

Interview with Joanna Rotté

EWJ: After a play is over, where is the person an actor or actress portrays? You aren't Ellie Dunn in Shaw's *Heartbreak House* now, are you?
J: No!

EWJ: When do you become Ellie Dunn?
J: When I get to the theatre...when I'm on stage dressed as Ellie Dunn.

EWJ: So you've thought it out, and then you shove it until it's necessary to take that part.
J: It's inside me. For example, when I go to teach, a teacher comes out; and I relate differently to my students than I do to you. But—though there's a big controversy over this—I don't believe that I "step into a character." That would mean that it's like a phantom out there and I go find out which one it is and I walk into it. I'm working on the principle that we potentially have all human beings within us, and we must pull them out.

EWJ: If we can express all human beings, where are they? If they're inside of us, that means we are the center of the universe.
J: I don't mean to say that we're the center of the universe. I mean that the center of the universe is within us. We're only vessels for carrying all this energy and vibration and emotion and intellect. Through our will then, we're able to bring out that particular vibration which is needed to create a character.

EWJ: I know you studied yoga for a while; in yoga, the idea is to become more you, to become, with complete integrity, yourself: *Integral* yoga. In acting, your goal is to become someone else. How do you reconcile those two paths?
J: But you're not . . .

EWJ: Unless you say that the someone else is also you—a possibility that you're developing.
J: How do I reconcile it? I think you have to understand yourself first of all very, very fully in order to understand another person—have the ego go so far that it almost disintegrates, so that you can pick up another ego. Yours is fully developed.

EWJ: If yours is fully developed, then it encompasses all of them.
J: That's my point originally! It encompasses all of them. You can bring it out of you. It's in you, but you're really nothing—so that the you becomes unimportant. Do you understand what I'm saying? There are moments when I'm totally unaware of myself; there are also moments when I'm conscious of myself as an actress, and there are moments when I'm conscious of myself as a human being.

EWJ: Though I haven't done much acting, except for just fooling around, the more self-conscious I am the more difficult it is to act. The more unconscious I am, the easier it is to be spontaneous.
J: Sure.

EWJ: Then to be unconscious means being empty, like meditating—no

mind." By unconscious I don't mean not conscious, I mean not self-conscious. And then suddenly everything starts coming to you. You start noticing things more clearly. If you're walking down the street and your mind is preoccupied—thinking about yourself and what you're going to do—and then you start to concentrate on breathing and forget everything, suddenly you start seeing people all around you. You start seeing the street—you start seeing where you are. As you grow more empty you become a stronger receiver for picking up vibrations. You become much more aware. So in yoga, you develop yourself, and you can draw on infinite vibration to create any role, because all those characters exist everywhere.
J: I don't see how yoga philosophy has any bearing on what we're talking about really.

EWJ: It does in a way. You use a discipline to develop yourself. Acting is also a means towards something else. That's how I can see New Age acting—new consciousness in acting would be that the play itself is the point of the play.
J: I think of acting as a gift. And my whole point is that the quality of the gift can be improved.

EWJ: Do you mean that acting ability is a gift or that the acting is a gift?
J: The performance is a gift. Yes.

EWJ: So then it's entertainment.
J: No. Or it is entertainment, but it's food too. You share a meal with the audience really. And I just think we've been giving people packaged food. They call them packages. Any touring company is called a package. Good word. Take a Broadway show like *Applause*. Cast it with second rate names—maybe T.V. names—and they send it out to some major cities. It's a package. So producers buy the whole group. That can be very second rate food. And that's what the audience's spirit is being fed. Their emotional life, their nervous system, everything is taking in all this.

EWJ: And sometimes at the end of a meal you feel sick; you have a stomach ache.



J: The experience in the theatre should be that way. You should have a gut reaction to it. You should want to go out and either start a war, vote for somebody else, beat your kid, have a baby—something profound should happen so that people are moved to action. If not that far, at least to consideration or reflection upon what happened.

Think about theatre in the medieval age. The entire community got together. All the energy was directed towards a common purpose: to have a good time, to honor the Lord, and to celebrate the feast day. The people who were ship builders would build the set for Noah's ark, and the carpenters would build houses for the sets, and certain people who had good voices would play the parts of actors. All this happened only about once a year at Easter time, and the entire community would be a part of it. The experience of watching it must have been extraordinary—knowing that you, too, had a part in it.

That can happen: To really have an extraordinary impact on an audience. All this *Oh!* that's active.

Take a singer like Sinatra or the Beatles. You don't care how many times you hear them sing "I want to hold your hand"; you go back for years and years. Then there are people who will bore you to death in ten minutes and you never go back to see them again.

EWJ: I think that anyone who is good at acting—or a comedian is a really good example—picks up personalities all around them. The people who bore you the most are the people who are trying to be a certain kind of person. But people who are empty enough pick up and reflect the people around them and all the personalities around them—or the story that you're acting out, or ideas you've had—ideas from books. A lot of your ideas for characters come from things you've read, don't they?

J: Yes. Sure. There are many influences from outside. My imagination helps me, but then again where is that fed from? From movies I've seen, from books I've read, from people I've known. It comes from outside. But it's in your memory.

EWJ: Which is inside.
J: Yes.

EWJ: Are you sure it is?
J: But it originally came from outside—what? Am I sure it is? Oh. I don't know. No, why, where is my memory? I've lost it—I can't remember where my memory is!

EWJ: I think that memory is the same as intuition, is the same as imagination, is the same as thinking.
J: I could agree with all except maybe the last one.

EWJ: And all of that comes from outside. Your interpretation of it or your translation of it comes from your internal condition.
J: I see what you're saying; I think.

EWJ: That's what I meant when I said we're not the center of the universe. We're just points in time and space, moving, picking up other vibrations. For a really dynamic acting group you'd have to have some further idea than entertainment or even moving people to action or thoughtfulness. Is there a way to change modern theatre? If you and some of the other talented people in the community got together and did a song and dance or a play or whatever, it would be much different. I'm sure the people would pick up on the fact that the group is really together. But to change the consciousness of the people you'd have to have . . .

J: I think first of all you need very talented people. Second, they need to be extremely well trained. It's a craft before it's an art. It takes a long, long time. It takes a lifetime. Your body must be perfectly agile and sensitive. Your voice must be the best instrument you can possibly make it. Your breathing, your health must be good. Then you start to develop your other instruments: your thinking, your understanding of history, of other societies. You need those things. You have to understand the other art forms. So that's the education of the actor. Then he has to have the material to work on, because he doesn't always make up his own material. Now he needs a piece of material that's going to do what we call this raising of consciousness. He is this nearing-perfection human being performing material that is very stimulating. This combination will have the impact on the audience: the super actor, with super material. I think some material like that already exists in our western culture. We have to find it and discover in it the high level of judgment that exists in the piece.

EWJ: What modern works do you think there are?
J: Certainly Shakespeare. I don't know what you mean by modern. But modern in the sense of infinity—certainly Shakespeare. Chekov is up there. Shaw doesn't have much sentiment in his plays. I think he's locked into the conceptual. But theatre belongs to the middle class of this country, and that's wrong.

EWJ: There's a limitation to the writing.

J: To the material. Because they're writing for that audience. They're writing for people who've come from work, who are tired, who are frustrated; they want to give them music—they gotta sell tickets—that's the thing, to sell the ticket. So it's got to be light and fluffy; then put a little profundity at the end of the third act, before you drop the curtain, and they think they've seen something that's stirring. Yet last year, the O'Neill play that Colleen Dewhurst did and Jason Robards—a very difficult play—it was the hit of the season. That will happen—like this show—all of a sudden. But you can't do Shaw on Broadway. No one would put a penny into it. It's a risk. That's why they don't do Shakespeare. They don't touch a good play, because they think people are too dumb and won't come to see it. But the reason is because nobody ever knows how to do them. Because our judgment is so impaired, we can't find within it what that play's really about. Because we're so foggy we can't see

my Ch'i." His Ch'i is directed. That's what happens.
 EWJ: He knows certain moves to make.
 J: So I have a technique, and I know certain moves to make, and I have a certain rhythm to get into and certain timing, and a certain costume that's going to have an effect. But before all that, I have to have my clean energy, and then all those things will make sense, because they will be integrated and they will come from a strong center. They won't be dissipated; they'll be directed. That's the difference. It's when an audience sees a direction that is focused right at them, and through them, and in them—instead of being lost in the atmosphere, because it's not coming from a strong center. We need that center. That's the electricity—that's the person who is charismatic. It's because they're centered. It's not just this emptiness—but within that emptiness there is such a clear yang center.

your own thing." You don't do your own thing. You express yourself within the rhythm of the place in which you are. That's why there is so much destruction going on, because there's no respect for the nature of the place.

atmosphere that goes with that character. That's the difference I see between freedom and license. License is "do your own thing;" freedom is being able to adjust to anything.

EWJ: Flexibility.
 J: That is where I think, in going from place to place, you can adjust your behavior no matter where you are. That is keeping your center intact, being able to pick up the rhythm of the place. That's also being able to establish a relationship with another person. It's being able to adjust with their rhythm and to find how you can mesh with it, instead of being antagonistic to it.

EWJ: If a company could mesh with an audience, it would happen on a gut level and also on some higher level.
 J: That's the fun and the challenge and the difference between live theatre and a movie. Each night it's different and they're different. Each night you try to find how to make it mesh, because each audience is a different personality and a different rhythm. They're all coming from a different place and, as a body, they're giving you a totally different response. It's not just that they laugh in different places on different nights. Their whole feeling is new. So you have to adjust to them each night. And you have to find out where they're at. It takes a little bit, you know, until you get a little bit into the play—and then you start to coast. Sometimes you never get them. You might have a great show, but you just can't make it with that audience. You don't know why, maybe, but then the next night it's spectacular. That's the way it goes, everything changes.

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the simplicity of human nature. Shakespeare is very simple. The verse can become complex, but that's just the poetry—but the simplicity!
 Somebody once said that there's nothing more lucid than a masterpiece. And that's true because it's totally logical. But we're so foggy from drugs, and so thick-headed and want to complicate everything, instead of finding the through line of action. So nobody does classics or nobody does really good pieces. If we do a revival, we do *The Boyfriend*, or, I don't know—some silly thing. This whole nostalgia trip that we're on—what is that?

EWJ: What do you do practically in order to get into a part? To change your Ch'i, to change your health?
 J: A pianist must do the scales every day. You know Rubinstein doesn't slough off. You've got to work on your body every day, and you've got to work on your voice every day. I vocalize, eat well, do yoga, dance, gymnastics. And then watch people, study people. Watch what is human nature. Watch people on the subways. Try to take in, try to allow the other person—instead of imposing myself on other people; it's hard to do—hard because the ego is very big. Mine is, anyhow. Try to sit back and see who they are—try to learn who they are.

EWJ: Did you study with anyone who taught you that?
 J: No. But Michael Chekhov—who was supposedly the finest actor ever to come out of the Moscow Art Theatre—he was a student of Stanislavski's—wrote a book called *To the Actor*. There he talks about what we would call aura. He calls it the atmosphere in which the actor moves—or any human being moves. So you must discover that atmosphere that surrounds the character. This is really the rhythm in which they move and therefore what light or intensity they throw out because of that. He believes you must consciously create the

EWJ: I just saw this image of some way to change people: instead of giving them something to work on inside, actually changing their figure on the outside—like changing their aura, or changing their energy. Conversation is like that—exchanging vibrations. You can do that because you're conversing with people, even if they don't ever answer back. That would mean, the vertical level as well as the horizontal level (it's like palm healing but without touching the person) to change them. You're consciously doing that, and there are very few people who really know how to do that. I don't know if I've met anyone who actually knows how to do that.
 J: I don't know if it's necessary that you know how to do it. I think what you must do is just keep improving yourself, your health, and get your Ch'i flowing very, very cleanly so that it will take care of itself—it will do its job. Your own energy system will do it.
 EWJ: That's true.
 J: I don't have to know that. Is the man doing a martial art, is he really that conscious of his Ch'i? No! It's working for him. He's conscious that his opponent is putting his foot in a certain position, and he knows how he has to answer it with his foot. But he doesn't think "Now I'm going to direct

EWJ: What you said about not consciously changing the audience's spirit—really, you change your own spirit, and that spirit, whether you are aware of it or not, will do the changing.
 J: It's got to. Because somewhere it will touch their memory.
 EWJ: One last thing I want to ask. You talked earlier about rhythm in your performances. What is rhythm? And how do you develop that?
 J: I think that's your aura. The vibration of energy that's around you. How do you create it? By being sensitive to the atmosphere in which you are. This is what I'm talking about when I say "taking in and watching." It means not violating the nature of the place in which you're existing. For example, when I go to a church my behavior takes on a different rhythm than when I go to a football game. If I behave in one place the way I would in another, I am disturbing the nature of that place; I'm disturbing its equilibrium. So when a person is in chaos within himself, he is too clouded to see what is the balance in that particular place, or what is the nature of that particular place. I think this is very much a problem in our whole modern society.
 So we come to that idea of "do

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