

## Why be Half-Human? How Play, Performance and Practical Philosophy Make Us Whole

Lois Holzman and Cathy Salit

At the Taos 25th<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Silver Jubilee in Cancun, we led two breakout sessions— “Let’s Perform Our Lives (Engaging the Dialectics of Development)” and “Upside Down Conversations (and other ways to challenge truth and create relational possibilities in the business world).” One of us (Cathy Salit) also performed in “Show and Tell! Taos Style!” We’ve blended together elements of all three to give you a flavor of what transpired and a glimpse of our passions, sensibilities, politics and how we work and play with others.

So many things are holding people back from developing their lives and communities and changing the world. How politics are done, economic conditions, cultural norms, and the institutions of mainstream psychology and psychotherapy are the source of too many constraining factors to count. Social constructionism is relevant to all of these, but has a special concern with psychological concepts that socialize people (both the discontented and the contented) to live in the world *as it is*. The dominance of individualism is high on the list of our cultural concerns. We’re troubled by how individualism touches every area of people’s lives and spreads across the globe, buttressed by research findings produced by the misapplication of a natural science and medical model to human life-as-lived.

Our work, based in a social constructionist world view, is one of many challenges to the current individualized culture and its psychology that are being developed and practiced in many parts of the world. Known as a *performative psychology of becoming* and *social therapeutics* (<http://eastsideinstitute.org/>), our widely used methodology is grounded in ensemble-building, in which human development and community development are inseparably generated through *play, performance and practical philosophy*. These three relational and meaning-making activities are effective ways to experience what makes growth and development possible at any age—namely, that it is not a “solo act” and that we are both who we are and other than who we are at the very same time (Holzman, 2008; Newman, 1996; Newman and Holzman, 1996).

Lois is director of the East Side Institute (Institute), an international educational non-profit organization for social therapeutics and performance activism headquartered in NYC. Cathy is CEO of the NYC-based global consulting firm Performance of a Lifetime (POAL)

(<http://performanceofalifetime.com/>) that uses theater, performance and improvisation working with business and nonprofit leaders and teams to help them with communication, culture and collaboration. Those are our official titles. Unofficially, we are both *developmentalists*, the term we made up for people who believe that what's needed to make a better world is continuous human and community development, and who create activities and programs and organizations whose purpose is to support people to develop emotionally, socially, intellectually, culturally—in all ways.

To us, human development is possible because *human beings are never merely who we are* at any given moment. We are, rather, simultaneously who we are and other than who we are. The 10-month old baby who cannot yet speak her mother tongue can babble her way onto a conversational stage with a parent and hold her own—because she is related to by her parents not just as who she is (a baby who's not yet a speaker) but also and at the same time as other than who she is (a baby who is a speaker). She doesn't become a speaker by doing things we call learning or studying. She becomes a speaker through *performing* as one—before she knows how or even that she's doing it. This performatory way of being relational—of giving and creating love, tenderness, caring, commitment and joy through play, playing at, performing as other, doing what you don't know how to do—is magical, more so because it is mundane and everyday. This understanding of development and of performance—and of how they're related—is the heart and soul of the Institute and POAL. Unofficially, the two of us are *performance activists*, the term we made up for people for whom changing the world means playing and performing it anew.

We are far from alone. Through the Institute's study and training programs, conferences and seminars, and writings, we have met, trained, learned from and partnered with hundreds of individuals and organizations in the US and dozens of other countries. Most of these performance activists involve people—inner city kids, refugees, poor immigrants, CEOs, university students and faculty, health care workers, trauma victims, and others—in performance-based activities as a way to build community and give expression to collective power. Their approach to activism and social justice is positive, reconstructive and developmental.

We want to share a bit of the story of how we got to this understanding and how we bring it to Fortune 500 companies and inner-city poor communities as we are building a global performance community.

## Discovering Performance

While there are many beginnings, or maybe none (!), we'll begin this story in the 1990s. That was roughly when both Taos and the Institute were in the process of “discovering” performance and our paths crossed.

As Mary and Ken Gergen write about their discovery of performance in their book *Playing with Purpose* (2012), performance became of interest to them from performance art and performance studies as early as the 1970s. Ways in which performance was entering the academy excited them and inspired their first performative presentation—by Mary at an academic conference on postmodern psychology in 1989 in Aarhus Denmark. The next few years brought more experiments and collaborations in performative ways to do research and scholarship and shake up academia, including the first Performative Psychology symposium Ken organized at the 1995 conventions of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Performance came into the therapeutic, educational and theatrical work we and our mentor Fred Newman, along with our many co-developmentalists, were engaged in in the late 80s-early 90s. Fred, who passed away in 2011, was a philosopher, playwright, therapist and political activist whose work was central to the design of our performatory-developmental network of organizations. Our collective understanding of performance as developmental came from two sources. The writings of Lev Vygotsky on play and learning in child development was one source (Vygotsky, 1978). For Vygotsky, when children play, they do things other than and beyond their current developmental level—in his words, they are “a head taller.” The other source was the theatre. Actors on the stage are who they are and, at the same time, the characters they're playing. When Fred and Lois looked with a performance lens at what our community was doing in therapy, schools, with inner city kids after school, we saw how transformative, how developmental performance is. We began to understand the power of performance as ontological, as what people do and as what our society, culture and psychology *stop us* from doing. Our own activities and organizations became more explicitly performatory. In the early 1990s we began to

publish our views on performance and the performative psychology we were developing and present on the topic at academic conferences.

We can't be sure, but we think Ken and Mary and Lois first met at that event in Aarhus when Mary did her performance presentation. We got to know each other's work and when Ken organized another Performative Psychology symposium for APA, he invited Fred and Lois to participate. At that APA convention in Toronto, we presented a live performance of a one-act play Fred wrote, titled "Beyond the Pale," with characters Lev Vygotsky and Ludwig Wittgenstein in a therapy session (Newman and Holzman, 1997). The four of us collaborated again in 1997 at "Unscientific Psychology," the Institute's first international conference held in NY and in 1998 at a workshop, "What are the Possibilities for Performative Psychology?" held in Philadelphia. In 2001, Taos and the Institute launched [Performing the World](#) (PTW), bringing together the performance and development grassroots work of the Institute's community and the Gergens' wide-ranging creative efforts to create within the academy what is now known as performative social science. PTW continues to this day, holding its tenth bi-annual conference in 2018.

Performance of a Lifetime (POAL) was founded in 1996. There are many "beginnings" and "explanations" for how and why something came to be. Here is one story about POAL's origins and history. (See Salit, 2016 for a more detailed history.)

As part of the overall exploration of our activities through Vygotskian and performatory lenses, we devised ways to look more closely at theatre therapeutically and therapy theatrically. POAL was born out of one experiment in bringing theatre and therapy together. Fred and David Nackman (who, along with Fred and Cathy, were members of the multi-cultural, experimental Castillo Theater and its improv troupe) designed a weekend retreat for the Institute, called "The Play is the Therapy." In a NYC hotel, 150 social workers, teachers, home-makers, students, activists, bankers, nurses, hairdressers, etc. participated in an unusual and surprisingly intimate exercise, where, without advance notice, they got on stage and "performed their life" in one minute. They danced, they sang, recited poetry and mimed their lives; they showed growing up, a memorable meal, losing a parent, talking to their dog, falling in love, a typical work day, etc. They got thunderous applause from the crowd. Then Fred and David provided theatrical direction to create a "sequel" of sorts, inspired by the original one minute life performances. The sequel direction was not linear, nor designed to resolve or improve, but was a next,

improvisational performance, for example, “Let’s see/hear what your dog thinking”; It’s the same meal but you’ve been transported to Viking times”; “Let’s see and hear that again in Creole.” Everyone there was blown away, commenting, “It was incredible,” “like falling in love,” “more helpful than 20 years of therapy,” “we did the impossible,” “I want more.”

And so we created more! POAL was launched as the “performance school for the rest of us.” We designed a four week “Interactive Growth Theatre” workshop, where anywhere from 15-50 people who were not professional performers performed their lives in one minute on stage for each other (with the improvisational sequels). These performances became the raw material for a semi-scripted play they performed for an audience, four weeks later. The plays (and the process that produced it) were creative, intimate, surprising, therapeutic, fun, emotional, wild. By 1999, we had hundreds of people participate. We had big dreams of expanding its reach, and making enough money to help fund the grassroots organizing that we and our colleagues were doing in poor and working-class communities.

But even by NYC standards, this project was very weird and, in retrospect, ahead of its time. Today, there is an improv comedy school on almost every block, and improvisation and creativity are heralded and sought out in almost every field and discipline. But back then, nobody was doing anything remotely like this. We had no marketing dollars and were trying to grow POAL through word of mouth. That eventually reached its limits, and so we struggled to pay the rent.

Then one day, a POAL student asked Cathy to run a workshop on communication and collaboration for her sales team at a financial services firm. We were flummoxed by this request! It seemed to us that POAL was too radical and weird to bring into what we assumed was a “stodgy, conservative business environment” and we said no. Then they offered to pay \$1500, a huge amount of money for us at the time. Well. Wow, we thought. We decided to give it a try (and thus pay our rent). And, to our surprise and delight, the “conservative business people” loved it. It turned out there were human beings there, also, who needed and wanted to perform, play and develop.

And so, we took off. We started bringing our program into American Express, IBM, The Olympics, Chanel, Nike, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Twitter, hospitals, nonprofits and more. POAL has since worked with over 150 organizations and hundreds of thousands of people in 27 countries around the globe—helping leaders and teams to work better together, to innovate,

to create inclusive and diverse work environments, to collaborate and grow. And we've contributed over \$5 million to grassroots organizing that is further developing performance, play and practical philosophy to change our world.

### Our Sessions

The title of one of our Silver Jubilee sessions, “Let’s Perform Our Lives (Engaging the Dialectics of Development)” implies a close relationship between performance, development and dialectics. We hoped by sharing our methodology and doing some performing together, participants would get a sense of our culture-changing approach to human and community development and come to appreciate the complex and varied relationship in everyday life between performance and development, and the dialectics of the developmental process.

What is it about human beings that makes development possible, that makes performance possible and that makes performance developmental? Sharing with you our understanding involves taking a look at how we think about what it means to be human—both in the broader psychologized culture and at the ways the two of us and we think most of you think about it.

#### WHO/WHAT ARE PEOPLE?<sup>1</sup>

##### WE ARE...

##### AND, WE ARE ALSO...

Shaped by our environment	Shapers of our environments
Tool users	Tool makers
Adapters to culture	Creators of culture
Members of identity and geographical communities	Builders of new kinds of communities
We behave	We perform
We are who we are	We are other than who we are, who we are becoming

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Those on the left side are essential to becoming socialized, adapted. They're what psychology focuses on and what we're socialized to be and understand ourselves to be. As essential as they are, they are also what keep us stuck, passive, less creative, less active in working together to change what we believe needs to change. We live in a world that denies our becoming-ness, our socialness, and our capacity to take what there is and transform it. We live in a world that suppresses half of who we are and what we're capable of!

This is outrageous. What we and a whole lot of other people around the world are doing with our outrage is creating organizations and projects—all kinds of environments—that allow people to give expression to this “other side” of all of us. Activities that give developmental shape to the relationship between our being shaped and being shapers, between our cultural adaptation and our cultural creation, and so on. It's when we play and perform—at any age—that we are using, showing and continuously creating these two sides of being human. In other words, when we play and perform we give expression to our humanity, because we are who we are and other than who we are, who we're becoming. So...if you don't perform you're only half you!

In our Cancun sessions, we gave people a chance to show and create both sides of being human. In one of them, we directed the “one minute performance of a lifetime” exercise described above. Because of time constraints, we only got to see about eight different performances and their sequels. All were all rich, beautiful, brave and humanizing. We rehearsed the audience, a very important “character” in this play. We started with thunderous applause every time someone came to “the stage” and for each segment of their performance. (Eventually we were asked to make less noise because of the impact on nearby sessions, and so we mimed our heartfelt support and enthusiasm instead). Joining the many thousands of other people around the world in business, community, therapeutic, academic, healthcare, family and conference settings who have performed their lives in one minute and then performed a sequel with an experienced improviser, the Taos participants were as open and frightened and creative and sad and funny as all the rest.

In our other session we did an exercise we call “Upside Down Introductions.” People got into pairs and each shared with their partner a childhood memory or something they felt “made them who they are today.” We instructed them to listen to each other very carefully, because when they were done they were going to find another pair (making a group of four), and perform as their partner sharing the story/performance they just heard. Instead of saying, “Mariana just

Draft chapter to appear in *Social Construction in Action*. Taos Worldshare: Taos Institute, 2020.

told me that when she was five years old she broke her toe...,” they were instructed to say, “When I was five years old I broke my toe...”, and continue as Mariana (i.e., as their partner), not only in words but also style, the way they moved their hands, the timbre of their voice, etc.

Once again, performing this way tapped into the “other half” of who we are as human beings. We were now co-creating our stories, hearing how and what others heard, being seen in new ways by strangers or colleagues. Putting ourselves in others’ shoes, performing their stories, which were now ours. This performance enables us to reconsider our individual identities, and creates an opportunity for a more relational experience and meaning making together.

### The Taos Talent Show

We loved Show and Tell! Taos Style! What a beautiful and joyous gathering of song, stories, dance, poetry and humor. And we were so happy to be part of it— both as audience and performers. Cathy introduced and performed the song, “Bread and Roses.” Here is her introduction (which was accompanied by slides portraying the history she spoke about), the lyrics and a recording (of Cathy) singing.

*I have a song I'd like to share with you tonight— a song that means a great deal to me personally, and to progressives, working class and poor people around the world. It grew out of a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in the United States in 1912 by thousands of immigrant women workers from 40 different nationalities. The walk-out was in response to a pay cut and the extremely dangerous working conditions in the mills. It was organized by the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW, the most radical union in the history of the US. The IWW was the first union to organize Blacks and whites into the same union.*

*The winter of 1912 was brutally cold, and as the strike dragged on hunger stalked the striking families. And so, the IWW began sending the strikers' children to supportive families in New York, New Jersey, and Vermont. This move brought publicity to the strike along with widespread sympathy, and soon Congressional*



*hearings followed, resulting in the exposure of shocking conditions in the Lawrence mills.*

*Inspired by a poem entitled "Bread and Roses" written by James Oppenheim that had appeared in The Atlantic Monthly a few months before the strike started, the strikers carried signs and chanted "We want bread, but we want roses, too!" The workers eventually won the strike, gaining a pay increases of 20%, overtime pay, and a promise of no retaliation against strikers.*

*The poem was put to music, and was quickly embraced by the labor movement all over the world. Among other things, "Bread and Roses" is today the unofficial anthem of the post-modern development community of which my colleague and friend Lois Holzman and I are a part. We love it because it says that people need not only enough food to eat and a roof over their heads, but also access to all the beauty, culture, love, laughter and community that the human race has created.*

#### Bread and Roses

As we come marching, marching

In the beauty of the day

A thousand darkened kitchens

A thousand mill lofts grey

We are touched by all the radiance

That a sudden sun discloses

For the people hear us singing

Bread and roses, bread and roses

As we come marching, marching

Unnumbered women dead

With the ancient cry for freedom

Comes the ancient cry for bread

Small art, and love and beauty

Their drudging spirits knew

Yes, it is bread that we fight for  
But we fight for roses too

As we come marching, marching  
We are standing proud and tall  
For the rising of the women  
Brings the rising of us all  
No more slaves and no more masters  
Thousands toil while one reposes  
For the sharing of life's glories  
Bread and roses, bread and roses  
For a sharing of life's glories,  
Bread and roses, bread and roses.

We were overwhelmed with how thankful and gracious the response to our sharing was. We hope that you, too, will share it.

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Draft chapter to appear in *Social Construction in Action*. Taos Worldshare: Taos Institute, 2020.

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Cathy Salit is the CEO of the award-winning consulting firm, [Performance of a Lifetime](#). Using theater, improvisation and play, Cathy and her global team of coaches, improvisers and facilitators create leadership and team effectiveness programs for American Express, IBM, ArcelorMittal, Gallup, Twitter, as well as non-profits. She is the author of [Performance Breakthrough: A Radical Approach to Success at Work](#), and her thought leadership has been featured in the Harvard Business Review, Forbes, and Inc.com.