

Flow: An Interview with Marty Pottenger

Leslie Atkins Durham

As her 1996 multimedia, Obie Award-winning solo performance *City Water Tunnel #3* opens, Marty Pottenger stands center stage, reciting an ode to water:

The water man from Phoenix said: "You have to recognize we're a closed system—three fourths of it covered with water Consequently, it being a closed system, we're drinking the same water that Napoleon drank. We're drinking the same water that Archimedes drank. We're drinking the same water that Napoleon drank." . . . It rained tonight as Galileo's tears boiled hot in my Maxwell House. Usually I hate Instant, but this tasted different, richer, more . . . rebellious. Insistent Instant I take another sip, blowing first to cool, steam rising, curling back in on itself, whooshing the brown liquid around in my mouth, savoring images of Joan, the Maid of Orleans, dawn, head bowed, her newly metaled knee down on the ground, resting in the dew that covers the battlefield, her forehead wet with holy water. Of Melissa Etheridge in the pouring rain on stage in Texas, rain on her face, sweat on her upper lip. Of my grandmother Marjorie, now dead for twenty-one years. Her tiny Chicago countertop kitchen, the drops of water collecting on the wall next to the stove water boiling our three-minute eggs as the black-and-white tv fills with pictures of women in Vietnam stretched out in rice paddies . . . not sleeping I drink, letting the possibilities of past, present, and future swim, float, dive and pool together, as if time were just a part of it and water . . . was the heart.

In this moment, and throughout her work in general, Marty Pottenger is about flow—the flow of words, of energy, and of identity.

In composing *CWT#3*, Pottenger spent three years interviewing the workers—sandhogs, engineers, administrators, secretaries, contract-

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ers, and others—involved in constructing New York City’s third water tunnel, a massive public works project begun in 1970 and scheduled for completion in 2025. As Pottenger shares with the audience the deeply intimate stories with which her interviewees entrusted her, she does not merely enact these workers as characters. Instead she seems to let them flow through her, mingle with her—much like the journey of the coffee she charts in the opening of the piece. *CWT#3* is about flow, about the literal flow of water and life force to millions of New Yorkers, and about the metaphorical flow of stories and with them the potential power of listening, of opening up to the experiences of one another and eroding the boundaries of what we previously imagined to be our selves.

Early in the piece, Pottenger lies down on the stage floor and uses her body to explain the three divisions of the project: the shaft, tunnel, and valve chamber. In this explanatory moment, Pottenger invites the audience to imagine her as the tunnel, simultaneously the *raison d’être* for the performance and the conduit for conveying the stories of a diverse group of people to another diverse group of people, the audience. As the workers’ stories flow out of her and engulf the audience, the visual focus is on the workers’ smallest gestures, the sediment of their particular kinds of work. As Pottenger tilts her hardhatted head, scuffs a heavy-soled workboot on the floor while telling a story, fastidiously arranges pencils in an empty coffee can on a desk, or coils yards of plastic tubing filled with blue water over a muscular shoulder, she shows the audience how the work a person does crafts the self, physically and psychologically. In these moments the gesture of the worker transcends its function as work, as the means to completion of a task, and begins revealing itself as art, as the creative, sculpting social force that shapes identity.

These ideas about the formation of selves through the artistry of work and through our sometimes tangled relationships with other people flow through Pottenger’s other recent works, including *Dirt* (1992), a full-length play about six “permanent” New Yorkers of a wide variety of ethnic and social backgrounds all sharing the same corner of a Brooklyn cemetery; *Construction Stories* (1991), an evening of stories about “love, work, death, and dignity” told while mixing mortar, installing a lock, and building a brick wall on stage; and *Housebuilding Time* (1989), a dance which culminates in the building of a small house against the backdrop of Donizetti’s *Lucia de Lammasor*.

Interview with Marty Pottenger

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Leslie Atkins Durham: How did you first become interested in performance?

Marty Pottenger: My first memory is from when I was a year and a half.

I noticed that if you played performatively, if you gave little performances, then people actually snapped out of their fog, that adults seemed to wake up a bit and people remembered to have fun. So I think that made a big impression on me. My grandmother, Marjorie Morgan, had one of the early tv shows in Chicago and it was called *Rediscovering Poetry*. It was a 15 minute-long program on the educational channel—I forget which one—and she read poetry from different countries in a kind of a performative fashion for 15 minutes. Each show would be about different peoples. She would read to me a lot, too. She taught voice and speaking and elocution and all those kinds of things at the YMCA and at some of the colleges as well. So I really was soaked in the world of language, of spoken language, of rhyme and rhythm, as a young one, and her delight in it; and so I'm sure that's why my writing comes from my love of how language sounds, whether it's prose or narrative or fiction or poetry. When I got to high school I was really active in the theatre department. They also had something called oral interpretation; that is, the study of language and written text and performance. So you would study a short story or poems and then perform them, or study diaries and letters or newspapers or Shakespeare and perform them; but you wouldn't perform them as a play or as a theater piece, though there were theatrical devices and elements you were using. You'd usually be without costume and the text would be visible in performance. The text would be on a music stand and you could play twelve characters or do a sword fight and it would be you, just you, or you could do it with other people. But often it was a solo thing and something about that won my heart because a lot of the difficult patterns that are attached to people in the theatre community were absent in oral interpretation or definitely less visible. There was a real commitment to the art and there was not a lot of commotion around emotion and egos and stuff, and that appealed to me tremendously. And so in the end I chose to go to Northwestern because it supposedly had the best department in that. I'm giving you my performance history, but I guess that answers the question.

LAD: And there was a period of time when you stopped performing?

MP: Yes. 1977-1987.

LAD: What inspired you to come back to performance?

MP: I think probably turning 35. Ever since I was a young person I had an image of myself at 35 as very happy, very powerful, a kind of relaxed and confident woman in a red dress—and I still haven't gotten the red dress. But I think when I turned 35, I think I got a chance to look at my life, and performance remained the most frightening and the most inspiring, exciting thing, an

the deepest in my heart, and that it was time again. As a human being it was time to be more . . . for myself, what made my heart sing, and performing was definitely that.

LAD: Can you talk about why solo performance excites you in a way that other kinds of theatrical performance don't?

MP: I think that they actually might excite me, too, but it would be a combination of the text that we were doing and the ideas of the text, the craft and the excellence of the material, and the creative environment that's built in the collaboration to realize the material—that would thrill me to no end, that naturally would—and I get all that in solo performance. I create my own work environment and I'm terribly fond of doing it. [laughing] And I get to follow my own thinking and my own interests and my own curiosity, and I get to realize a vision and welcome other individuals in as collaborators to offer their visions alongside mine. Also, in solo performance an interesting thing, though it's not at the heart of why I do it, there is that kind of thing that is developed where there's just me. There are improvisational opportunities that are very interesting. I also think there's the issue of fearing of control in there and of placing yourself in a working collaboration in performance with other people. Some of the experiences I've had were so upsetting that my mind still sticks there, you know.

LAD: You've mentioned your grandmother as being a big influence on your work. Would you tell me about some of the other influences on your work?

MP: In college for a final project I chose Harold Pinter. There was something about the spareness and the richness to his language that I think appealed to me. I've never gone back and read anything, but if you say what are my influences, I'd say that's one. About half of my family is from the deep South and the other half is from the Midwest. There was a storytelling tradition in both parts of my family with the men of my family for several generations. There are a lot of salesmen in my family, and they have all these stories—folksy and at times racist and sexist from the 50s and the 40s and the 30s. I would hear these stories and even though they caused me pain there was a critical importance placed on remembering things. The importance of remembering and memory was big within me. That was a big influence. I did get to see Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*. I went with my grandmother and my older brother. And also my professors at Northwestern—Charlotte Lee, Wallace Bacon, and Lila Heston. These three individuals were so seriously committed to excellence both in the study of the text and in the performance and they were the first people outside of my

grandmother that I resonated with—their fierce commitment to excellence. And as a carpenter—that was part of my life for twenty years—to have to do it, to make it right every time—there’s not a lot of room for fudging—not if you have an appreciation of your own work, if you’re caring about what you’re doing, with my love of structure and precision. I’ve also done a lot of political organizing in my life, grassroots political organizing with different liberation movements, and colleagues of mine have pointed out that my mind tends to go to structure. I tend to think about how to organize, how to structure things. I could say authors that I like but when I think of influence in terms of live performance I think what fascinates me is when people are fully present in performance and several different times I have seen that watching different performers at P.S. 122—watching this one fellow walk out on stage. He did lariat tricks with a rope—he was so cleanly present. That’s where I’m trying to stand as a performer.

LAD: In *Construction Stories* when you’re on stage building a wall, or changing a lock, or swirling mortar, like the lariat performer, you’re really executing these actions, not imitating a character doing a dramatized version of these actions. Is performing a “real action” different for you as a performer than playing a fictive character? To what extent are you performing a stage version of Marty in these moments or are you simply on stage performing an action?

MP: My first impulse is to say that I’m on stage doing it, but that’s not Marty performing Marty. I’m aware of the feelings—the story is from my life. When I’m mixing the cement I’m both thinking about the story, about breaking up, and I’m feeling that and drawing on that energy to mix a batch of cement. Trying to do it in performance, I’m trying to be someone for everyone, trying to welcome people in to be that close. Someone who actually studied oral interpretation, a professor, watched me with her husband and she said, “That woman studied oral interpretation.” I was so thrilled. It was like meeting my mom or something. She could identify things I had never thought consciously about. Even though I had been away from oral interpretation for twenty years, I saw that I was part of a tradition. And that really is my tradition. When Elin Diamond saw me she said, “You’re so meta-meta.” I had to look that up. And I do listen to myself. I too enjoy the sound of the water and the cello playing. I, too, enjoy the richness of the words as I say them. David White, Executive Director of Dance Theater Workshop, said I listen to the audience listening, and that comes from oral interpretation. You aren’t just inside the text, you’re also outside it.

LAD: Let’s talk a little more about performing characters, the people that you

interviewed, specifically. How completely do you want to disappear into your characters? When you perform Natasha, for example, should I only see Natasha in front of me or do you want me to see you, too? Should the audience members have a split awareness of the performer and the character, paralleling the way you have a split awareness of the text and audience, or should we allow ourselves to become completely immersed in the character?

MP: That's a really good question. I think I would be completely pleased if the audience completely met the character, and people say they do—that there is a complete transformation when it goes well; but other people also say that one of the things they find so engaging—I don't know if that's the word I want but I'll use it—is that they actually see me and the character and they see me doing the character. So they're aware of a human being, they're kind of aware of the vessel and they like that. And part of my baseline thinking about something like *City Water Tunnel #3* is that there's import and merit in one woman telling this story, and that's definitely part of my conception of the piece and that's an important part. I'd rather people weren't intrigued with the skill with which I was doing that—I don't know that they're doing that—or the lack of skill at times. People use the phrase “channeling,” or whatever you're doing. People are trying to say it looks different than acting to them. When it works for me, which isn't all the time, I'm right inside the person; or it's like I'm right behind them, like we're pressed together chest to back and I feel like they're in front of me and I'm right at their back, and that's how we're pulling it off.

LAD: How hard is it for you to perform characters of different genders or different backgrounds? Is it more challenging or more satisfying to perform characters, to be pressed together with characters, more or less like you?

MP: I think I have a particularly interesting relationship to gender and identity. In my own personal identity, in what I figured out looking at the world as a young one growing up, my central commitment seems to have been to try to be myself and to keep as many parts of being human as near to me as possible. As a young one, it looked like men had big pieces of being human intact and it looked like women had other big pieces of being human intact, but it was unusual for me to meet a man or a woman who seemed to have all of them intact; and so, I think I tried to chart a course that has resulted in me being easily mistaken as a man by some people and in some ways identified as a woman by other people. A bus driver said to me in New York, when I asked him what time it was, he looked at me and said, “Is you a man or a woman?” And he said to me, “If you's a man you are the prettiest man I've ever seen, and if you's a woman you's the most handsome woman.” And I found a lot of comfort both in

the compliment and in his not being so concerned in some ways. He was interested more than alarmed or panicked in any way. So let's face it, I find it very, very easy to play men and I found it difficult to play the women. I had to go back and kind of start the conversation up again about myself and sexism and the ways in which I'm trying to battle sexism by not adopting culturally created femininity. Also being a construction worker for twenty years, the culture I was in was male culture for the most part, and so both in my personal life and in my performance I've been able, in the last seven or eight years, to actually reopen negotiations with culturally constructed femininity, to start to enjoy it, to start to play with it, to start to appreciate it. And so, that has a huge impact on what I can do on stage and what I can do in my life. So I wouldn't say one or the other was easier, but they're different. I think the thing that I saw as a young one (and that I kept and then adapted) was a culturally constructed male physical pattern. The thing that got me, and the thing I wanted to keep, was a sense of being a player, a sense of holding onto initiative. I remember very clearly walking into kindergarten the first day and looking around realizing that almost every female except one was under the cloak of contrived femininity, that they had lost initiative, that they had misplaced initiative. It was heartbreaking. I made friends with the one young girl who could still raise hell. Even though we got in trouble, we had the option at least. If terrible things were happening, you at least had the option to raise hell, and I wanted to keep that, you know.

LAD: Do you raise hell on stage?

MP: I don't think I've even begun to raise the kind of hell I intend to be able to raise on stage. I'm really pleased with what I've done, but I feel like there's so much more possible for what I can do both in terms of writing and performance. I'm really wanting to work with other people, two human beings are almost always better than one and three are almost always better than two.

LAD: Art and activism seem to me to be intimately linked in your work. Is art worth doing without activism?

MP: It is. It just happens that changing the world is the most interesting thing I've come across. It's like two loves meeting each other. The roots of making all art are deeply human. If a human is engaged in making art in a repressive anti-human culture, that's political. It's a force that contradicts oppression. I'm taking it in a different direction because I'm so interested in the world and how it works and how it might work differently. Whistling is a lovely human activity. Whistling as a man in the U.S. is one thing, and whistling as a woman in the U.S. is actually a different thing, and whistling as a woman in Iran in this

historical period is punishable by stoning, and it's all just whistling.

LAD: Would you talk to me a little bit about ethics and performance? How do those things work together for you?

MP: Not everybody does the kind of work that I do where there's the kind of ethics I talk about in that article [in *High Performance*]. Ethics and performance is making sure that you're at least attempting to bring something of value to the people coming to the theatre. That's one thing. There's also the conviction that there's actually some kind of a contract going on.

LAD: When you talk about a contract, what do you expect the audience to bring? You take the responsibility for making something of value, but what do you expect the audience to do in return?

MP: By coming they're actually doing something really significant. Once we're all there together then that's the playing ground. I would prefer they come sober [laughing], but the contract is such that the burden of responsibility is on me. I want us all to go to the incredible place that live performance offers, which is a place of discovery and remembering who you are and a kind of deep connection with yourself and also with the humanness that we're all a part of. But I feel like I, as the performer, have to extend the invitation. So far, I've only had a couple of audiences that were really odd. One time [laughing] I had my tech guy come down and say, "How about those Red Sox?" Which is a saying that I think you say when you don't know what to say. And that was just really interesting. I'm fascinated by the organism that an audience is and how one person's intelligence has an immediate effect on the audience. I think if you imagine me and everybody else so intimately connected, if you imagine those photographs with the lasers intertwining—I'm thinking *National Geographic* or *Scientific American*—I think that's what's happening in live performance. There are these locations of light that are in deep communication with each other in ways you never would imagine.

LAD: How radically do you change your performances when you feel these responses from the audience?

MP: I won't skip any characters. I'll add, I'll be much funnier or much tighter or much meaner and leaner. I'll be really relaxed and silly sometimes. I'll be really trying and not succeeding other times. I'll be just outside of where I want to be—those are really, really fun nights. [laughing] Actually one of the ways I will stumble back into center is through improvisation in those times. The text

rarely offers me a doorway. I haven't figured out how to use the text to do that yet. I have on occasion, but it's more frequent that I'll use improvisation to stumble back. One time, I improvised for three minutes, which is about thirty minutes in dog years, about highly technical information. Having done about thirty performances by that time, I knew there were technical ears in the audience that fueled that improv. At the end of the performance, as audience members introduced themselves to me, I met the three design engineers and Phillip Petit and his wife whose listening turned technical information into exciting theatre.

LAD: When you perform something like *City Water Tunnel #3*, how free to improvise do you feel with people's stories that they've told you? Do they still feel like the primary focus?

MP: It doesn't feel like it's about me. It's about them and it's about the tunnel. *Construction Stories* was about me since it was drawn from my life but it was also about us, about construction workers. I think I've slipped a little on the question. I feel like I can improvise and be funny. If things are going well, then I've done many things, improvisational, long riffs about growing up, about the 101 ways my family cooked ground beef badly. And I felt comfortable being big. It's like when you dance, you lose that self-consciousness. We're all big, we're all that big. I want the people I do to come off as big.

LAD: In *Construction Stories*, you talk about the way an electrician puts a pair of pliers in his pocket and the beauty of that gesture. As I heard you say that and saw you do it, a word that came to mind in the full range of its meanings was grace. Is spirituality part of your performance ethic and/or aesthetic?

MP: There's a phrase I use to discuss that action. I wanted to reveal the accumulated unselfconscious grace of our ordinary activity which is most evident in our activity at work—the typist, the waitress, me carrying lumber. I'm coming to that later in life. What I'm aware of and have a growing clarity about are how deeply connected humans and living things are. It's not come to me through a particular pursuit or study of anything, but through ordinary living. I'm doing experiments, everywoman's scientific experiments. Something is becoming revealed to me. I said to someone that I'm becoming a Buddhist by accident.

LAD: Would you tell me a little about your latest project?

MP: I'm working on a show called *Abundance*. I'm going to live next to interview three fathers who are billionaires and three mothers who earn mi

mum wage and their rooted link is the fact that all six of them are parents. The show's core revolves around the question of what is enough for you and have you ever had enough. I'll be doing performance workshops with the six people. I think that performance workshops are a gift and I want to give back to them. It may generate material that will be used. Back to ethics—first it is for them. I'll be working on it for one to two years.

LAD: What do you have in mind for the performance workshops?

MP: The performance workshops will be a combination of sharing personal histories regarding scarcity and abundance in the participants' families. There will be writing and researching of songs that reflect issues of scarcity and abundance, and story-telling around the question of who had more than you growing up and who had less, and the telling of life's stories from the perspective of not having had enough, and then from the perspective of having had more than enough. Throughout the workshops the participants will create their own one to three minute solo performances.

LAD: So this is a different way of working than *CWT#3*?

MP: Yes. In *CWT#3* I was interested in finding the art people were already making. I want to do right by the communities and people I work with. I think the performance workshops will be fun, informative, and possibly transformative for the participants.

In the time that transpired between the interview and its publication, Pottenger has expanded her effort to give artistic voice and vision to the events taking place in Yugoslavia. She has continued working with the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade on RJEKA/REKA, a performance journey through the entire Balkans. In addition, she organized and scripted *Winning the War Peace: A Gathering of New Yorkers* with the help of Eve Ensler, Laura Flanders, and Kathleen Chalfant, a project performed on June 30, 1999, which assembled fifty people from theatre, labor, dance, the visual arts, the military, and education to read letters, journals, poems, and emails from the people of Kosova and Serbia. In early July, Pottenger traveled to Belgrade to interview Serbian citizens. This material will be the foundation of a new play, *War and Peace*.

In her press release for *Winning the War Peace*, Pottenger explained her motivation for this particular work:

I realized then that we need opportunities to come together, to meet as New Yorkers, as citizens of the United States, as people who care and are also confused, isolated and scared. We need a place to simply listen to our neighbors from Yugoslavia, both in response and in respect, to hear their stories and turn our minds towards war and peace—not just for this war, but for the next, and the one after that. War is a time when *relationship* and *community* can keep open the door through which we can all move forward to win real peace.

This drive, that Pottenger feels so urgently in regard to the peoples of Yugoslavia, is at the heart of all her work.



Marty Pottenger. (Photo courtesy Marty Pottenger)

