Matthew Maguire
In conversation with Caridad Svich
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[Matthew Maguire's plays include *The Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo*; *The Tower*; *Phaedra*; and *Chaos*, a science fiction opera. He created with Philip Glass *A Descent Into the Maelstrom* for Australia's Adelaide Festival. He has also won an OBIE for acting and is published by Sun & Moon Press. His play *Luscious Music* was published in *TheatreForum*.]

CS: Let's start with a non-sequitur. George Matthew Maguire installed the first telephone in Texas in 1890. This makes me think about connections, how we are linked to those we don't know, and how names live through history. Your work as a writer deals with links to the past as well. Where does a piece begin for you? In the dig of memory/history or elsewhere?

MM: Just below the surface there's a tantalizing web of connections on which we might eavesdrop if we could only persuade George Matthew Maguire to install the phone lines. Another Matthew Maguire I may be related to is the man who organized the first Labor Day Parade in Union Square in New York City in 1882. The connective tissue of history has always fueled my writing. I don't believe in non-sequiturs; everything is connected. Memory has been a recurrent theme for me. One of my plays, *The Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo*, explored the amnesia of the Reagan years. [It's ironic that the president who fought so hard to suppress our national memory is now succumbing to Alzheimer's.] I generate plays by exploring questions that obsess me, and those questions in turn provoke new questions which spark the next play. Though plays are discrete, writing is a continuous stream. Recently I've been pursuing questions of self-destruction: can a person be saved who refuses to accept forgiveness? Since the personal is political I hope these questions may shed some light on our country's seemingly headlong dive into self-destruction.

CS: This is a most difficult and complex time we live in. Salvation and redemption are on my mind as well, as are social destruction and self destruction, and attempts toward reconstruction are very much at the fore of our daily lives nationally and globally. I continue to be interested in investigating the process of exchange and artistic collaboration as a means to forge links and open up the dialogue across borders. You've created pieces alone and in collaboration (CHAOS, for instance, or ...MAELSTRÖM). How does your process change given with whom you are working? Have you ever been turned inside out as a writer because of a collaboration?

MM: I've sometimes thought of collaboration like a marriage but without the conjugal pleasure. Yet, collaboration can be immensely satisfying. I find that each person with whom I collaborate draws out a different aspect of my voice. I aspire to the virtuosity of the chameleon who perfectly adapts to the color of his branch without ever losing his essence. I admire the German artist Gerhard Richter whose 2002 retrospective at MOMA celebrates his technique of continually reinventing his style in diverse media. Fortunately, Richter's show is on a national tour through 2003 so it will continue to challenge widely held attitudes about the "inherent importance of stylistic consistency." If shape shifters dazzle you, then you'll enjoy collaborating. But collaboration does change one's process. Philip [Glass] wanted me to draw the play, visually storyboard the scenario, which I did in one, two, and three minute segments when we created *A Descent Into the Maelström*. It was rewarding to visualize so deeply. When Michael Gordon and I wrote the science fiction opera *Chaos*, he often asked me to invert my usual pattern of words first and craft lyrics to fit complicated meters. The challenge drew me closer to the music. Have I ever been turned inside out? Driven to paroxysms of rage and agony, oh yes. Climbing out of my own skin like some refugee of Magritte? No.

CS: How did you start writing for the theatre? Did your interest come from reading plays or seeing them?

MM: When I was sixteen I went to the St. Louis Rep to see Earle Hyman in *Othello*. When he began howling with grief I got shivers all over my body, and I thought right then that I'd like to do that for other people. My love for theatre grew deeper when I saw in the same season *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*. I felt the genius of these writers, however, I thought my path would be as an actor. After earning an acting degree in New York I was in a bookstore called Untitled Books where I discovered Max Ernst's collage novel, *Une Semaine de Bonté*. Unlike a traditional novel it contained little text, but rather 139 collages. The idea entered my brain (or perhaps my eyes) that this would make an amazing piece of theatre if the images were staged. I proposed the idea to Ellen Stewart who, amazingly, since I had never done it before, said yes. For the next ten years I reveled in staging plays which collaged theatre and the visual arts. It was when the era of the theatre of images had peaked when it dawned on me that the power of the image evoked in our imagination by the word would still be transmitting long after individual spectacles had faded to pale memories.

CS: PHAEDRA, your response to Racine's play, is such a strong, evocative, taut piece. It is a modern mirror for an ancient tale. What limits or taking-off points do you give yourself when adapting text?

MM: I attempt to stay in constant connection with the impulse that inspired me in the source. With Racine's play I was struck by Phaedra's heroic struggle against forbidden love. She's willing to starve herself to death rather than succumb, yet the force of her desire overwhelms her. His work is stunningly erotic, yet it also warns of turbulent and frightening unconscious forces. It seduces and repulses at the same time. As Racine says, "Phaedra is neither entirely guilty nor entirely innocent." The questions of guilt and innocence that Racine inspired in me are still echoing in the chain of questions driving me now. I attempted to be as faithful as I could to Racine while making the story my own. As a model I used his own departure from Euripides. He pays Euripides all the homage the master deserves, then departs, hopefully with a blessing. I don't believe that we playwrights invent new stories, rather that we tell the stories which have always existed and make them new by channeling them through the filter of the present moment. As writers we are that filter.

CS: Your new play LUSCIOUS MUSIC has gone through several drafts. The play, thus, exists in different forms. When assembling a draft, what task do you give yourself as a writer? Do you think of a potential audience? Actors? Theatre company?

MM: The eminent physicist Richard Feynman said, "Science is a way of trying not to fool yourself." I've tried to adopt this idea: writing is a way of trying not to fool myself. So the first task I grapple with is stripping away received ideas so that I might reach a standard of authenticity. To that end I can imagine an ideal audience composed of John Lee Hooker, Gertrude Stein, Federico Garcia Lorca, Johnny Cash, Egon Schiele, Marie Curie, Margaret Sanger, Joseph Cornell, and Rosa Parks. There are people in this world who say exactly what they mean regardless of cost, and I can't envision a better audience. That said, of course being in *showbiz* I'm a pragmatic animal. *Luscious Music* grew out of a series of *gigs*. Dance Theatre Workshop invited me to show some work in their Hit and Run Festival, so I took poems I'd been concocting and asked two of my favorite actors to weave them into a short theatre piece. Next the Performance Index Festival in Switzerland asked me if I would do a piece in the Architecture Museum in Basel, and since there was only a budget for a solo I performed it myself by conjuring monologues sparked by the poems. As I found myself inhabiting the characters as an actor I wanted

more history and a real arc, so when I returned to New York the writing grew into a full-length realistic play. Clearly there is a dialogue between the ideal and the pragmatic in everything I do.

CS: You perform, write, and direct. Have you ever worn all three hats at once? What happens to you as an artist when you wear a different hat? Do you find yourself thinking differently about the art of writing when you act, for instance?

MM: I've thrown myself into the maelström of three hats three times. It's exhilarating and if you love panic it's a hoot. I could feel in my bones how integrated an art theatre really is. All the elements must mesh for that peak experience to erupt. It's easy as a writer to concentrate solely on the text, but what makes theatre such an ecstatic medium is when all the contributing forces arrive at the moment with equal power and focus. When I act I'm acutely aware of the creative force the actor wields. I don't believe that actors are *interpretive* artists. Actors are the only ones in command of meaning when they are on the boards. If the text says, "I love you," and she kisses him on the lips it's one reality. If she says, "I love you," then slaps his face, it's an entirely different world. I believe that respecting and channeling the actor's power is the most potent approach to writing.

CS: When I teach, student playwrights are often so intent on production that they forget the option of self-production, but I think it is something we all do at one point or another in our lives as writers. You can't always depend on someone else to produce the play. Sometimes you have to find a way to make it happen for yourself. How do you find the strength and energy, administrative and artistic, to self-produce when you do?

MM: I find that once you make the plunge and commit to self-production the boldness of the decision rewards you by opening doors which were firmly closed until you committed the psychic energy. The sheer stamina of youth is helpful but not necessary. When I was a kid I'd sprint around lower Manhattan to numerous banks shifting credit lines like three card monte to float my productions. It was literally "sweat equity." Now I walk but no less energy is required. It is purely an act of will. At a certain point the process takes over and an event is born. I've often felt during opening week that what's happening to me is what the experience of giving birth must be like. There's this thing coursing through me, and it's insisting on coming out, but there's not enough room and so it's very painful, yet I conceived it and set it in motion so by god it's coming out. I become a witness to my own creation, simultaneously participant and

innocent bystander. So the trick is just to commit. All the people depending on you will drive you home in the vehicle of this thing which has acquired a life of its own.

CS: You have been teaching at Fordham University in New York City for a while now. Has your daily interaction with students of theatre changed your approach to writing?

MM: Teaching has had a real impact on my work. Since I'm in a constant search for better ways to illuminate the inner working of craft, I'm forced to probe my own understanding. I have to teach myself so that I can teach. Teaching Theatre History from the Greeks through Shakespeare and up to the present moment has ignited in me a fascination with the power of storytelling and plot. I spent years mining every possible way to subvert the linear, so when Mark Bly invited me to teach a workshop for his Yale playwrights he was surprised to find his friend the radical experimentalist extolling the beauty of causal chains. My first training was as an actor, with Stella Adler, and now that I've returned to teaching Stanislavski technique I find that my writing has shifted to support the power of the actor in physical actions. Writing as if I had my own feet on the stage. And in the third branch of my teaching, directing Fordham's Playwriting Program, I've been moved by the power of the individual voice, and I confront every day the necessity to resist the censor. So teaching has been a boon for my writing, but I warn any writer contemplating it that there are occupational hazards. Artists by necessity are self-involved, teachers are always directing outwards, giving and giving. These two forces clash in writers who teach. Students' needs often invade the private realm necessary for the imagination to breed. As miners carry canaries into the mines to warn them of toxic fumes, so should writers carry their own canaries into the classroom.

CS: Would you speak a bit to your work experiences as an artist outside the US? It is easy to become so focused on what happens in NY, for example, or Chicago or L.A., etc. than the option or possibility of working outside US borders sometimes doesn't enter the picture, as it were...

MM: There are many reasons to work outside the United States. There's a history of artists ranging from Josephine Baker to Robert Wilson who've succeeded by leaving home. Artists are often accorded a deeper respect in cultures other than our own late-capitalist orgy in which the "non-utilitarian" and negative price/earnings ratio of our work doesn't compute. In Ireland writers are so valued they're exempt from tax. I've been influenced by Ellen Stewart at La MaMa who always urged us to

create work that would reach audiences of other cultures by avoiding reliance on the text as the main communicator. As I moved from "wrighting" my plays and entered a phase of "writing" Ellen and I grew apart, but I still see the value of her position. She inspired me by producing brilliant companies like Tadeuz Kantor's Cricot 2 from Poland whose work spoke to me though I understand no Polish. It's a lesson I carry with me when I work abroad. There is a virtue in speaking to one's local community, but when you leave it you should be aware of the complex issue of translation. As Rabbi Yehudah said in the Talmud: "If one translates a verse literally he is a liar; if he adds to it, he is a blasphemer and a libeller." When I toured my play, *Untitled (The Dark Ages Flat Out)*, to Berlin I worked with a translator and the best we could do was the sadly literal *Dark Times at Highest Speed*. You can definitely lose some zing if you rely on your language alone. So I think it's great to work abroad because it hones the sensibility which communicates with all the languages on the writer's palette.

CS: How do you pace yourself as a writer? Are there mundane routine things you do? Or less mundane?

MM: You're a wonderful one to talk with about pace. You're the fastest writer I know and the only one I know who challenges other writers to races with their writing. It's endearing and amusing. However, I've made a conscious effort to slow down. I was once thought prolific. The company that my partner, Susan Mosakowski, and I run, Creation Production Company, has collectively created nearly fifty works. When I began I considered the making of work as a way of life. One made theatre, it was ongoing and infinite. I aspired to be the Lope de Vega of downtown. Slap 'em up, take 'em down, it didn't matter if there was plenty of dross because the gems would shine through and that was life--a continuum. However, recently I had the good fortune to teach playwriting in Italy, in Orvieto, and every night as I sat in the outdoor cafe across the piazza from the Duomo I would gaze up at this magnificent cathedral and admire the bas relief and the stone work of the facade which took over three hundred years to complete. I was inspired by the commitment of generations of artisans who worked in spite of the knowledge that they would not finish their work in their lifetime. I'm drawn to the idea of taking the necessary time to say it truly because what I'm seeking is the authenticity that might stand the test of time. This means more simmering, putting it away, letting it get cold, and then attacking it again. It means more readings with more diverse casts. In vintage Broadway terms it means a longer run out of town. As Isaac Babel says, "If you use enough elbow grease even the coarsest wood gets to look

like ivory. Warm it and polish it with your hand till it glows like a jewel." Now, while I'm warming and polishing are my routines mundane or not? The exotic choreography of my procrastination dance is so complex it would dazzle a labyrinth builder. However, when I finally hit a groove I'm a junkie, can't stop, day or night.

CS: You belong to a community of writers, who are often spoken of as a "group:" Mac Wellman, Jeff Jones, Len Jenkin. An inspiring bunch! I know when I trained at Intar with Irene Fornes when I was right out of grad school at UCSD I was challenged and inspired by my fellow writers in the writing room at Intar (and by Irene, of course). We kept each other on our toes! In what ways do you keep yourself curious and ready for challenge?

MM: You fit right into that group yourself, although I think that the propensity of any group is to diverge; witness the unholy rows and mock trials of the Surrealists. But yes, Irene is a light for me, as is Susan, and yes, Mac and Jeff and Len are major influences, and yes, I always ask them to read and see my new work. Being kept on the toes--Jeff took an early draft of *Luscious Music* and offered to cut everything he thought was unnecessary. He cut half the play! I was moved by his effort and so curious about the result that I printed his exact cut and did a reading of it in the context of a four day workshop on the whole text. He was often right. Your friends keep you honest. None of us work in a vacuum. No Shakespeare without Marlowe.

Your question about the means of maintaining curiosity is crucial. I try hard not to repeat myself, which is one reason why I've embarked on my current experiment with realism. As I said earlier, questions propel my work. As an experimentalist my mantra has always been, "Given this, [the canon] what next? The impulse to dig into new terrain with the willingness to go where it leads still intrigues me. Recently I've caromed from exploring Racine and the heightened language of French neoclassicism, to an investigation of the science of Chaos theory in a libretto fully sung, to the gritty world of carny life in Florida. Driving across south central Florida in search of the vanished town of Old Venus I thought to myself, what a great life, going where my nose leads me. When that dries up you're dead.