





Rachel Rosenthal



THE *DbD*
Experience

CHANCE KNOWS WHAT IT'S DOING!



ROUTLEDGE

The DbD Experience

First, pick up a copy of Rachel Rosenthal's inspiring *The DbD Experience*—part manual, part manifesto, part memoir—then head for Los Angeles . . .

Friday: Origins

Arrive at the “Doing by Doing” workshop to be greeted by Rosenthal—pioneering theater explorer and your host for the weekend ahead. Explore non-human ways of living and moving. Begin to develop a shared vocabulary with your fellow students through exercises.

Saturday: Connections

Continue to connect with the group on an energetic level. Make the journey from Kansas to Oz. Collaborate and create as a group—moving and vocalizing without language. Improvise boldly at every step. Treat music, voice, lighting, costume, sets, props and fellow performers as equals.

Sunday: Power

Learn to arrive in the moment when you are needed. Engage with transformative processes and take part in the Star Meditation. Understand your own individual power, joining your physical and emotional self. Perform solo improvisations and the Rambler—the final, extended culmination of everything that you have learned through the 34 hour experience.

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Rachel Rosenthal

Edited and with a foreword by Kate Noonan

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To Dibili with all my love

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Foreword

Kate Noonan

Moments come when we feel outside time, seized by a longing, moved by an image, in touch with invisible voices. We realize that we do not live in one world only. As Rilke says, "we are grasped by what we cannot grasp . . ." Something beyond life lives within life and calls the soul.

James Hillman



Rachel Rosenthal in *Traps*, 1982. Photo by Daniel Joseph Martinez

I first encountered Rachel Rosenthal in the late 1980s in an ad for her DbD (Doing by Doing) workshop in the *LA Weekly*: a bald woman in fatigues, her cavernous mouth contorted in a scream—that image scared the hell out of me. The ferocity and raw power of that photograph, along with the text promising an *intensive* experience made me so very uncomfortable that I had to question *why* it made me so uncomfortable (I was reading James Hillman at the time).

That ad became a sort of emblem for my fears, confessed to a friend who laughed with me about how uneasy it made me feel, and at me and my pronouncement that since it frightened me so much, that was reason enough for me to sign up and confront it (James Hillman's idea).

I didn't rush to sign up, however. Confronting my fear was theoretical at that point.

My theater background was firmly rooted in realism. I was taught that one started from theme—the Big Idea. An actor's mandate was to serve the playwright. The action took place in rooms with a fourth wall. The sets were tables and chairs. I had studied in New York with Stella Adler and was steeped in Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw. My personal tastes ran more toward Beckett, Peter Handke and Ionesco, yet I was a devoted student of Stella's acting maxim; "Understanding leads to doing, doing leads to experience" (as in experiencing the emotion, the truth of the circumstance). I was then, and remain, a devotee of the written word. Content was everything. Form (or as we would say the "How") would follow as a result (and was largely in my opinion the director's problem).

As is the truth in many an actor's circumstance, I sometimes made my living teaching. I worked with adult actors and with children in various programs and settings, from scene study and technique in conservatory to summer theater camp. It was after one intense and exhausting summer camp session for inner city youth that I decided to confront the fear and sign up for the DbD Experience, as its dates happened to fall on the weekend I would be heading home. Camp ended Friday morning, I would drive straight to the DbD. The children in that particular session inspired me by their willingness to commit themselves wholeheartedly to something utterly foreign to their experience.

Unbeknownst to me, a friend of mine had also signed on for the DbD weekend. We had had similar training—he had been a student of Sanford Meisner's in New York. I was happily surprised to see him at the studio when I arrived, and I latched on to him like a vise.

Rachel, too, was a surprise. Here was no boot camp warrior general, but a rather lovely middle-aged woman with a vaguely European accent, dressed with panache, bedecked in jewelry, and trailed by two large friendly dogs. I remember she was gracious and welcoming. I remember little else about that first evening, only that I felt very much a stranger in a strange land.

The exercises were non-verbal, and—uh-oh—touchy-feely.

I was *extremely* uncomfortable.

Shy and admittedly somewhat bookish by nature, I had always been a good student—a quick study. Here, I was worse than remedial—I simply did not get it and it was exasperating. Rachel gave feedback to the students who all seemed to understand what she was after and what was meant. I struggled to identify an urgency that propelled the processes and found none. Had my friend not been there I am certain I would not have returned the following morning and would have dismissed the work as nonsense. He, like the other students, was enthusiastic and excited, which fueled my suspicion that the deficit was mine. I did some psychological reshuffling, shifted my identity gears from expert to tourist and attempted to “go with the flow”.

Saturday was better. I began to notice that when Rachel gave feedback she talked about form: composition, tension, shape. She asked us to be aware of our partnerships on an energetic rather than a psychological level. The work was more kin to the visual arts than to the theater I had heretofore been working in.

Rachel insisted that the lights, the set, the audience, the music, gravity and air—elements I had never given much thought to—were all in this together, and there was no hierarchy, no one element more important than the next. As the weekend progressed, I experienced moments of hope and despair, clarity and confusion, chaos and beauty. And play for its own sake, which was a revelation.

What was being offered in the workshop was the abstract underpinnings of Theater. A different kind of scaffolding, metaphorical and poetic, imagistic, surreal.

Realism lost its luster. I went from Kansas to Oz and never looked back.

Stella had been after a theatrical truth, trying (and with her fellow members of the Group Theater, succeeding) to rid the theater of the artifice and grand theatricality of the nineteenth century.

Rachel was trying to rid the performer (in fact, the human being in general) of his/her hubris and sense of primacy. They could have been mother and daughter—both women theatrical pioneers in their respective generations. Both fueled by a modernist sensibility and a passion for art and for the world.

What is played out in the DbD workshop is the eternal dance between the “I” and the “Other”, the negotiations of power, the intermingling of passive and active, the focusing and diffusion of attention, the dialogue between “who I am” and, as Rachel puts it, the “givens” of existence. I came to feel that my education had been backwards; that I had built a lofty roof with Stella, and afterwards the foundation with Rachel.

“Understanding leads to doing” and “Doing by Doing” were both valid concepts but had come in the wrong order.

Rachel has a motto: “There are no mistakes, just bad follow ups”. After my initial DbD weekend, I knew that there was much more I needed to learn. I did several more workshops as a participant and many more as a “Slave of Love”, Rachel’s nickname for her support person. I became a member of the Rachel Rosenthal Company in the early 1990s, performing with the company in original works, written and rehearsed, and in the totally improvised “TOHUBOHU!”

My method of teaching changed radically as a result of this apprenticeship. As adult actors we try to retrain ourselves how to be “in the moment” and act “as if” we are seeing or doing for the first time every time. The beauty of children is that they do—wholeheartedly and without hesitation, and out of that doing understanding comes.

I have been teaching Rachel’s method to children and teenagers (in an Arts and Music charter school for three years and now at Espace DbD). I have watched miracles happen every day as a result. Students become more intuitive and aware of their effect on the world around them. Their bodies become articulate, their curiosity and empathy increases. Other teachers have noted their ability to focus on their work despite distractions in the environment. They are adventurous, willing to take risks. They become confident and free. “Be Where You Are Needed” became the mantra for most of my students. Good words to live by.

“Doing by Doing” is a much needed philosophy. Doing music, doing lights, doing sets, moving, using body and voice, improvising—as a soloist, in groups. Being where you are needed in the moment. Art making is soul making. I have been privileged to witness souls being made at Espace DbD for nearly 20 years, for the first time every time. Actors, dancers, poets, painters, surgeons, florists and lawyers have all made wonderful, ephemeral art in this space under the gifted eye of Rachel Rosenthal. Though the weekend is 34 hours long, it is not arduous and taxing, but rather a source of energy and renewal. I continue to do the workshops to this day and learn something new every time.

James Hillman wrote that fear is often the path to calling. He said that to find one’s calling, one must set aside the psychological frames that are used because “they don’t reveal enough. They trim the life to fit the frame.” This has proved true for me. I am grateful every day for the DbD Experience for how it informed and enlarged my life. I hope that this book finds the reader ripe for the experience.

Preface

"You have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive. It is not for unsteady souls."

Merce Cunningham

I discovered Merce's quote after having written the following paragraphs. Substitute the words "Total Free Improvisation" for his word "Dance", and the Cunningham message is identical to the Rosenthal message. Not surprisingly!

This book is about theatrical free improvisation. And about the way I teach it. The method that I am about to describe is a resurrection under another name of Instant Theatre, which I created in 1956, and subsequently taught, directed and performed, in a variety of incarnations.

But before you continue to read, let me warn you: You will not get rich if you choose this as your art form. Free improvisation frightens presenters. You may sneak it in during a gig that features a performance piece or several that have been produced, presented, and let's hope, positively reviewed. A free improv can be done at the end of the program perhaps, like an encore in a music recital, a bonus to the venue and its audience, but it's no program header, nor is it something that is well remunerated or financed, and there is no TV or Broadway at the end of the tunnel.

So why do it? In my view, and I have performed in many rehearsed, theatrical, and performance situations, no art form can come close to it in difficulty, in the multimedia aspect of it, in the diversity of its appeal, and also, in its astonishing effect on those who devote themselves to its exigencies and become proficient in and understanding of its demands. Free improvisation makes one better able to