

Optimism and Pessimism:
Cynthia Hopkins Returns to the Stage as an Alien Mother

Beth Kurkjian

July 7, 2007. A hot evening in Brooklyn, N.Y. The residential streets pulse with salsa music. A line of people who seem unfamiliar to this area of east Bushwick march from the L-train subway stop towards the Starr Street Space to watch Catch 24, a performance series that features experimental works-in-progress. [1] Inside, the raw, open Space has a cement floor, with a small kitchen area where volunteers sell beer and homemade popcorn in paper bags. Chairs are arranged in three rows on simple risers and on the floor, facing a bare space. According to the program, curated by Andrew Dinwiddie and Jeff Larson, Cynthia Hopkins will perform first.

She begins in the upstage left corner from underneath an old wooden wheelchair, holding a long rope. She wears a pig nose prosthetic, a curly black, cropped wig, a beige 1970's pantsuit and white scarf (that make her look somewhat like a pilot), and ladylike boots. Her body is propped up on a board above the small-sized wheels so that with her back flat and her legs extended, she can pull the rope with her arms and glide on a diagonal trajectory, towards the audience. She pulls herself headfirst, while singing a song about love and loss. [2] Her sweet voice hangs in the humid air.

As the song winds down, she arrives downstage and tosses the coiled rope aside. She turns the chair with her feet to face the audience and slowly lifts her head through a hole in the chair's seat. The audience titters, presumably at the toilet bowl imagery. She acts as though she has to struggle to breathe each time she raises her head, but, in between gulps of air, she manages to explain that she needs to save her missing daughter, that humans have caused themselves to become extinct due to American imperialism and environmental carelessness, and that Earth may be destroyed unless she saves it... although it might be better for the whole universe if it is eliminated. At one point she shouts, 'I came here because I'm a believer. I'm a believer!' and 'Jesus Christ, are you even listening to me?' She whimpers through a

number of lines before wagging her finger and yelling, ‘The Earth is my home.’ Soon she shifts from storytelling back to singing; in the lyrics she wonders if she must first change herself to then change the world. Suddenly standing centre stage, she lists pros and cons before declaring that she will explain this conflict in a dance. The audience laughs.

With quick steps in a syncopated rhythm, she shakes her arms and swings from her torso, before melting to the floor. After a backwards summersault, she picks up singing the second song. Every time she sings the word ‘mind,’ she makes a hand gesture as if she is holding a fragile ball. She half sings, half yells lyrics like: ‘it’s so beautiful!’ during the climax of the song and concludes her workshop excerpt quietly, on her knees, gazing at her ‘mind’ gesture.

About a month later, I invited Cynthia Hopkins, an experimental theatre-music-dance artist based in New York City, to talk about her creative process on this new project. *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)* will be the final show in her trilogy, first set in motion with *Accidental Nostalgia* (2004), and followed by *Must Don’t Whip ‘Um* (2007). [3] *Accidental* and *Must Don’t* stemmed from Hopkins’ explorations of her autobiographical ‘demons,’ and in these two somewhat overlapping fictional narratives both main female characters try to decipher how memory relates to identity, and how to convert loss into an inventive tool. [4] In the interview below, Hopkins articulates how *Success/Failure* contends with her current and future concerns about being a mother, a citizen of the United States, and a human being on this planet. Her focus appears to have widened to include not only her personal demons but also those she sees out in the world today, and she transports her worries and her questions into a science fiction context.

As in her prior shows, Hopkins plays the lead character in *Success/Failure*, writes the script and the lyrics to the songs, and also composes the music. She performed solo at Catch, but her collaborators will most likely join her on stage in the final version; they include her design team Jeff Sugg and Jim Findlay, and her band Gloria Deluxe. In the past, Sugg and Findlay have not only controlled video, lighting,

and set elements, they have also intermittently spoke, danced, played musical instruments, and sang back-up. Gloria Deluxe's sound mixes blue grass, folk, experimental, and brass band stylistic traits. [5] Hopkins sings the lead vocals and at times plays the piano and the accordion. After *Accidental*, Hopkins formed a company called Accinosco with her collaborators—she is the Artistic Director. [6] They have toured the first two shows to major cities across the United States. Hopkins received a 2005 New York Dance and Performance Award (Bessie) for *Accidental*, Sugg and Findlay received a 2007 Bessie for their design in *Must Don't*, and CalArts presented Hopkins with the prestigious 2007 Alpert Award for the Arts for Theatre. The successful second show, the company's larger national exposure, and the recognition from the awards have all contributed to a shift in her career in 2007, elevating her from 'emerging' to 'mid-career' status within the experimental performance community. Eric Colleary in *Theatre Journal* predicts that 'the [third] production will surely continue Hopkins's legacy of creating dynamic theatrical fusions, hence setting the bar higher for other artists in the field' (Colleary, 2007: 515).

Hopkins' formal aesthetic hybridity largely emerges from the experimentations created during the latter part of the last century by artists in the United States like Laurie Anderson, Richard Foreman, and the Wooster Group. Laurie Anderson emerged alongside a number of other solo performers in the late 1970's/ early 1980's, but her dedication to electronic music and technology, and her disarming, gentle way of speaking set her apart from daredevil monologists like Eric Bogosian and Karen Finley. Anderson's storytelling and musical performances encouraged Hopkins to envision *Accidental* as a solo show originally. But once she started collaborating with Sugg and Findlay, Hopkins found she preferred involving them in the stage action both as performers engaged in the narrative as well as performers who attend to their technical tasks. This choice recalls the Wooster Group's work, as they have included creative collaborators, writers for instance, on stage with the actors instead of off in some of their productions. Over the past thirty years the Wooster Group is perhaps best known for inter-splicing classic texts with lesser known sources, for considering their works in process indefinitely, and for integrating

videos on multiple screens. Sugg and Findlay have worked as designers with the Wooster Group and Hopkins interned for them. The Accinosco company is part of a cluster of younger groups that do not have what Renato Poggioli would call an 'antagonistic' response to the work of avant-garde artists of previous generations that have become more established; they are inspired, in different ways, by postmodern techniques of their predecessors. Yet, as Helen Shaw puts it in her *Must Don't* review in *TimeOut New York*, 'Hopkins pulls off the impossible: She makes postmodernism danceable once again.' [7] While many artists have and continue to blend music, dance, and theatre traits together, collage video with live performance, and blur the division of art and life, this group—fuelled by this prismatic progenitor—tantalizes contemporary audiences with a masterful concoction of these tools. Accinosco's work also tends to be more emotive, playful, and hopeful than the work of their predecessors. This difference originates from Accinosco's centre of gravity—Cynthia Hopkins.

Hopkins is the visionary behind the majority of the elements at play on stage. Like the playwright-director-designer Richard Foreman, whose career began in the 1960's, she funnels something innate to her into the fictionalised, highly stylised settings. Both of their theatrical representations reveal obsessive patterns of inquiry when placed alongside their other works. Her plays are much more linear than Foreman's, but they are still challenging to follow. Hopkins pens contradictory viewpoints about her characters within her plays by having the character she plays contradict herself, by having other on-stage or pre-recorded characters question her character's believability, and by incorporating Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg's mind-bending manipulations of pre-recorded and live images. She adheres to Foreman's belief that audiences will create their own interpretations out of a complicated, even confusing performance and purposefully offers spectators what she calls a 'layered' experience by juxtaposing ideas within the text with movements, sounds, costumes, and set elements. [7] Though Foreman may attend every show and often control sound cues, Hopkins physically performs inside the 'layered' universes of her productions on stage.

In addition, her mode of performance does not function simply as a singular layer among the other elements. Hopkins comments on her performance as she performs. She frequently draws attention to the artifice within the theatrical production through her spoken and sung delivery, her movements, and her usage of props. This dramaturgical strategy relates to the styles Foreman, the Wooster Group, and many others have cultivated—they are all largely indebted to Bertolt Brecht's *alienation effect* concept. Patricia Coleman's *PAJ* essay, 'La Belle Indifference', sees Hopkins' performance as 'neo-Brechtian' and she examines how Hopkins' 'switches, as if dancing, from the position of observer to observed and back again' in *Accidental* (Coleman, 2005: 133, 135). Johannes Birringer, also writing about *Accidental* for *PAJ*, observes Hopkins' mysterious positionality within the matrix of 'a poetic journey filled with superb ironies'; he articulates how Hopkins' 'gestures are infused with dark humour and the ambiguous smile of the cabaret *chanteuse*, making us ponder how to interpret the inflections of her voice' (Birringer, 2007: 4).

To me, Hopkins' clever performance style also slips into another, deeply inhabited dimension. At times, she performs in a heightened emotional state that Foreman and the Wooster Group would avoid. It's almost as if the surplus of formal choices and her alienation skills frame micro-moments of transcendence. *The New York Times'* glowing review of *Must Don't* concludes with, 'at the heart of the production's magic is her soulful exploration... All the rest is wonderful confetti.' [9] Hopkins can touch spectators in an uncanny, authentic way. An audience member blogger writing for On the Boards, a theatre in Seattle, pinpoints a moment from *Must Don't* for him:

I found myself at several points admiring her skill at making eye contact with the audience as she appeared to be singing directly at me before I realized that she was, in fact, facing away from the audience and singing to a camera mounted on her piano. That ability to foster a sense of intimacy in the midst of so much technology and to be lifted rather than overwhelmed by the spectacle surrounding her is what marks Hopkins as a truly remarkable performer. [10]

To me, these soulful, intimate readings of her performance relate to her

dramaturgical decision to weave her experiences into the fabric of the narrative. For instance her characters in *Accidental* and *Must Don't* talk about struggling with alcoholism, as Hopkins does, and about losing her mother at a young age—at fourteen years old, Hopkins' mother died of cancer. Hopkins' family members often portray characters somewhat related to the roles they play in her real life. John Hopkins, her real father, in a video clip portrayed the adoptive, abusive father (even though he is neither of those things) to her character in *Accidental*, and in *Must Don't* the action on stage suggests that her actual husband, Jeff Sugg, portrays the role of her character's Sufi lover. Even though Hopkins does not use her own name in her shows, like the late actor Spalding Gray did in The Wooster Group's early *Rhode Island Trilogy*, Hopkins' bursts of feeling within the material is palpable. Shaw's review, for instance, comments on how '[Hopkins] blurs the edges of confession and performance.' [11]

Hopkins binds the three shows together by employing the character name Cameron Seymour in each one. She believes that Cameron Seymour could be considered an alias for herself. [12] This admission reveals the proximity she feels toward the character(s) or perhaps the persona(s) she inhabits. However, although Seymour is always the protagonist, in each show the plot reveals that Seymour is never really on-stage: in *Accidental* the audience learns that the woman they have been watching stole Cameron Seymour's identity when Seymour died; in *Must Don't* the audience learns that the woman they have been watching is not Seymour but Seymour's daughter representing a reconstruction of who she imagined her mother to be; and in *Failure/Success* Ruom Yes Noremec (Cameron Seymour spelled backwards) introduces herself to the audience, but another woman, far into the future, may actually be relaying Ruom's story. The narratives that Hopkins constructs simultaneously encourage her to embody a version of herself and keep herself at a distance. This structure allows her to engage in a hybrid positionality during her shows. The twisting and recycling of the name Cameron Seymour is also a literary device that coheres the three works together.

Hopkins' usage of her personal experiences in her writing relate to a well-established

literary tradition—the playwright Tennessee Williams and novelist Ernest Hemmingway are two well-known cases of writers who created characters that were more like representational mirrors of themselves. *Failure/Success* pulls attributes from a more fantastical, science fiction genre. Hopkins references *Star Trek* in the interview and she uses a sci-fi genre vocabulary—Inter-galactic League of Universal Consciousness, for example—in her monologue. It may seem less possible to bridge science fiction with autobiography, but Hopkins sees the conjuncture of these genres as an opportunity to push between fact and fiction on a more extreme level in her writing. [13]

Biography journal dedicated its winter 2007 issue on how these seemingly disparate genres overlap, noticing, in particular, how many science fiction stories are narrated with an autobiographical style. Lisa Hammond Rashley's essay, for example, examines how the famous science fiction and fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin tends to write 'much of her nonfiction, employ[ing] the same fundamental narrative techniques of experimentation and play that characterize her fictional writing to create multiple feminist identities through narrated autobiographical bodies' (Rashley, 2007: 23). She does not argue that Le Guin portrays herself through her characters *per se*, but that the literary strategies in each form of writing is similar. John Rieder's introduction to the issue discusses how 'generic identity is also a generic difference that is made visible by its being positioned within a system of recognizable terms' (Rieder, 2007: xiv). Hopkins playfully employs almost stock science fiction settings and terms within a theatrical context, while continuing to foreground the struggles of the protagonist modelled after herself. The sincerity in her performance is conspicuous when she sings about her confusion about wanting to change the world but needing change to herself first.

The playful tone running though the Accinosco shows offers audiences thoughtful and entertaining points of entry into their productions. Take for example the pig nose. On the one hand it may conjure memories of *The Muppet Show* and its 'Pigs in Space' segment, or seem like a vaudevillian gag, but it also darkly references freak show displays and titillating tales of human deformity. Hopkins believes that Ricky

Jay's book, *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (1987), may have had a 'subconscious role in the development of the pig nose costume.'[14] Jay recounts how a wealthy woman, Tannakin Skinker, was born in 1618 in 'a neutral town between Holland and the German Empire' with swine-looking facial features (Jay, 1987: 28). Her family tried to lure a husband for her by offering an enormous dowry to no avail. Nevertheless, this story became 'the basis of legends, broadsides, waxworks, and exhibitions for the next three hundred years' (Jay, 1987: 31). Indeed, the plot in a new Hollywood film *Penelope* almost parallels Skinker's life-story completely. [15] Perhaps the imagery of a woman elegant in every way except for her nose appealed to Hopkins. A woman such as this lives a liminal existence: she embodies grotesque and refined qualities simultaneously. Hopkins explores a related duality within her bittersweet performance of *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)*. The seriousness juxtaposed with humour within her storytelling, her dancing, and her singing allows her to communicate strength and vulnerability, ugly conundrums and blissful emotions. As an artist, Hopkins refuses to unpack riddles in her performance. Ultimately she knows she cannot teach us how to understand or value what is success or what is failure. Instead she seems to shine a mirror on deformities, within ourselves and within our world, that we can choose to disdain and/or lovingly embrace.

Hopkins keep issues in the news both in the forefront and in the background of this new work. Essentially she funnels her feelings within an alien world that can potentially inform us about the paradoxical world we live in now. Performance Studies scholar and experimental director Richard Schechner finds Hopkins' *Failure/Success* fits somewhere between the socially conscious work of experimental artists like Bread and Puppet Theater and the Living Theater and art for art's sake works of artists like Robert Wilson. [16] Here Hopkins discusses how Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) inspired *Failure/Success*, and she relates decades-old scientific theories written by Stephen Hawking and Buckminster Fuller to the present. To me, former covert CIA agent Valerie Plame Wilson's recent controversy with the United States government resonates against her inter-galactic agent's narrative. [17] Portraying an alien dissenter on-stage not only suits the plot, it

also characterizes her everyday feelings. Her anger towards the Bush administration, global materialist culture, environmental destruction, as well as her worries regarding her own mortality and the desire for motherhood, suggest strong feelings of alienation within the cultural systems she resides in. As she opines about these issues, she does not come off as elitist. This transcript displays a more melancholic confusion coupled with a yearning for hope and knowledge.

The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success) is still gestating, but Hopkins appears to want to encourage a synergetic awakening between her art and the audience, such that spectators could potentially humbly consider how we are each a small part of a larger whole, yet also responsible for the forces that we individually and collectively contribute. [18]

August 22, 2007. This interview occurred in Kurkjian's apartment in Manhattan, N.Y.

BETH KURKJIAN: Could you talk about the origins of your ideas for this new work?

CYNTHIA HOPKINS: I'm trying to expand upon the themes of the first two parts of the trilogy. One of those is mortality—accepting the mortality of other people and of one's self. The first piece had to do with someone who goes on a search for her father, and then she accepts letting him go, and, in a way, letting the effects he's had on her life go. Then the second piece is about someone looking to find out who her mother was by trying to investigate the little fragments of the past, then ultimately accepting the loss of her mother. The third part is a crisis of mortality for the protagonist, and also for the human race as a whole, in the guise of a post-human universe in which the earth's fate is at stake.

I can tell you a brief summary of the plotline. Basically humans are extinct. They rendered themselves extinct. And they did that partly through a complete misuse of

the earth and its resources. They ultimately blew themselves up in a nuclear explosion. But now there's a post-human race of creatures and the protagonist is one of those. She is a former secret service agent, inter-galactic agent and (laughs), and she has quit the field because she got involved in a conflict on another planet. The earth is reliant upon other planets for fuel— because the humans used up all the fuel. The government on earth sends her to investigate and she finds out that that planet has no interest in going to war against earth, which she was sent there to prevent. It's a long story, but she gets captured by a terrorist group on this other planet, and they say: 'nobody here is interested in earth; you've got to tell your people that.' And she goes back to tell them that but finds out they already waged war. So the terrorist group kills her husband in revenge, thinking that she spurred the conflict when she was trying to avoid it. So she quits the secret service. She says, 'the government lied to me; I'm not going to work for them anymore.'

Then she gets called out of retirement, (laughs), to go on a mission to save the earth from obliteration. The government tells her that there's this Inter-galactic League for Universal Consciousness, which is the ruling entity of the universe, and they tell her that that league is on its way to destroy the earth because the earth has produced so much bad juju, bad energy, that they feel the best solution is to obliterate it. She says, 'you guys lied to me before; you're probably lying now. I'm not going to go—no way.'

But then she finds out they've kidnapped her daughter and they're holding her hostage. They threaten to take away the remaining thing she has to live for, if she doesn't go on her mission. So she goes on the mission, and what she finds out is that the universe is re-collapsing, and that the reason that ILUC is heading to destroy the earth is because there's a wormhole at the centre of the earth to another universe. The only way to out of this universe that's re-collapsing alive is by blowing up the earth and going through this wormhole. They've actually gone and explained this to the government of earth, and asked them to evacuate the planet, but they've refused.

KURKJIAN: And who is populating the planet of earth?

HOPKINS: Creatures. Yes. So the pig nose, you were asking about, which is part of the costume—I really wanted some mask that would make me less human. Like *Star Trek*; anything that would look different. For a while I was buying putty that you can use to change your features. Stage make-up. And I just couldn't get it to look right. Finally, I went to Halloween Adventure and they had these pig noses. I tried on one of those and it immediately looked sort of alien, part animal, non-human. It transformed my look, but wasn't extreme. It was subtle, but pretty disturbing. It was also easy because I could attach it with spirit gum and then rip it off. At first I thought, I'll just try this until I find something better, and then it stayed that way.

KURKJIAN: How does the...

HOPKINS: People have asked about its significance, but it's not really...

KURKJIAN: So you mostly happened upon it?

HOPKINS: It's somewhat accidental that it ended up being a pig nose. It's not...

KURKJIAN: So in terms of it being a metaphorical reference to a pig...?

HOPKINS: The pig is less... yeah.

KURKJIAN: How does this new piece relate to its title?

HOPKINS: *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)*? A lot of different ways. (Laughs). The way I've constructed it right now, which may not end up being how the piece is, is that this whole story of this post-human creature that I just outlined is actually being told by an even further in the future creature in the new universe, who's talking about what happened to the old universe. She's telling the story of the destruction of our universe that we live in now.

KURKJIAN: Okay.

HOPKINS: It's like storytelling and she points out at certain moments that this is an example of the success of failure. The first one is the extinction of the human race. That could be seen as a failure, an enormous failure, but it also made room for this new race of creatures to evolve. And so that is the success of failure.

The failure of success has to do with... this person who's a secret service agent/ protagonist loses both her parents when she's very young. That's part of the reason she becomes an agent: she wants to devote herself to something indestructible. She learns this lesson when the government lies to her and she quits this agency and she's losing everything she had ever worked for. She had been really successful. She had become an agent of justice, but then she found out that the justice she thought she was fighting for doesn't really exist. So she quits it. But when she quits it she finds a happiness she had never known was possible, in falling in love and in mundane life. That's the failure of success, her success. It's both, actually. That concept is alive in all of the pieces. It's like, how do you turn lemons into lemonade? Which is essentially what we're all (laughs) trying to do, all the time.

KURKJIAN: (Laughs). That reminds me of a moment in the excerpt I saw when the post-human creature says, 'okay, on the one hand, I really want to save the earth...'

HOPKINS: Right.

KURKJIAN: '...but on the other hand, I don't.'

HOPKINS: Maybe it wouldn't be the best thing to save the earth, too. I think there's this idea of American imperialism, that's like: we're going to succeed; we're going to take over the world. Of course, Islamic fundamentalists have the same idea: we're going to take over the world; we're going to make it like it was in the 7th century. It's so primal or primitive to say, 'my people are going to survive no matter what!' And

I'm trying to turn that on its head and say: we have to accept that we're not going to last, as individuals, and we have to accept that our race is not going to last much longer. Who knows? It's not a given. 'Axis of Evil' is a good example. There's this idea that there's good in the world and evil in the world, and the good's got to crush the evil. It's such a dangerous notion.

KURKJIAN: Do you feel like the character demonstrates a feeling of helplessness towards being able to do something? Perhaps she realizes that whatever she (or it) does, it won't be enough? Or...

HOPKINS: I don't know if it's so much that it won't be enough. I think it's almost like a Hamlet crisis in a way, like an existential crisis. Right and wrong are pretty amorphous concepts. You have to just try to accept what the reality is and figure out the right way to live your life. And it's always shifting. Like in the other two pieces, she actually realizes that she has a lot of impact, that she does have a lot of control over her reality. Because those actions have consequences, constant repercussions from all the actions you've already done.

It's kind of a karmic or an eastern philosophical view, which is what I'm interested in studying at the moment. I think some people misunderstand it to be, 'oh you get what you deserve.' You can twist it—like the whole thing that happened with AIDS: 'oh, it's God's wrath against gays or whatever'—but karma is a different thing. I think karma translates directly as action. It literally means anything you do has repercussions. They don't stop; they continue on. They don't stop where they are. They have ripples. So I think it's a matter of accepting what you can change about your reality and also accepting what you can't change.

KURKJIAN: In moments of the other pieces you have this way of being not quite like a teacher, but presenting ideas to the audience. Sometimes it seems like you're clearly saying certain ideas. And then other times, for instance during the excerpt that I saw, you said to the audience, 'I'm going to demonstrate this conflict with a dance!'

HOPKINS: Right.

KURKJIAN: You're doing something with how you're trying to relay information. Can you talk about different ways of offering ideas?

HOPKINS: It's funny because I've been recording an album of the songs of the last piece. And the people I've been working with, the engineers, are very much of the music world, they're not from the performance world. Occasionally they've asked me, 'what is this show?' So I've been wondering why I use this hybrid form. Why isn't it just the music? I think it's because I am interested in many forms of expression being necessary to express any idea really. I think it's exciting for me. It's exciting for me as an audience member when I experience multiple levels of communication at the same time. Because I think that language is a tool. And that it has its limits, as a tool. So, it needs some help. (Laughs).

There's something really satisfying about completely isolated forms, too. Like I love to read, I love reading just ideas. I love reading words. I love storytelling, where it's just the words. But I guess it's exciting for me to make things where there are all these different methods because I'm trying to investigate convoluted conflicts and existential crises of living. The pieces are really about trying to figure out how to live your life. Do you have the power to make your life better? Do you have power to make the world better? If so, what do you do about it? I think that kind of story is going to have the most impact if there's a physical element, a sonic element, a visceral element, an intellectual element, and a linguistic element to it.

KURKJIAN: What kinds of sources have inspired you? Environmental sources, for example. Or what sources led to you to include this idea about the destruction of the earth?

HOPKINS: Well, I was talking to my father on the phone when I was just finishing the second piece. And he said, 'okay, so what's the next one about?' (Laughs). I

was like, 'I don't know, Dad, I'm not thinking about that.' He said, 'is it about the future?' (Laughs). I said, 'I guess it should be.' He said, 'well, the first one was about the past.' I was like, 'that's a good point.' So I started to think about the future.

When I think about the future, all I can think of is the mortality of the human race and the planet that it lives on. Then I thought, well, why do I really think that? I don't really know. I just am kind of a doomsday person, from personal tragedy and whatever; I'm very aware that things are probably not going to go very well. But let me just find out. Of course, it's a huge, hip thing right now, in fact, environmental issues. It's easy to find a lot of interesting material.

The first thing I read was Buckminster Fuller's *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969). That is an amazing book because it's so far ahead of its time. It's revolutionary in its thinking, in his thinking. He points out, 'I've lectured for thousands and thousands of people, for so many different kinds of audiences and I always ask: 'do you know the meaning of the word synergy?' Nobody knows this word except if I lecture for chemistry students; scientists know this word synergy.'

Synergy is the power or maximum efficiency of any machine that is greater than the sum of its parts, or that's greater than any sub-assembly of the system's parts or any individual of the system's parts. So the cake tastes better if it's all mixed together. There are millions of examples, but different kinds of metals, if you put them together, have some strength that is actually greater than the strength of one plus the strength of other. His whole point is that we live in a synergetic world. Everything is inter-connected. If we don't work together to make this planet survive, it's not going to survive, and we're not going to survive. He argues that this earth is a spaceship. We're floating in space and we're in an unbelievably miraculous situation. Scientists are completely baffled that it turned out this way.

It's such a delicate balance of factors that make this planet habitable. The only reason we're not killed by the sun's rays is because of an electromagnetic field that

surrounds us and protects us from solar wind. Meanwhile, it took millions of years for there to be enough oxygen for us to live, through millions of years of photosynthesis. This incredibly complex organism that is the earth is taken for granted. Now it's starting to be realized by more and more people. But it's kind of too late. (Laughs). Unfortunately. I think it's really important for everyone on this planet to understand that it's kind of a miracle that we're here.

I've also been reading Stephen Hawking and lot of creation of the universe theories, but especially him, because he's so articulate. He points out that one of the major intellectual revolutions of the 20th century was the discovery that the universe is expanding. Before that, people assumed the universe has always been here, or it got created at a certain point in time by God or whoever, and it's been like this ever since. What they discovered is in fact everything in fact is moving away from us. That means everything is constantly expanding. That's how the theory of the Big Bang got created. It's like continental drift: it must have all been at one place at one time if it's moving away. Hawking says that the reason that that idea, like the flat earth theory survived so long, is like the reason that stationary universe theory survived so long. People want to believe that when they die the universe is going to stay the same or the earth is going to stay the same. Well, nothing's going to stay the same.

KURKJIAN: I know that a lot of aspects of the two previous pieces had to do with your personal life.

HOPKINS: Right.

KURKJIAN: And I...

HOPKINS: Yes, yes. Oh, I can talk about the connection of my personal life with this piece, if you want. (Laughs).

KURKJIAN: Feel free.

HOPKINS: For me this is also coming out of the fact that I'm thirty-four, I'm almost thirty-five. I keep on saying I'm having a mid-life crisis, and then people are like, 'you're not old enough to have a mid-life crisis!' (Laughs). I'm like, 'yeah I am because I'm a woman.' I also got married a year ago. I never thought I wanted to have kids. Now that I'm getting older I'm literally thinking, wow, my time is running out. It's surprising for me because my mother died when I was young, my father almost died right after her and I thought I had a pretty good grasp on mortality.

Well, I didn't have a grasp on my own mortality, come to find out. (Laughs). Also, my body. My back hurts, my vision is going bad. I'm starting to feel those things. I'm getting older. (Laughs). It comes out of that, too. Grappling with the choices that I've made. Are they the right choices? Do I want to have a family? Can you dedicate yourself to more than one thing? *Must Don't Whip 'Um* was a little bit about that, too. What do you dedicate your life to? Is it possible to be devoted to more than one thing? Can you have work and have a family and have those things be fruitful both? Or can you have a spiritual practice and still have...? I think definitely the answer is yes. But it's coming out of those questions, for me.

KURKJIAN: The first two pieces had daughter characters in them. And those daughter characters seemed to me in some ways related to you.

HOPKINS: Oh, yes.

KURKJIAN: In that you were reconciling things with your parental figures in those pieces, but it sounds to me like this piece has to do with...

HOPKINS: This is the opposite, yeah. It's like me, the surrogate for me, is the mother of the daughter. I think also the first piece, for me, was dealing with my relationship with my father. And then the second one was dealing with the relationship with my mother, and feeling abandoned and all that. Then this is supposed to be more like my relationship with myself, and working that out. We'll see what happens. We'll see how it turns out. (Laughs).

KURKJIAN: (Laughs). About the government, when you're saying, 'the government lied', and all this...

HOPKINS: The Bush administration has lied so much. But the Bush administration is a shining example of so many catastrophic, fatal errors that are happening on a larger scale right now. You couldn't really have a better textbook example. I mean not only using up the fossil fuels but, killing, sacrificing so many people's lives for fossil fuels. The amount of money that's been spent in Iraq on the war, they could have harnessed the wind, the sun, (laughs), they could have made water power—these renewable resources—run everything by now.

The fact that so many lives have been lost. The fact that we've alienated America from the rest of the world, probably spurred thousands and thousands, maybe millions of people to become jihadists against America. I think I would be a jihadist against America at this point if I was living in the Middle East somewhere. Those repercussions will never ever stop. That's why I'm trying to wrap all those things together in this doom and gloom scenario because it's true. Stephen Hawking says this too, that we're at an increasing risk of being wiped out by nuclear catastrophe or a virus created by some insane person or environment destruction, or other dangers we haven't thought of yet. (Laughs). I really like that last one—'there could be lots of other...’—but he's right.

When I was growing up, I was born in 1972, I was first aware of politics during the [Ronald] Reagan era. And I felt, 'oh, horrifying, oh, horrible.' Trickle-down economics, and all that kind of crap, but then [Bill] Clinton came along and comparatively—I know all the bad things about Clinton too—but I have to say I had a glimmer of hope. But this administration has really, completely destroyed my faith. I could just go on for hours. The justice system and how the election went down: the fact that our president was elected by the Supreme Court and not by us. So many things about it made me completely lose faith in the entire structure of our so-called democracy. That's part of the piece too. How can you fight for justice? If you can't

fight for justice in the structure that exists, then how can you do it?

For me, because I grew up in a household... my mother was very religious, both my parents were very religious. They had a very [Episcopalian] Protestant work ethic, which means you've got to work hard and not earn but show your gratitude. I've always felt like I've got to do something and help. (Laughs). This is all to say that the years of the Bush administration have made me feel like I've got to do something more proactive. Here I am making these shows and the world is going to hell! Although I did say to the engineer the other day, when we started talking about what's going on in world, 'what are we going to do?' He goes, 'make some records.' (Laughs). It's not the worst thing you could do.

KURKJIAN: Do you think that you're trying to promote, not necessary a specific message, but something for the audience to think about?

HOPKINS: Yes. I saw the [Al] Gore...

KURKJIAN: The *Inconvenient Truth* movie.

HOPKINS: Yes, the *Inconvenient Truth* movie. It was inspiring because he decided that just getting people's awareness and minds enlivened about what's happening is what he can do for what he cares about. It's different with me because ultimately I'm doing these pieces for myself in a way. It's a survival tactic. That's kind of the primary motivation. But, beyond that, if you were to ask, do I hope that the audience gets something out of it? Yes. I hope it sparks curiosity, really.

I think that in our civilization now it is easy to get caught up in survival. That's another thing that Buckminster Fuller points out. He talks about when the American government created a program to send veterans to school because there were going to be all these young men coming back. They took this money and they just sent them to school. He uses this example, and he's like, 'hey, that sounds like a good idea: how about invest in education?' Because here's the thing: if you have an idea

to build a machine that's going to do the work of ten men, then it's worth your time. It's going to be paid off as soon as you get that machine built. Boom. Your problems are diminished. His whole theory is that thought is really where our power lies.

Most people are just struggling to survive and there's no time to think, there's no time to think about anything other than getting a house and getting more stuff. I've been watching a lot of movies about geological destruction and the history of the earth. Global warming all started with the Industrial Revolution. If you were looking at all this footage of the Industrial Revolution from many years in the future, it's kind of like what did that really do? It made things go faster? Now we have more stuff. We have it faster. We can communicate and we can travel; there are many wonderful things about it. But for me that's not advancement if you look at what we do with it. So you invent a thing, the A-bomb, perfect example. $E=MC^2$. All of a sudden you have this knowledge and can compact something and make an explosion and kill and destroy so many things. This is considered progress. It's not progress in my opinion. It's not progress. And I watched *Rescue Dawn* (2006) last night. Have you seen that?

KURKJIAN: No, I haven't.

HOPKINS: It's so good. The beginning of the movie is just footage of a plane dropping bombs on Vietnam. It just made me cry because that's what we're doing. That's the Industrial Revolution. I don't know what would... I think more meditation would be good. But you can't force anything on other people. Part of karma also is a real belief that your energy and your thoughts and your actions really do make a difference. I think Al Gore has made a difference with his film, actually. I think his movie is a big part of the reason why it's a huge topic of discussion right now.

The capitalist economy has worked against awareness. As soon as it was discovered that the burning of fossil fuels effected the environment in a way that negatively impacts humans, the people harvesting and selling those fossil fuels wanted to protect their investment. For them disinformation—disseminating incorrect information—was a marketing tactic, and it worked.

KURKJIAN: They promote the idea that we don't know scientific effects for sure yet.

HOPKINS: This is what is so upsetting about it. It's like the whole thing with Iraq. People really believe that Osama bin Laden had something to do with Saddam Hussein. They believe it! Now, in a way, that's their fault. But in another way it's where thought and speech and action can be incredibly destructive and dangerous. That was part of what was so inspiring about Al Gore's movie. We can use the same tools to inspire awareness of what's really going on.

IMAGE



Photo: © Paula Court [19]

NOTES

[1] The Starr Street Space abruptly shut down about a month after this performance, due to licensing problems. Check for any updates at
<http://a.theoretic.org/starr/projects.html>

[2] The Catch program explained that the first song, 'Song Before Love Songs', Hopkins sang in this work-in-progress was originally composed for a Bang on a Can (<http://www.bangonacan.org/>) commission in 2005.

[3] The trilogy is called *The Accidental Trilogy*.

[4] <http://alpertawards.org/theatre.html>

[5] Gloria Deluxe has self-produced a number of albums: *Gloria Deluxe* (1999), *5 Songs* (2000), *Hooker* (2000), *Devotionals* (2001), *Alas Alack* (2002), *Accidental Nostalgia* (2005) and *Must Don't Whip 'Um* (2008). Many songs are available on iTunes. For further information, see: <http://gloriadeluxe.com>

[6] The ensemble group's name, Accinosco, originates from the title of their first work *Accidental Nostalgia*, such at the 'Acc' is from *Accidental*, the 'nos' is from *Nostalgia*, and 'co' is from company. For further information about Accinosco, see:
<http://www.accinosco.com/>

[7] Helen Shaw 'Must Don't Whip 'Um' (review)', TimeOut New York, January 25-31, 2007.

[8] Cynthia Hopkins in (unpublished) interview with Beth Kurkjian on June 18, 2004. Interview took place in a rehearsal studio in DUMBO Brooklyn, NY.

[9] Gina Bellafante 'Mama Was a Rolling Stone: 'Must Don't Whip 'Um' (review)', The New York Times, January 26, 2007.

[10] Rick Miller 'Must Don't Whip 'Um (review)'

<http://www.ontheboards.org/blog/?cat=24>

[11] Helen Shaw 'Must Don't Whip 'Um' (review)', TimeOut New York, January 25-31, 2007.

[12] Cynthia Hopkins in (unpublished) interview with Beth Kurkjian on January 4, 2006. Interview took place in Kurkjian's apartment in Manhattan, NY.

[13] Cynthia Hopkins made this statement in Richard Schechner's 'Experimental Performance: 1950-present' class on March 24, 2008, in the Performance Studies department at New York University.

[14] From Cynthia Hopkins' email sent to Beth Kurkjian on January 14, 2008.

[15] *Penelope* is directed by Mark Palansky and the screenplay is by Leslie Caveny. For more information, see: <http://www.penelopethemovie.com/>

[16] Richard Schechner made this statement in his 'Experimental Performance: 1950-present' class about Cynthia Hopkins' work on March 24, 2008, in the Performance Studies department at New York University.

[17] Valerie Plame Wilson, a former CIA agent whose identity was leaked to the press, is currently pursuing legal action against top Bush administration leaders and the CIA. Her book, *Fair Game: My Life as a Spy, My Betrayal by the White House* (2007), published by Simon and Schuster, describes the events from her perspective.

[18] Hopkins has performed a handful of work-in-progress versions of *Failure/Success* since the Catch performance. She aims to complete the show sometime in 2009. For further information, visit www.accinosco.com/.

[19] Paula Court's image of Cynthia Hopkins was taken at a Gloria Deluxe concert celebrating the release of the *Must Don't Whip 'Um* album on March 2, 2008 at St. Ann's Warehouse (Brooklyn, N.Y). Hopkins played new songs for *The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success)* during the event in this costume.

Suggested readings

Aronson, Arnold. American Avant-garde Theatre: A History (London; New York: Routledge, 2000.)

Bauerlein, Judy. 'Cynthia Hopkins: Accidental Nostalgia', *Theatre Forum* (27, 2005): 3-7.

Benson, Sarah; Liska, Pavol; Margraff, Ruth; Parson, Annie-B; Vazquez, Tory. 'Working Downtown', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (PAJ 83, 28:2, 2006): 42-60.

Birns, Nicholas. 'Retrospectives and New Beginnings', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (PAJ 84, Volume 28, Number 3, 2006): 48-55.

Birringer, Johannes H. 'Performance and Science', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (PAJ 85, 29:1, 2007): 21-35.

Browning, Barbara. 'Indulgent Domesticity', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* (16:3, 2006): 469 – 473.

Berghaus, Gunter. *Theatre, performance, and the historical avant-garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.)

Carlson, Marvin A. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann

Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2001.)

Coleman, Patricia. 'La Belle Indifference', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (PAJ 81, Volume 27, Number 3, September 2005): 131-139.

Colleary, Eric. 'Must Don't Whip 'Um (review)', *Theatre Journal* (59:3, 2007): 513-515.

Fleischer, Mary. 'Antigone (review)', *Theatre Journal* (55:3, 2002): 513-514.

Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996.)

Hopkins, Cynthia. 'Accidental Nostalgia', *Play a Journal of Plays* (3, 2007): 263-321.

Jay, Ricky. *Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women* (New York: Villard Books, 1987.)

Kalb, Jonathan. *Play by Play: Theater Essays and Reviews, 1993-2002* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2003.)

Kurkjian, Beth. 'Causing More Trouble Out There: Mark Russell on P.S. 122', *TDR: The Drama Review* (T 195, 51:3, 2007): 46-76.

Malkin, Jeanette R. *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1999.)

Marranca, Bonnie. 'Performance, A Personal History', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (PAJ 82, 28:1, 2006): 3-19.

Mills, Chris. 'Under the Radar Festival (review)', *Theatre Journal* (57:3, 2005): 489-493.

Poggioli, Renato. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.)

Rashley, Lisa Hammond. 'Inventing Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Nonfiction', *Biography* (30.1, 2007): 22-47.

Rieder, John. 'Life Writing and Science Fiction', *Biography* (30.1, 2007): v-xvii.

Russell, Mark. 'A Coda: An Epilogue of Sorts', *TDR: The Drama Review* (T 195, 51:3, 2007): 76-79.

Savran, David. *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988.)

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.)

Shank, Theodore. *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2002.)

Wellman, Mac and Lee, Young Jean. *New Downtown Now: An Anthology Of New Theater From Downtown New York* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.)

Cynthia Hopkins is a writer, composer, performer, multi-instrumentalist, and theater artist. She and the Accinosco company have created two award-winning works: Accidental Nostalgia and Must Don't Whip 'Um. These works feature Gloria Deluxe, a band Hopkins formed in 1999. She is currently creating a new show with Accinosco called The Success of Failure (or, The Failure of Success). Hopkins has created solo works including Tsimtsum and has worked as a composer, musician, and performer for many projects, including Big Dance Theater's Antigone, Shunkin,

and Another Telepathic Thing, for which she received a Bessie award (for composition) and an OBIE (for performance).

Beth Kurkjian lives and creates dance theater in NYC. She has performed in multiple venues in NYC and the UK. Kurkjian teaches in the Expository Writing Department at NYU as a Language Lecturer and has been a Guest Lecturer at Skidmore College and the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. She serves on the Editorial Board of Women and Performance and has been published in TDR: The Drama Review. Kurkjian is writing her PhD dissertation on Cynthia Hopkins in the Performance Studies Department at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU.