes were kind and shone with an amused twinkle. She proceeded to give me a full examination. I had to take off all my clothes and wear a kind of paper night gown which opened at the front. She then checked my heart, my pulse, my ears, my eyes, my neck, thyroids, stomach, prostate, everything! I was told to sit on the bed whilst she took my blood.

"Oh you have ropes!" she said. When I asked what they were, she explained that it meant my veins stood out.

She liked the rope veins. However it took a while to find the vein and was a little unpleasant. I have never been comfortable at the sight of a needle.

After the blood was bottled and labeled, I went for my final exam -an ECG - a machine that monitors your heart and all your vital signs.

I came out an hour and a half later, tender, sore and emotionally and physically weary.

The results came through a week later and showed that there was nothing untoward and that my cholesterol was excellent!

One of the big surprises and challenges I have had since my time with Aquila began are the Shakespeare workshops that I have given on the road. At one of these workshops three years ago, at the Governors School in Greenville, South Carolina, I met a young student called Emily Bennett who was in the process of applying for Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. We kept in touch and I gave her advice and encouragement. I was pleased when finally she was accepted for the full three year RADA program. In May of last year she took me around my old college. It was a very strange experience for many dark and complicated reasons. The most obvious shock was the whole building, except for the main entrance, looks completely different inside. Millions of pounds have been spent in its rebuilding. I wandered around like a ghost. I hadn't stepped foot inside RADA since 1984. Later on in the year I found out that Emily had taken a year out of RADA. Since our Ophelia was not returning for the Spring tour, I suggested that she might like to put her name forward for the role. She flew into New York to audition for Peter and Robert, and was subsequently offered Ophelia. I love it when life hands you the chances like that. In this case it seemed the obvious action and not a coincidence. I don't believe in coincidences.

I walked out on stage last night in Shippensburg, VA, to perform Jekyll & Hyde in a beautiful theatre that had just been built and was taken aback to discover that we had 1300 people in to see our show. Since the population of Shippensburg is 5,500, this seemed extraordinary. J&H though kept them entertained. It made everyone raise their game and their performance - and we had to make it big. A good thing to do because we could push it to the limits and see where it took us. It still is work in progress. It's difficult having three endings... and nothing really can top the transformation I make from Hyde back into Jekyll- simple and effective lighting magic. However the reaction at the curtain call was extremely positive.

During the show, one of the crew fell off his chair because he was laughing so much when Darren and Andy, the Scotland Yard Inspectors, disguise themselves as East End prostitutes. It's a good sign when you can

make the crew laugh.

As I said... It is improving all the time.

Usually I do the preshow talks for Hamlet and Jekyll & Hyde, but for one venue they had a classics professor come in to talk to the audience. I slipped in the back and was startled to hear him say in his first sentence that Hamlet was 'unstageable'.

Hardly the thing an actor wants the audience to hear before he is about to perform the 'unstageable'. He went on to say that he thought it was wrong for Hamlet to get angry or violent with his mother in the bedroom scene, that he was persuading her through the power of his reasoning alone. When he asked me to come and say a few words to the audience, I pointed out that Gertrude had just witnessed her son kill Polonius and the sword was still in his hand. I said I didn't think Gertrude would need much persuading to go along with what Hamlet says, and anyway she says in the script that he is shouting. I divulged that I had been the stepfather to a stepson who was every bit as troubled as Hamlet. His relationship with his mother was passionate, close, violent and punctuated by furious shouting matches and physical fights.

It can be an extremely ambiguous and fiery relationship between mother and son.

I felt a bit guilty contradicting the professor, but, really!

Actors are closer to Shakespeare's text than anyone. It's written for us, by a man who was an actor and theatre manager. It's our job to keep it alive and performed on stage and not left to be worshipped on the bookshelves of academia. The problem with the teaching of Shakespeare, or talking about him and his works, is that you're dealing with a work of art... and that is transcendental. That is why it is important for the students to read Shakespeare aloud as much as possible. So they can feel the way the words work on them and on the people listening. Reading and studying Shakespeare alone and in your head has the danger of putting it into the mind and not the spirit. It's something that a lot of young drama students have trouble grasping.

For instance - and this is my personal opinion - the Method technique, or any technique, is fine as long as it is not forgotten that it is just a way in. If it is used, it should be used - I believe - only once, within the rehearsal process and as a layer. I think most of the best actors I know are instinctive. That is not to say that they don't meticulously study their character, but after researching the background, inventing perhaps the personal history, they allow the character to come to them, rather than bash away at objectives, motivations and all the rest of it. It comes to them from within and not through their minds.

Most of it is beyond words. It's the instinct. This is especially true when performing in theatre. It's not just the other actors you're speaking to, but the audience, and their energy... the crew and their energy... the very energy that lies within the stones of the theatre, the atmosphere - everything. It's taking all of those things which have an energy, most of which you can't see, and using it to make the words, yourself and the play, burn a little brighter.

The worst question an artist can be asked is: "What does it mean?"

The worst insult an artist can inflict is to give the answer.

We are pretty successful in our Shakespeare productions within the parameters that are part and parcel of touring - no set, a time limit of no more than two and a half hours, eight actors, etc. - but we also have the right to fail and to fail gloriously in our attempts to make Shakespeare - even the 'unstageable' - accessible to our young modern audiences.

It was now March - February was over.

He smiled.

A cause for celebration - but a quick look at the touring schedule tempered any celebratory mood.

March was in like a lion... and was about to kick their butts.

A hard schedule lay ahead.

Long driving days.

Driving and show days.

Incredibly draining.

Days off on which they had workshop commitments to fulfill. It would be time to grit their teeth and be exceptionally patient and kind with one another.

In April they could look forward to settling down in Nashville for nearly a week and with just one show a day.

A paradise for the actors of Aquila.

Swings and roundabouts again, he thought to himself... Spring was not far off now.

Electric Blue, not heavy red.

And the voice in his head...

Will you listen to the rhythms

And the hymns of the Gods?

Will you follow follow follow

Follow your Bliss

Will you follow your instincts?

And he whispered

Yes.