

# Madness and Method in *This Room Is Moving*

by MALLORY CATLETT

*This Room Is Moving* is a double bill that features Harold Pinter's first play, *The Dwarfs*, and a new play, *Beat*, compiled by Screaming Flea Theatre from the writings of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. Both plays are inspired by the formative years of their authors and the rooms they moved through.

In *The Dwarfs*, Pinter recollects the betrayal and loss of childhood companions. He analyses his self-absorbed behaviour as a twenty-something actor looking for a career beyond the confines of his East End flat. Feelings of regret and humiliation pervade. The destructive impulses of three young men find their outlet in the slow annihilation of long-lasting bonds that have become stale and abusive.

In *Beat*, destructive impulses are experimented with and exploded. Set on the Upper West Side, the characters emerge within the confines of a cold-water flat, amidst the chaos of books, Benzedrine and dirty underwear. The dramatic tension rises out of excessive honesty and a hunger for intimacy that ultimately forges a long-lasting friendship<sup>1</sup>

The public development of *This Room Is Moving* can be marked chronologically by a 1999 production of *The Dwarfs*, a 2001 workshop of *Beat*, and finally, a full production of *This Room Is Moving* in 2003.<sup>2</sup> In private, the company worked on and off, together and across great distances, researching, writing and editing.

In any development process, the problems you pursue move things forward. For *This Room Is Moving*, those problems can be traced back to my college years, when I suggested to my professor that I direct Harold Pinter's *The Dwarfs*. He responded by saying, "Well, it's not really a play." In an act of madness, I proceeded to direct the show. Afterwards, he gave me an insightful critique outlining the problems of the production, which appeared to have evolved out of an overly methodical approach and a failure to get the desired energy (among the actors) onto the stage. For this reason, I thought often about directing the play again.

In 1998, while in grad school at Simon Fraser University, I cast Billy Marchenski, Derek Whidden and



Billy Marchenski (Leon/Ginsberg) from *Beat* workshop, Vancouver, 2001  
PHOTO: ANDREW DENTON

Maury Tyre in *One Flea Spare*, by Naomi Wallace. As the show closed, I realized that these three actors had the right chemistry for *The Dwarfs*. Two of them had just started a company called Screaming Flea Theatre, with fellow actor and classmate Paulo Ribeiro, so I pitched the idea to them and asked Paulo to serve as the assistant director and dramaturg on the project. The following summer, we began.

*The Dwarfs* is a cryptic play; the language often serves as a cover for the plot and the characters. It is both autobiographical – scenes and events extracted from an early novel – and a first play. When it begins, the friendship of three men (Pete, Len and Mark) is already in decline. Finding clarity in the arc of the characters, and by extension, in their friendship, while maintaining the poetic, often cryptic, surface of the language is problematic. Without this clarity, the play can be effective but unsatisfying.

In rehearsal and performance, certain problems were solved, while others emerged. We were left, after the production, with a strange predicament. The audiences' interest in this rarely performed work was encouraging, and we were strangely dedicated to the questions the play raised about friendship – as a vital, potentially creative, but often destructive force in our lives. We wanted to continue this dialogue amongst ourselves and with our audience. Although we thought about remounting it, the play itself did not seem to be the answer. Instead, we considered building a new piece to go with *The Dwarfs* – one that could look at the same questions from a different angle.

In rehearsal for *The Dwarfs*, while struggling with this friendship handed to us by Pinter, we had looked first to biographical material, his early writing, and to historical sources about East End London in the forties. This was helpful intellectually, but our scene work struggled to unlock the energy at the source of the friendship. I began to think indirectly about the problem and, as a diversionary tactic, I did a little reading into William Burroughs,



Maury Tyre (Will/Burroughs) from *Beat* workshop, Vancouver, 2001  
PHOTO: ANDREW DENTON



Derek Whidden (Peter/Kerouac) from *Beat* workshop, Vancouver, 2001  
PHOTO: ANDREW DENTON

whom I began to think a lot about while dealing with the character of Pete. In my reading, I found a photograph of Burroughs, a young Jack Kerouac and a very young Allen Ginsberg, in the late forties, on the Upper West Side. The picture was strikingly reminiscent of the kinds of pictures we had of Pinter and his friends at about the same time in London.

We found in the Burroughs/Kerouac/Ginsberg relationship a similar triangular dynamic and code-like use of language. Burroughs was an interesting parallel to Pete, Ginsberg to Len and Kerouac to Mark. Their friendship had a vitality that we suspected existed at one time among the characters in *The Dwarfs* but had difficulty capturing. The formation of this friendship between Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg then became the obvious subject for the new piece, as they had come to represent our parallel universe.

In the company's post-performance discussions of *The Dwarfs*, it was proposed that the new piece should use Pinter's structure as a skeleton – same number of scenes, same number of characters in each scene – to assist in the writing process and to ensure a strong dialogue with the original script. We did not want it to appear that we were competing with Pinter, however, so we decided to create a collaborative, collage-based script, compiled and edited

from literary excerpts. That would allow our new piece to evolve stylistically, while delivering the writing of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs as directly as possible to the audience.

The premise that guided the "writing" process was that it would be the natural extension of our group research. In theory, our relationships to one another and our functions would remain consistent. As director, I would research and then write with an eye to the play as whole and in relation to *The Dwarfs*. Each actor would research through the lens of character as he developed his new role. The role of the dramaturg would be critical, as Paulo had to work in conjunction with my concerns, while trying to monitor and coordinate the actors' evolving character agendas. This was particularly important because I spent the better part of the script-development period in New York City and knew that I had to rely heavily on Paulo's direction of the Vancouver process in my absence.

Collectively, we were able to cover a lot of ground in our research. Each actor had hundreds of sources to choose from – recordings, letters, journals, poetry, biographies, essays, novels, films and interviews. Paulo and I focused on social context and sources that answered the difficult questions that eluded us in *The Dwarfs* – What brought the characters together? What influenced their thinking? and How did those influences create intellectual, emotional and literary bonds?

In particular, I was drawn to the communal education of these three writers. With Paulo's help, I dug deep into a select group of scientists, doctors and grand social thinkers – Wilhelm Reich, Oswald Spengler and Alfred Korzybski. All wrote significant tomes, all dared to be generalists, without the sanction of their respective scientific or social circles, and importantly, all were prophetic thinkers who saw a connection among science, psychology and history. Kerouac, like many in the forties and fifties, read Spengler's *Decline of the West*, but William Burroughs harped on these writers to his friends. Through these conversations, he began to compose a worldview that connected their ideas and began to shape the literature that they were creating.

In retrospect, my growing obsession with figuring out how this outer ring of writers directly influenced the novels, poems, dreams and musings of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs probably came from my absolute inability to find any concrete evidence of a connection among Pinter's characters. It was through this secondary matrix of writers – including Yeats, Rimbaud, Gide and Céline – that I could concretize both the friendship and the eventual literary output of Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg. I felt this education could be dramatic and supply the necessary key to onstage action and image.

Meanwhile, the actors were consumed by the primary source material. In this way, we established an ongoing dialogue between influences (Paulo's and my investigation into secondary sources) and output (the actors' knowledge of the writings of the characters they would portray). This dialogue fuelled our collaboration. The result of all this research was a massive binder, filled with quotes, excerpts, images and illustrations. From this, we began the madness of collective writing.

What helped me through this process and guided my editorial choices was an understanding of the environment out of which the play would emerge and the rules that would govern it. My certainty about that was predicated on the major problem we solved in our 1999 production of *The Dwarfs* – specifically how to “move the room.” As Len, the lead character in *The Dwarfs*, notes early on,

This is a journey and an ambush. This is the centre of the cold, a halt to the journey and no ambush. This is the deep grass I keep to. This is the thicket in the centre of the night and the morning. There is my hundred watt bulb like a dagger. This room moves. This room is moving. It has moved. It has reached ... a dead halt. (96)

In this fairly simple description of Len’s room, Pinter’s use of territorial language reflects his interest, at the time, in how we control and are controlled by rooms. Through improvisation with these ideas and the object world of the play, a design emerged that allowed the actors/characters to territorialize the space and to actualize Len’s escalating instability as the plot unfolds.

A series of heavy drapes bisected and enclosed the space. By opening and closing the drapes, both Mark’s and Len’s rooms could be revealed and concealed swiftly by the actors. The precision with which the space shifted to reveal the characters, their rooms and the objects within them was of utmost importance. The physical action was minimal and economic. Handling objects or moving the curtains in transitions was an act of shifting control that underscored the characters’ desire to hide and obfuscate.

In Pinter’s first scene, Len takes several trips into Mark’s kitchen (established by the offstage clamour of his rummaging through cupboards). Pinter’s distinct sense of decorum prohibits us from seeing beyond those rooms relegated to social gathering. The premise of *Beat* was to lead our audience into the kitchen and all the spaces behind Pinter’s rooms. The New York City cold-water flat that typically has a tub in the kitchen came to mind. This is a space where the bathroom and kitchen come together in an unseemly combination – the perfect foil for Pinter’s sense of decorum.

We knew that Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs had lived together on various occasions, in differing combinations, but never for long. If territory defined the rules of Pinter’s space, then transience would define the rules of *Beat*. The space would be littered with over-stuffed suitcases and personal effects. Sheets and curtain liners replaced the heavy drapes. Entirely incapable of concealment, this curtaining would convey a desire for, but the complete futility of, privacy.

As in *The Dwarfs*, character behaviour would be determined by these new rules of transience. Transparency and the desire to strip away the trappings of the socially acceptable would govern the actions of the characters – drug use, dream life, homosexuality, masturbation and states of undress – were all within the realm of possibility. The characters were never concealed. Random insignificant actions and a sense of abandon when it came to objects in the room were highlighted and often accompanied by music.

A song, selected from the biographies of the characters, was the centrepiece of three scenes in the play. The first musical interlude, Bessie Smith’s “Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl,” depicted Ginsberg peeling and eating a freshly boiled egg while Kerouac typed and Burroughs dressed to go out. In the second interlude, Strauss’s “Blue Danube” accompanied the three men preparing and taking Benzedrine. In the third, The Mills Brothers’ “You Always Hurt the One You Love” played as Burroughs and Ginsberg ransacked the apartment.

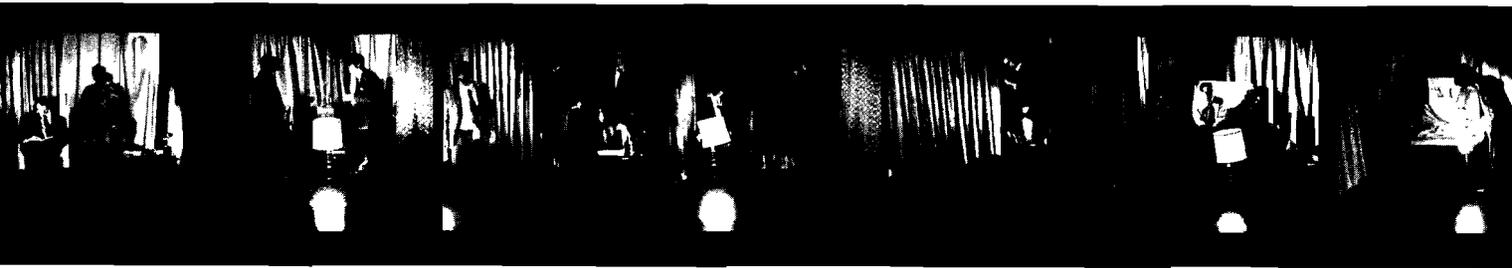
As I sought refuge in the spatial foundation of the play, the script was evolving and being passed back and forth via e-mail. By the fall of 2002, it was clear that we needed to come together and workshop the second draft. The laws of diminishing return had set in and we all needed to feel the fruits of our labour. I arrived in Vancouver and, after a week of rewrites, we launched into a staging.

One of the most interesting things about *The Dwarfs* is the trajectory it sets for Pinter as a writer and the role these friendships seem to have played in shaping much of his early work. Specifically, we were interested in the process of fictionalization. In *Beat*, we brought this issue to the surface, by making writing itself a primary action in the play. The sound of typing could be heard in almost every scene. Life in this room was being transcribed – even Leon, the Ginsberg character, describing the contents of the sink:

Two tooth brushes, one sanitary paste, yellow soap, fork, grimacing mass of black abrasive pads for pots. Sink in which I’ve washed my dishes of organic stew, my flowery salads oils and cigarettes, garbage of my eyeballs in the morning, in which I’ve pissed and coughed up tars of mad tobacco and spat my bleeding gums and doused my burning feet and dipped my stinking hand and washed my fat black balding hair-regurgitated ecstasy and thrown up junk and wine and washed my dirty underwear. O sink, my sink, white mouth of god, porcelain white coffin of the year – (Ginsberg 409)

This seemingly spontaneous outburst was, for us, an act of writing emblematic of Ginsberg; it stood in high contrast to Kerouac’s classic stance atop his Underwood, while dreams and routines gave voice to Burroughs. But what all three seemed to have in common was an excessive, effusive, almost gratuitous use of language – what we could identify as Burroughs’s “word virus.” Each character’s personal mode of writing was threaded through the script to make evident the way in which this friendship fuelled and supported the emergence of these three distinct voices. We chose, as did Pinter, to fictionalize the characters by using early literary personae but not to submerge the writer or the creative act.

The second most important element that arose from the writers’ voices was Burroughs’s idea about writing as the extension of routines. These skit-like, character-driven happenings were a hallmark of the early friendship. Influenced by Gide’s notion of the *acte graduite*, the routine was helpful, in the sense that the writing was performative and fuelled by an audience. We began to see the play as a series of routines that galvanized the structure, style and dramatic action.



A chronological sequence of stills from the video of *The Dwarfs*, in *This Room Is Moving*, Vancouver, 2003  
VIDEO: PAULO RIBEIRO



A chronological sequence of stills from the video of *Beat*, in *This Room Is Moving*, Vancouver, 2003  
VIDEO: PAULO RIBEIRO

The script we had created was a mad collection of these routines, interspersed with a scientific discussion of Pavlov's dogs and semantics, readings of Spengler on Faustian Man and the future of machines and recitations of Rimbaud's *Scatological Sonnets* and *The Drunken Boat*. The workshop allowed us to see where this jumping back and forth – from raw excerpt to more crafted dialogue – worked and where it fell short.

All along, we struggled to make the story explicit, while working within the confines of excerpts that often had only a metaphorical relationship with the actual scenario and circumstance that we were placing them in. Our commitment to excerpts and collage techniques caused a lot of friction. We worked always with two very distinct, perhaps more, notions of what writing is and how it happens best – a single-author model, where original text is generated, and a collective model, where pre-existing text is aligned and arranged alongside other text. This was often maddening, however necessary.

After the workshop, Paulo and I stepped back from the script and left the rewrites to the actors, who used the process to work out the kinks in their characters and the plot. We all needed time away from each other to contemplate the benefits and damage that often result from intense collaboration under the pressure of time, overwork and underpay. Like many small companies, we had a lot to learn about negotiating those stresses, while trying to keep everyone on board. I went back to New York. We regrouped and focused on grant writing, literary estate dealings and production planning.

I returned to Vancouver in July of 2003. My focus was on the dialogue between the two pieces, and we set up a rehearsal schedule in which we alternated frequently between the plays day by day. Rehearsing *The Dwarfs* was strange. We were re-encountering our younger selves – past choices and impulses that now seemed fruitless after

our trajectory with *Beat*. Born out of an often frustrating relationship with Pinter's play, the making of *Beat* now felt like an elaborate and indirect way to come to terms with *The Dwarfs* by blowing it apart in an act of our own making. Each actor had, in a sense, processed one character through the development of the other. Many previous mysteries about their relationship now seemed obvious.

The ultimate test of the process was whether the two plays worked together and engaged the audiences in their dialogue. Again, the movement of the room played a critical part in the audience's ability to participate. In *The Dwarfs*, we were able to completely enclose them, along with the play, in heavy, claustrophobic drapes. This allowed us to throw open the entire space during intermission and radically shift the surroundings for *Beat*.

Directly behind *The Dwarfs'* drapes was the set of *Beat* – bare walls, covered with pictures of their influences (portraits, scientific diagrams, historical charts) and remnants of the kitchen and bathroom (a tub, toilet, medicine cabinet and hot plate). But many of the staple elements were shared by both plays – the table and chairs, books, clocks. The transformation of space occurred during intermission, accompanied by a Charlie Parker medley. You could feel a palpable release from the audience, as they moved down off the risers and into the space – now sitting on three sides of the playing area.

*Beat*, like *The Dwarfs*, ends in hospital, which we staged on the risers where the audience had begun the evening. This time, however, all three characters explicitly play out a routine of insanity – an issue Pinter only hints at metaphorically. Instead of one character being left alone at the end, as the lights fade on *Beat*, all three remain together.

In watching the show, I felt the audience change. There appeared to be some method to our madness. *Beat* rewarded them by allaying the uncertainty and edginess that *The Dwarfs* evoked. At the chaotic centre, there is an

optimism, a friendship with a future. It felt good to leave our audience with that and to complete this conversation we had started so long ago.

It could be said that the balance between method and madness in a given process defines one's aesthetic and mode of presentation. It is, perhaps, some strange defining ratio or equation that evolves, falters, but eventually stabilizes and gives way to the theatrical event itself. How much madness can be sustained by how much method? The one without the other is deadly, if not for the artists, then surely for their audience.

As the project leader, I was more aware of this negotiation than I had ever been before. I asked four artists to work on the same project for four years. And although their commitment was inspiring, I had to step in on occasion with a little method to quell the madness. Our tolerance for madness was high and was fuelled by our source material. Having immersed ourselves in Pinter, Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac, it should not have been a surprise that we might lose our bearings. And we did. Our ability to recover was predicated upon our submission to the demands of the piece we were creating.

Much like the characters in the plays we were pursuing, we were forced, by the process of making *This Room Is Moving*, to come to terms with the destructive and supportive impulses in our own creative friendship. At times, we were not sure whether all this would end like *The Dwarfs* in a monologue, or like *Beat* in a collage of inter-cut correspondence. After four years of living with this problem, it was reassuring to know we learned from the experience and chose the latter. **CTR**

## Notes

- 1 This show synopsis was written by the company in preparation for the production.
- 2 Exact dates and venues: *The Dwarfs*, July 13–6, 1998, at Vancouver Little Theatre; *Beat*, the workshop, November 23–5, 2002, at the Cavern; *This Room Is Moving*, August 19–31, 2003, at Video In. *This Room Is Moving* was funded, in part, by the Canada Council for the Arts and was performed with permission from the Estates of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and by special arrangement with Dramatist Play Service, Inc.

## Works Cited

- Ginsberg, Allen. *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties*. Ed. Gordon Ball. New York: Grove Press, 1977.
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**Mallory Catlett is a freelance director/dramaturg. Most recently, she was awarded a year-long residency at HERE Arts Center, where she will be creating a new derivative piece about Joan Littlewood and her seminal work *Oh What a Lovely War*. In February, she directed a site-specific production of *As You Like It*, which was the inaugural work of her new company, Restless Productions NYC. She has received grants from the New York Council for the Humanities and the Canada Council for the Arts. She is the recipient of the Elliott Hayes Award for Dramaturgy for her work on the Juggernaut Theatre Company's *The First 100 Years: The Professional Female Playwright*, a New York, city-wide reading and discussion series, dedicated to the works of female playwrights of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She splits her time working between NYC (where she is the Artistic Director of Restless Productions NYC and Associate Member of Juggernaut Theatre Company) and Vancouver (where she is a founding member of Screaming Flea Theatre and Co-artistic Director of Restless Productions Vancouver – an interdisciplinary collective that develops new works of music, dance, theatre and installation art).**