

• Preface: "The End is the Beginning" •

The plays in this collection were developed and first presented by da da kamera, a company I formed in 1986 and first tried to close in 1991.

In 1986 I was just out of George Brown College in Toronto and was trying to make new work together with a group of friends including Michelle Jelley, James Cameron, Caroline Gillis, Corey Reay and Lisa Lelliott. We were a collection of many-hatted actors, directors, designers, video artists and playwrights. We were making work in places like the back room of the Rivoli on Queen Street West and at the celebrated Buddies In Bad Times Rhubarb! Festival. After about a year that group had dwindled to Caroline Gillis, myself, and my then boyfriend Albert Chevalier. Together we didn't really know what we were doing other than we wanted to make theatre that was engaging and alive and that we wanted to travel with the work. I wrote a one-woman play for Caroline called *See Bob Run*. Albert thought it was the best play he had ever read—though he hadn't read many plays. I think what struck him most was the power of Bob's voice, and the spirit in which the play was written: quickly, desperately and lovingly. I had written the play for Caroline because I wanted her to have a career and be happy, I guess I also wrote the play for Albert because I wanted him to have a project to work on, and I wrote it for myself in order to bring us all closer together. We were living in an apartment on Berkeley Street in Cabbagetown and always struggling to make the rent. Albert was sure that *See Bob Run* was going to be our ticket to success. It was our lack of knowledge about the way things worked that allowed us to be convinced by Albert to approach the best director we had seen and offer him the play of an unknown playwright with an unknown actress and unknown producer attached. That director, Ken McDougall, was intrigued by this curious group of friends and something in the play interested him. Ken was a close friend of Sky Gilbert, Buddies In Bad Times' Artistic Director, and Sky, never one to be afraid of oddballs and outcasts, came up with some seed money for the show and co-produced with us at The Poor Alex Theatre. The show was something of a small sensation and although we didn't really make any money we had our first taste of creative success. Somewhere along the way we picked up stage manager Claudine Domingue and bolstered by our Toronto experience launched da da kamera's first national tour, produced by Albert and his credit cards. We took the play to Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal and Halifax. Something was beginning.

It was now the late 80s and I began to create new work with Ken and Toronto playwright/actor/director Edward Roy. Together in various combinations we made *Never Swim Alone*, *2-2-Tango*, *Yes I Am And Who Are*

You?, *This Is A Play*, *White Trash Blue Eyes*, and Theatre Omaha's Production of *The Sound of Music* to name a few. We all had our own companies—I was da da kamera, Ken (with Robin Fulford) was Platform 9 and Edward was Topological Theatre—indeed it appeared at that time that everyone had their own theatre company. It seemed to me that each of those companies was really just a pseudonym for the artist or artists making the work—I didn't think about aesthetic or mandate—a mandate was just something I had to write for an art council grant. All I knew was that I wanted to make work that excited me and that gave me a sense of belonging. With the help of people like Sky at Buddies, Deanne Taylor at Video Cabaret and Sara Muerling at the Theatre Centre, da da kamera had gained a reputation for doing interesting work and so our Theatre Centre production of *Never Swim Alone* had a restaging at Theatre Passe Muraille. This was a big deal. The show was a success but the world was changing, AIDS was devastating our community, and people were asking a lot of questions about why we were doing this work. Albert had died. Others were ailing. Then Ken got sick. Something was ending.

At the opening night party for *Never Swim Alone* the woman who worked as the publicist at Passe Muraille was standing near me at the bar and overheard me tell a friend that I was going to close da da kamera. I was overwhelmed with the paperwork, it was over, kaput. The publicist approached me and she said "If you stop doing theatre I'm stopping too." This woman was Sherrie Johnson. I didn't know Sherrie very well but I knew she was devoted to theatre. She had been working part-time with Toronto madman/genius Hillar Liitoja's DNA Theatre and at Passe Muraille she had spearheaded a publicity campaign for *Never Swim Alone* which saw subway ads, a first for Toronto theatre. Also, she was always hanging around the theatre while we were working, looking for any excuse to watch the process, apparently she almost lost her job because "the theatre is no place for the publicist" (and we wonder why we have problems with the system?). The thing I had discovered about Sherrie was that although she didn't actually write or act or direct she was an artist. A couple of days later Sherrie came to my apartment on Maitland Street and we talked about how we could do something together. We wanted to make work that was engaging and alive and we wanted the work to travel, other than that we had no idea what we were doing. Something was beginning.

Around that time I had begun a creative partnership with the Toronto director/playwright Daniel Brooks—who ran The Augusta Company with Tracy Wright and Don McKellar. Brooks and I were playing with notions of theme and style and together we had made the solo show *House* which, with the help of producer Colin Rose, we had toured to Israel, Glasgow and Manchester. More recently we had been examining the life and work of the playwright Federico Garcia Lorca and taken a three-week trip to Spain which

resulted in the creation of *The Lorca Play*. Sherrie managed to bring *The Lorca Play* to the attention of Marie-Helene Falcon from Montreal's Festival des Ameriques and the play was offered an invitation to the festival. This was really the first time the company's work was seen at a festival where presenters from other festivals come looking for work to program, and although *The Lorca Play* was too unwieldy for a young company to tour—with eight actors and a four-person design team—we saw what was possible.

The following years saw Sherrie and Brooks and I as a team making *Here Lies Henry*, *The Soldier Dreams* and *Monster*, among other shows. We each had our role: Sherrie was producing, Brooks was directing, and I was writing and performing, but more than that we had a profound love for one another and the shared energy of a desire to make work that was more than just a "good job done" and to make a life that was entwined with our work. It was around the time of *Monster* that Brooks was considering becoming an official partner of the company. It was Brooks who helped me to believe that my ideas were important, who showed me that my self was worth celebrating and examining, and allowed me my artistic vision. Much of the work he had done on the solo shows helped to define da da kamera's visual style. He was an essential part of the work we were doing. But I was hungry to direct. When Brooks and I were working together on larger projects we would always fall into our familiar roles: he the director, me the playwright. I was worried that with Brooks as a partner I would never develop as a director. I told him I didn't want him to become a full partner. It was very difficult for me, but I imagine more so for him. It was not an easy time but it is a testament to our love for one another that our friendship remains strong and committed and we continue to work together.

It was the following years that produced the work *You Are Here* and *In On It*. Sherrie had managed to build da da kamera up into one of the most successful international touring companies in the country. The work had been seen throughout the US and UK, in Israel again, the Czech Republic, in Australia at the amazing Sydney Opera House, in Norway, Ireland and all across Canada from the tiny Festival Antigonish in Nova Scotia to the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, we had forged ongoing and important developmental partnerships with Chuck Helm at the Wexner Center at Ohio State University, with Mark Russell at New York's P.S. 122 and Danièle de Fontenay at Montreal's Usine C. *You Are Here* had played in sold-out runs in Toronto and Halifax and *In On It* toured more than any of our other shows and had won an Obie Award in New York. Sherrie had become one of the best international producers in the country and da da kamera needed more months in the year to attempt to visit all the cities to which we had invitations. Around this time we began work on the solo show *Cul-de-sac* for the Festival du monde in Montreal with Brooks directing, it was a deeply difficult process (as Brooks so brilliantly and succinctly outlines in his

forward to the published script) but the show was clearly one of our best. A long road of touring stretched out before us. But I was growing tired. I was turning 40 and spending up to eight months of the year on the road. I remembered how when we had first talked about the company Sherrie had said she would rather not handle the finances and now here she was besieged with spreadsheets and accountants and corporate gobbledygook. Not only that, Sherrie and I had begun to develop and produce film together and she was running Six Stages, her own international theatre festival. Sherrie was trapped in the office and I was trapped on the road. In order to escape I moved from Toronto to Halifax in an attempt to slow my life down, but because of touring I spent little time in Halifax. I needed a break, but I didn't know how to stay still, so I took two months off to drive through the deserts of the American Southwest. It was in New Mexico that I remember feeling resentment about da da kamera and how much they expected of me. I suddenly realized, I was "them." I e-mailed Sherrie and told her that I had to stop working this way. When I received her reply I was moved to tears, she felt the same way. Something was ending.

Sherrie never met Albert. I wish she could have. They are certainly kindred spirits. And I would never say that Sherrie picked up from where Albert left off, Sherrie is far too much her own person with her own creative fuel to be described that way. But together they would have been an unstoppable team. Of course as I write those words I realize that is what Sherrie and I became. Until we decided to stop, to change. Without question both Sherrie and I will continue to make theatre, but not this way. Not the way da da kamera made theatre: where all artists are present in the process from the beginning of the idea, where each element of production is of equal and essential value, and where development continues years into the life of the production. Companies are too concerned with the bottom line for that, here in this world where theatre is produced like it's real estate and the people who sell the work exist in a world far, far away from the creation of the work. But of course you might change all that.

Something has ended. And that is a good thing. I am happy to have had this time, to have loved these people, to have done this work. And in the end I have learned that meaning is revealed in retrospect, that aesthetic is developed not intended, and that absence is required for depth to be discovered. The plays in this collection came from da da kamera, and if any one thing, these plays are about how we must welcome death and embrace endings in order to move forward, even to begin. As we entered the final stages of development for *A Beautiful View* we were aware that it would be the last new creation of da da kamera. The process leading up to the world premiere at the Wexner Center was a wonderful and calm time. Charmed even. And knowing it was the last show certainly effected what the play

became: a story which closes with two people sitting at the end of the world looking at one another and seeing in each other their best selves. We couldn't hope for a more perfect final image.

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