

## How I Came To The Four Saints

In 2010 Jack Cummings, Artistic Director of Transport Group, attended a performance of my multi-character solo play, *The Myopia*. Shortly thereafter he asked me to work with him on a solo rendition of *I Remember Mama*. I was intrigued by the idea – but had reservations about my performing that play. We decided instead to look for a script I might better connect with.

I recalled seeing a charming and tender 1927 silent comedy, *The Patsy*, based on Barry Conner's 1925 eight-character romantic comedy of the same name. I found a copy of the play and read it aloud to Jack and his creative team. We loved the script – and during a three-week workshop in the winter of 2010, Jack, dramaturge Krista Williams and I trimmed the play to a fleet 80 minutes and developed a preliminary staging (for which I took very detailed blocking notes). I then spent the next three months working on my own (in my apartment), memorizing the lines while mastering the blocking and developing my physical and vocal interpretation of the characters. We rehearsed in the spring of 2011 and put the show up that summer. It went like gangbusters – we had a great time of it and audiences found it a delight.

Jack, Krista and I were determined to find another script to work on. Two years later I made an outlandish proposal: a solo rendition of Eugene O'Neill's 1928 eight-character, six-hour, nine act, seldom-produced and vastly underappreciated drama, *Strange Interlude*. The play is noted for its frank depiction of infidelity, mental illness, abortion, and deception over paternity – and, most importantly, its extended internal soliloquies. After a week-long residency in which we examined the script, we were persuaded by our designer Dane Laffrey, to make this our next endeavor. We staged the play in a series of workshops – after each of which I would (as I had with *The Patsy*) work on my own at home to master the script and staging and develop a physical and vocal interpretation of each character. It was a four-year project – and a remarkable creative experience. Our 2017 production was greeted with great enthusiasm.

I have dedicated a certain amount of my creative energies to performing work by Gertrude Stein – principally several of her lectures – one being *Composition as Explanation*. In that lecture, Stein speaks of making in her work a “continuous present.” Essentially, it suggests a film strip playing at normal speed of which the viewer can nonetheless see each individual frame. Stein of course set out to accomplish this in words. It occurred to me that I was accomplishing something to that effect by performing a solo rendition of *Strange Interlude*. In a conventional production, as characters speak their inner thoughts, the actors portraying the other characters are required to enter a soft freeze so as not to distract from the soliloquy being delivered. As a solo performance, the audience had only to look and listen to the single actor. The play thus became the film strip moving at normal speed and I became from moment to moment each individual frame.

Shortly after this realization, I decided that I would perform a third solo – thus creating a trilogy of sorts. I knew immediately it should be a work by Gertrude Stein. After reading various texts, I settled on *Four Saints in Three Acts*. All three plays in the series were written in the late

1920's; and each represents a different form of playwriting. *The Patsy* is a romantic comedy, *Strange Interlude* a modernist drama and *Four Saints* a radical theater text.

*Four Saints* was conceived as an opera – and written in collaboration with composer Virgil Thomson. But collaboration, as we generally think of it in the theater, is perhaps not the most accurate description of their working relationship. Stein wrote her text independently – and then gave it to Thomson to set to music without any further collaborative involvement. I feel that the script itself has literary and theatrical merit and have chosen to perform it without the musical score. Stein often referred to *Four Saints* as a play. I have taken her at her word.

I had worked with director Ken Rus Schmoll on my adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. We enjoyed an exceptionally fruitful collaboration – and were eager to continue collaborating. I read the play to Ken – and despite my uninformed and inept delivery, he was immediately intrigued. It didn't take long for the two of us to become enthusiastically engaged in this endeavor.

Ken has a probing intelligence, sensitive to the intricacies of language and attuned to unconventional expressions and depictions of human experience. Long before working with him, I was moved by the emotional and intellectual energy of his work. His productions feature an exceptional coordination of speech, movement, visual representation – and all in sync with fine acting performances. He created a gorgeous production for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* – and we have a heck of a good time working together. We are joined in this project by Jay Stull – Ken's associate director and our dramaturge. In addition to being an astute director, Jay is gifted playwright; and he brings a playwright's intelligence to our investigation of Stein's singular approach to theater.

*The Patsy* and *Strange Interlude* each presented their own unique challenges. *The Patsy* features breakneck comedy, pyrotechnic family hysteria and tender romance – all without pause. It requires non-stop, high-speed performance. Given its length, *Strange Interlude* requires endurance; but that is not all: while the characters in *The Patsy* are recognizable types, the characters in *Strange Interlude* are highly individual – and there is a psychological intricacy in the characters' pivot between dialogue and inner monologue.

*Four Saints* is its own remarkable challenge. There is no discernable plot; dialogue is interspersed with substantial unassigned narrative passages; when lines are assigned to characters the lines in-and-of-themselves do not suggest characterization. Stein stated that she was interested in “emotion and time” rather than “story and action.” That suggested to Ken, Jay and I that her language – its rhythms, cadence, wordplay, rhymes – all eschewing ordinary sense – could be interpreted in service of a continuous flow of emotional moments “unburdened” (as Stein would have it) by having to follow a story. Interpreting *Four Saints* has necessitated my making a multiplicity of decisions: vocal and physical characteristics for the various characters, choices regarding rhythm and tempo, physicalizing the narrative passages and, most importantly, interpreting the dialogue and narration in a manner that *implies* story only insofar as it facilitates the emotional flow.

*Four Saints* “dramatizes” the experience of artists as saints and saints as artists. Their creative acts are realized in a gyrosopic relationship between their inner and outer lives. According to Stein, genuine artists (who she thinks of as saints) construct the “contemporary composition” from which they are inseparable. In other words, they fundamentally create the time in which they live and of which they are a part of. And like saints, authentic artists are often rejected (“refused” as Stein puts it) during the time in which they live.

Because of a Covid surge, Transport Group postponed a planned 2022 production featuring a cast of nine actors when the risk of infection was high. Instead, I was asked to revive *The Patsy*. I jumped at the chance – and relearned the play in a matter of weeks. Serendipitously, this has meant again performing the first play in this series only months before premiering the last of the three plays. I thus come to the *Four Saints*.