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The Ephemeral Anatomy of a Trojan Horse: Cultivating the Third Edge of a Precarity Practice

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by Jay Ruby

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*The Ephemeral Anatomy of a Trojan Horse examines the cross-fertilization of precarity practices, ensemble performance development, festival culture, and cross-cultural exchange. **This series** (<http://howlround.com/tags/spectacle-based-drama-series-by-jay-ruby>) introduces basic tenets of spectacle-based drama and is rooted in the touring experiences, laboratory practices, international travel, and broader performance community of **The Carpetbag Brigade** (<https://carpetbagbrigade.wordpress.com/>).*

Precarity is derived from the **adjective precarious** (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precarious>), meaning not securely held; strong, or steady. Depending on the will of pleasure of another. Dependent on uncertain premises. Dependent on chance, dangerously likely to fall or collapse. Precarity is a condition of existence without predictability or security. Precarity actualizes the truth of impermanence. To intentionally practice precarity is to reclaim our relationship to the truth of impermanence. It actualizes the inherent contradiction of making the unpredictable predictable—of securing the insecure. Our attraction to precarity practice in performance results from an act drawing our insecurities into the open and dispelling them with an act of faith and confidence in existence. To know humanity can shine and excel in uncertain circumstance is to know we can overcome.



Candle Sticks. Carpetbag Brigade Stiltasana workshop at Parque Fundidora with Pura Vibra. Monterrey Mexico, 2009. Photo by Isabelle Kirouac.

Training is the universal means by which a precarity practice is honed and developed, and precarity practice is fundamental to spectacle-based drama. It brings performers to the edge of their technical evolution and functions as an antidote to sterilization, codification, and stagnation. By turning focus and concentration inward, performers confront habits of their body and mind that distort and distract. This requires a commitment to doing intensive work, where the limitations and habits of the body and mind can be challenged and overcome. The discipline of a precarity practice results in developing performative behavior for the performer, company, and form, which can be harvested as scenic material.

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The goal of this practice is to develop capacity, refine skills, and cultivate an ethic of engagement with the self. Training in a precarity practice inculcates an inner sense of orienting toward the edge of knowledge, between what we know and don't know, between what we can and can't do. There are three types of edges. The first is the personal edge of development, which exists where a technique expands the repertoire of our skills. It demands we move and think in new ways, altering our point of view. The first edge dissolves as the practitioner integrates the basic vocabulary of a form.

When beginners study Carpetbag Brigade's acrobatic stilt vocabulary, they must reconfigure their strength and balance and learn to move in a new way. We once taught two trained dancers to walk on stilts; their graceful bodies devolved in front of us as they adapted to new restrictions and dangers in their balance. Their normally fluid movement became temporarily disjointed and awkward as they found their footing in a new situation. They were passing through the first edge.

The second edge appears when the practitioner has accessed the full body of knowledge already available in the community of practitioners. This is the moment when a shared vocabulary seeks new information. The importance of ensemble work in precarity practice is the witnessing, sharing, and encouraging that practitioners provide for one another in navigating the second edge. This edge is breached either through external activity (when new forms are imported) or through internal activity (when new forms are developed).



Double Jitney. The Robes of St Anne. Cross Cultural Collaboration produced by Co Julie Danse and Circus Stella Dieppe Canada. Photo by Mathieu Laprise.

For the Carpetbag Brigade to perform in repertory, performers must learn essential vocabulary. Mastery of the vocabulary includes the execution of the technique, the knowledge to transmit it, and the ability to apply it in composition. As a company's collective body of knowledge grows, it takes longer for a new member to become familiar with the second edge; conversely as the company becomes more familiar with its second edge, knowledge is transmitted more efficiently. In the early days of Carpetbag Brigade we used a picnic bench for spotters to stand on as we developed a lift now called “the jitney.” It took six weeks of rehearsals to roughly understand it. Now courageous strangers learn it—without benches—in less than two days.

Absorbing the first edge takes drive and discipline and an example via a teacher or mentor—classes and workshop serve this function. Integrating

the second edge takes colleagues and exchange. An ensemble's edge of development is where collective identity and vocabulary is formed, practiced, and experienced. An ensemble needs practice and a location to train. Within this context of laboratory research, the third edge emerges at the spirited intersection of imagination and determination, leading to evolutions in the practice. A successful training ethic encourages an ensemble to consistently challenge personal habits, expand repertoire, and propel the practice to the living edge of the form, where its development can incubate and nurture the emergence of artistic expression.

To truly approach the third edge, we are interested not only in our innovations but in the myriad of forms that different practitioners in our field investigate. Because of this, Carpetbag Brigade created Global Stilt Congress for stilt-oriented performers and practitioners to come together, exchange skills, develop craft, and strengthen our community and network. Invited teachers and directors share techniques, compositional strategies and life experiences through classes, lectures, and a culminating site specific performance project.

A precarity practice should develop the goal of keeping the mind in a state of questioning and search. The practice of placing the body at risk and developing confidence in its capacity creates a state of faith, resilience, and inquiry. If the desire for perfection overrides inquiry, a critical part of a performer's presence is lost. An ensemble returning to previous victories attaches itself to old habits and constrains its growth. Precarity stems from the same root as the word **precor** (<http://www.latinwordlist.com/latin-words/precor-24139254.htm>), which means to pray, beg, entreat or invoke; and precordium, which is the portion of the body over the lower chest and heart. Precarity, precor, precordium, pre coeur...in front of or before the heart. Precarity practice aligns imagination and action by positioning a performer near the physical sensations and metaphorical allusions of the heart.

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