Nature Theater of Oklahoma is one of the best ensemble theater companies in the world. Their work is weird and unlike anything you’ve ever seen. I guess it falls under the category of “experimental theater,” but despite the term’s dubious implications, it’s completely entertaining and moving and there’s nothing pretentious about it. Under the direction of Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška—who have been working together for the past 14 years—they won an Obie Award last year for *No Dice* (2007). Their other shows are *Poetics: A Ballet Brut* (2005), *Chorégraphie* (2008), *Rambo Solo* (2008), and *Romeo and Juliet* (2008). This summer they will be working on part one of a ten-part bio-epic, *Life and Times*, which will premiere at the Burgtheater in Vienna this September, and their *Romeo and Juliet* will finally have its US premiere at The Kitchen this coming December. They do more international touring than any other company I know, and they get rave reviews from press and audiences alike.

One might think their success would incur jealousy within the theater community, but I’ve never heard anyone say a bad word about them. This is probably due to the fact that Kelly and Pavol, besides being totally brilliant, are two of the nicest people you’ll ever meet.

—Young Jean Lee

**PART I**

Young Jean Lee: Are there things you’re sick of talking about in interviews?

Kelly Copper: We’re pretty patient with questions. Even the dumb question about whether we are from Oklahoma, which I know you won’t ask.

YJL: Are you from Oklahoma? Ha ha. But actually you should remind me how you guys got that name.

KC: We always said if we ever made a theater company it should be called Nature Theater of Oklahoma. It’s from the last chapter of Kafka’s unfinished novel *Amerika*—the story of this poor guy, Karl, who’s sent away from his home in Europe (because he’s such a screwup there) and comes to America. He is always getting into these sad situations trying to support himself, and finally at the end of the novel he reads a sign advertising that the Nature Theater of Oklahoma is hiring: “We have a place for everyone, everyone in his place—but be sure not to miss the midnight deadline!” He goes there and says he has no experience in theater, and they give him a job as a technician. They give everyone who shows up a job, and it’s beautiful and angels are blowing trumpets and they put them all in a big train that rides off into the sunset bound for Oklahoma. You never know how it all ends.

We also chose that name because Pavol’s story somewhat parallels Karl’s. He came on his own from Slovakia at 18, and spent his first year in America in Oklahoma. He actually lived across the street from where that first postal worker went postal and shot up the whole post office. That’s where the phrase “going postal” came from. There’s a plaque there now.

YJL: What is your working process like, from initial concept to closing night?

KC: We start out with some extremely basic question, like: What’s the least thing we can do and have it be a show? Will it be a show if there is no script? If we just stand there in front of a curtain? If we open the curtain, is it then a show? If we use only our phone conversations for dialogue but we’re wearing costumes, does that make them into a play? At the heart of our investigation is this wondering about the tipping point—when does it turn into theater?

YJL: Can you give me an example of what you bring into rehearsal?

KC: For *Poetics* it was a chart for each actor with a grid and mathematical coordinates and time signatures, indicating where they should go at what time. For *No Dice*, we brought in edited sound files of our recorded phone conversations to play with. Early in rehearsals we knew that we weren’t interested in hearing the actors accurately replicate the casual nature of the phone conversations. We needed something that could transform that material, so we asked them to find costumes in the back of the theater. (We were working at Downtown Art, a local youth theater, and they had a lot of great costumes.) We played around with different accents, and picked three that were the hardest for them, just to give them something to work against. Pavol and I got into the idea of finding a primitive acting style by watching a lot of silent films—in the very first ones you can tell that the stage actors are struggling with the particular demands of this new medium. Because these were before recorded sound, all the actors were using were their faces, their eyes, their bodies, so we studied that. We also brought in videos of street magic and developed a set of physical gestures from that. Those are the kinds of things we bring into rehearsal. Not all of it ends up in the show, but we learn what we need as we...
go, such as needing something like accent or gesture to offset the vocal casualness of the recorded phone calls.

Over the course of rehearsals, we always end up with a set of rules for the performance. In No Dice the actors had to: 1) Keep the exact language and timing of the recorded phone calls; 2) Keep the accent going; 3) Use eyes and melodramatic emotion to extract the biggest drama from the material; 4) Use one of the three sets of hand gestures we created; and 5) Be in one of thirteen paired positions on stage.

It's like you create the game of football and everyone learns the rules and strategies and then you just play the game every night. Pretty early in the game, shortly after rehearsals, we're putting what we do in front of an audience. You saw act one of Poetics at Tonic maybe a week into rehearsals, right? It was just awful.

YJL: Yeah, that was pretty awful, but I've never seen you do anything even remotely bad after that. Have you done secret bad things I don't know about?

KC: We did early showings of No Dice that included these long stretches of conversations between John Cage and Morton Feldman on boredom. For a while No Dice ended with a song by Stevie Wonder. Romeo and Juliet, for one day at least, included a sort of Hee Haw number with banjos. Also, in one showing we had a dance break for world peace where the Palestinian and Israeli flags magically turned into a giant American flag which triumphantly waved in the air while music played. Is that bad enough? We were trying to explore what it means to be American artists, going back to the transcendentalists' questions about what American art or writing was as opposed to Europe's.

YJL: You make all of that stuff sound so good. I was there for the flag waving and thought it was excellent.

KC: We always put up something really rough, and that early encounter with an audience always helps to shape it. After that we start to erase more and more. In rehearsals we add a lot of material, then we look at the structure and take away the garbage. Then we put it in front of an audience again. And that continues. We've never done with any of the shows.

We changed a big chunk of Poetics after we had performed it for a year; we changed a major element of Rambo Solo the day before we opened in Hamburg; and we continue to direct all the shows. No Dice is directed live, during the show, from behind the audience.

YJL: What do you mean you direct it live from behind the audience? What does that even mean?

KC: Pavol and I work from a platform behind the audience for No Dice. We have a set of signals for the actors: basic stuff to remind them to breathe, remember accent, volume, articulation, increase the melodrama,
the editing, although that's always done in conversation, too. We live in a studio apartment. We work in one room and we work all the time. We're all up in each other's business and in each other's workspaces. The one constant is that I know he will not put anything on stage that I can't stand behind, and vice versa. We're both really stubborn and hard to convince. It's good, though; you can never be too in love with your own bullshit.

Pavol deserves all the credit for being the driving force behind everything.

YJL: I wish you would rephrase that because "driving force" is pretty general and makes it sound like you have a passive role.

KC: Yeah, fuck the driving force. But all the same, he generally gives me a lot of credit for shaping and thinking about the work, and I give him a lot of credit for having that restless thing inside where he is always looking for the next thing.

When he first started wanting to work on No Dice, I was in the middle of writing another play, and he was like, "I think the next thing we do should have no written script. Here." And he bought me a tape recorder and wanted me to narrate a play into it. I tried once but it was really dumb, so then he just sort of gave up on me. Then he started calling people we knew and asking them for a story. He's on the phone all the time and I'm trying to write this play still. Gradually I couldn't help getting involved in listening to his phone calls. We started talking about the calls, and next thing you know we were 100 hours into this thing that became No Dice.

Pavol's got this wonderful quality as an artist where there's just no idea that he will not try. And if that one doesn't work, he's got something else he wants to do. You never hit a wall. Often I'm coming into the work as a sort of outsider and I find my own way into this plethora of stuff and we make a show that neither of us expected to make when we started.

Does that make sense, or does it still make me sound like a turd?

YJL: No, that makes total sense.

KC: He says he gets us into trouble and I fix it for us, which is really simplistic, but there's maybe something in that dynamic that has the ring of truth.

YJL: Do you like touring?

KC: Ever since I can remember I wanted to live like circus people and now I do! I love seeing how the shows change everywhere we do them. There's always a new space, new problems: it keeps everything alive. Pavol and I stop ourselves all the time with a feeling of "Can you believe this is actually happening?" We'll be going on the train to open a show in Paris, and turn to each other with this look of "How cool is this! We're going to perform in Paris!" We still remember when we had to pick up human shit in a theater we had rented in New York. There was a homeless guy who would come in and shit on the stage every night, and so with that in mind ... everything seems totally amazing now.

Every morning we try to actively remind ourselves that he could be putting on his uniform to go be a security guard at the Met, and I could be choking on chemicals in a darkroom all day—which was my last job before I started making my living as a theater artist. Things are great! I'm 38 years old and I love what I do most of the time. I am lucky that I get to make work all over the world with someone I love who inspires me.

YJL: Wow, now I feel like an ingrate. What is your relationship to the cast on tour? Are you guys like a big gang of buddies?

KC: When we started, everyone was hanging out together as a group of big buddies, yeah. That gets old really fast. You're with the same people every day and night for months, so it's more like a family dynamic, which is crazy, because Pavol and I never wanted a family! You realize at a certain point that you're just recreating that whole thing with the company—there's love, guilt, responsibility, rivalry—all that stuff. I try to step away every once in a while, and not overdo the time together. Also, we're not big party people, which takes us out of the general company social circle.
BOMB

YJL: How did you guys each individually get into theater? And/or how did you start making work together?

KC: I started making radio plays when I was a kid. My dad has always worked as a radio personality, so when I was little one of my first toys was a tape recorder from Radio Shack. I'd do sound effects and make up stories. One of my favorite things was to invite my friends over—we'd all drink a lot of water and then put the tape recorder in the bathroom and record ourselves pissing. Then we'd all listen to it and just die laughing. I'm sure these tapes would probably fetch me like half a million dollars on eBay right now, if only I had held onto them.

Also, my mom was into musical theater. She was in community theater versions of Godspell and so on. My dad had a lot of no-good friends always coming around who did cartoon voices for a living, or there was this guy who was a magician and would levitate Nerf balls. All this low-rent theater contributed to my later delinquency.

In high school I made my first play instead of a term paper. It was 40 pages long, featured the Pope, Nietzsche, and Sartre, and had musical numbers. My history teacher actually staged it for me.

I met Pavol in my final year in college. We took a course together in Dadaist theater. There were only three students in the course: us and one other girl. We used to stage interruptions in class by passing mysteriously wrapped packages to each other across the conference table. We annoyed the shit out of that professor. Pavol had two more years to go of school when I got out, so I went to New York and found us the apartment where we live to this day.

YJL: Does being married make working together easier or harder?

KC: I'd say it makes it easier on the whole—I can't imagine doing what we do for a living and having a spouse that didn't understand that. It's ridiculous enough to have to justify it to yourself. Can you imagine?

YJL: What have been the biggest challenges (artistic and/or administrative) for you guys in making theater? If you've conquered any major ones, then how did you do it?

KC: The biggest challenge is always what comes next. How do you not repeat yourself? How do you keep experimenting and how do you make sure that failure is always an option? I have to remind myself always that we can do this with no money in a basement somewhere. Otherwise the temptation is to keep chasing after the success you had with one show. For us that one show was No Dice.

YJL: I know! It seems like it's hard to tell when it's happening to you, otherwise those other companies wouldn't do it, right? Can you make a deal with me that you'll tell me if my work ever starts to get like that?

KC: Sure. You'll tell us?

YJL: Okay, but with the two of you keeping each other in check the way you do, I don't see you guys calcifying like that. Is there anything you hope to accomplish by presenting shows for an audience?

KC: I know that what we do is ridiculous, that no one would care tomorrow if we stopped making it, but I always hope that what we do changes people's lives, that it alters consciousness, that it cures cancer and AIDS. I know I am failing miserably at any one of these goals, but I have to keep striving for big things when I invite all these people into a room. I have to believe in the power of that encounter.

Pavol feels the same way. In his country, theater people were the ones behind the Velvet Revolution. It was Václav Havel and a bunch of theater people who were
PL: Yeah. Let’s be fresh for that.

PL: See, then you’ll have time to prepare. Your brain is not to me. I have a Motorola two-way kind of cell. You click and you can ask but you can’t talk back to me, you’re looking at me here. We are on an island and we changed my life.

PART II

Pavol Liška: Ask me all your questions all at once.

YJL: All at once? And I may never ask another one again? Do you want me to wait for your answer or not?

PL: Just ask me questions. What you’re doing is the art form of asking the question: you’re free-associating questions and I will be listening and taking them in.

YJL: But I already asked Kelly all the questions I had.

PL: Ask anything you ever wanted to know about me as you’re looking at me here. We are on an island and we only have … I don’t know, a Motorola two-way kind of cell. You click and you can ask but you can’t talk. If I click the Motorola, I can talk but you can’t talk back to me, you can only listen. Then I can press listen, and you can talk to me.

YJL: Okay, if I were going to do that, I don’t think my questions would have anything to do with theater. There are a couple of questions that I want to ask you, and then I’ll start free-associating after that.

PL: See, then you’ll have time to prepare. Your brain is not going to be fresh for that.

YJL: So you want me to start out with the free association?

PL: Yeah.

YJL: Okay, I guess I would be interested in knowing what you think about alcohol. And I would ask you if you think that you’ve found the secret to a happy life, and if so, what it is. I’m interested in what the biggest source of pain in your life is, and how long you’ve had the same facial hair and haircut, and how frequently you change it. And, also, if you’ll be changing it in the future. I’m interested in the extent to which fashion plays a role in your life and where you shop and how much space in your brain the clothing that you wear occupies. I’m interested in why you don’t want kids. I wonder if you ever get depressed. Oh, now I’m remembering—I wonder what Kelly does in the artistic process that you wouldn’t be able to do on your own. What are her superpowers, basically? She talked about yours. I’m also interested in all of the work that happens before you’re actually with actors; what’s that like for you and Kelly? Okay, now I have to cheat. (Looks at her notes.) I’m interested in your method of creating the shape of something: do you have an overall framework from beginning to end? Or is it that you’re just creating a bunch of disparate things that then come together? I’m interested in whether you believe in God and if you think there’s a possibility of an afterlife. Also, in whether you’ve ever had a near-death experience? Is death something that you ever think about? And what kind of music do you listen to? What are your favorite television shows? Is there anything that you think is really awesome about Slovakia that you find lacking in the United States? What was your favorite venue to tour at? What brand are your sneakers? If your apartment was so filthy that there were mushrooms growing in the bathroom, and you also had ten Odwalla bottles with, like, a quarter or a fifth liquid left in them and they had become so poisoned with botulism that the plastic of the bottles had puffed up, how would you rather die: by eating the mushrooms or drinking the Odwalla from the bottles? That’s it.

PL: I don’t drink. My father is an alcoholic and I always rebelled against it. When I left Slovakia, I left for America to live in Oklahoma; I did not drink yet. Afterward I went to Dartmouth College and that’s where I started drinking. I drank heavily, all the time. And I learned that I’m an alcoholic. Once I moved to New York and we were making theater, I still kept drinking. Then we got burned out and I stopped drinking. When I drink, my brain takes a break and I never allow a thought to go to its completion. So I stopped drinking again for several years. Then we got back into theater. Ideas began to percolate in my brain when it wasn’t taking a break by drinking. We started making theater and then, after 9/11, I started drinking again. But I think 9/11 was an excuse for everyone to do whatever the fuck they want. We were making theater but not that good—I blame it all on drinking. I have a tendency to blame every problem that a human being has on drinking because I’ve seen my father, an extremely talented person, ruin his life. As a matter of fact, I’ve been receiving phone calls about every other day from him in rehab in the past month, but I haven’t picked up. I haven’t spoken to my father for about six years. He only calls me when he needs money. I know I have a predisposition toward alcoholism and ruining my life. I’ve chosen to erase that word from my vocabulary. As I have chosen to erase the word “burnout” too, because I got burned out before, and there were four years of darkness in my life. I decided that no matter how hard it’s going to get, there’s nothing else that I want to do than make work. To make myself feel better sometimes, I like shopping.
I love to shop for shoes. I have about six pairs of shoes that I love. One is Adidas; one is a pair of Levi's that I bought in Austria. Whenever we go to Austria I love to go shopping for shoes at Humanic. Then I have really fancy Puma shoes that Kelly bought me for Christmas. I also have a red and white Diesel pair of sneakers. That was the first pair I bought after only wearing Converse for years: I wanted people to start looking at my feet and not at my eyes, because I wanted to be looking at their eyes, not them. I also have Kenneth Cole shoes. I got them for free because the guy who sold them to me, who was selling me a leather jacket, packed in the shoes also, but didn't charge me. I have a Nike pair of sneakers that I bought for exercising when we tour.

One of the favorite venues to tour was Kaaitheater in Brussels. We've done three shows there, and it's the best because of the audience. Also Oslo. If it's between Oslo and Brussels, I would say maybe Oslo because we've been there only once, so it's maybe more special. That's what happens: once you get what you want or you go somewhere twice, then you stop appreciating it. So probably Brussels was better, but I appreciate Oslo more because it only happened once.

Kelly is much better at creating structure of the overall event. I'm good at generating a lot of material. I get bored very easily, so I keep skipping from one project to another. So I can make material for five projects in one month, and then Kelly's job is to make one project out of those five different ideas for a project. But the most fun I have is generating material. I don't have to be disciplined. Kelly is much more disciplined than I am. I'm disciplined in the fact that I force myself to work and I keep moving forward constantly without a break. And Kelly is able to look back, take the whole of the material and organize it. Without that we'd have no projects. There's no hierarchy. I'm restless and that's not necessarily a virtue.

I surf channels on TV all the time. Some of my favorite channels are the Animal Planet and the Travel Channel. We didn't have Internet so we got cable and that's like heaven. Investigation TV—they have all kinds of criminals. I love all types of prison shows. There's Lock Up, there's Hard Time, there's Lockdown ... Prisons Abroad or something like that. To Catch a Predator is another one of my favorite shows. Survivor is fading in its popularity for me, now that we have cable. When we didn't have cable, those types of shows that are on regular television were really important to me. Now I cherish prison shows and shows about sharks. I love sharks. Prison shows—sometimes they have marathons and I love it. I watch probably because I'm scared of that world. I'm definitely afraid of sharks. The biggest phobia I have is sharks. And probably prisons. So that's why I love to watch: maybe I can learn how to behave in these worlds if I'm, by any chance, thrown into them.

In prisons you can only wear the same clothes all the time, which brings me to the way I like to dress. I can only focus on certain parts of my body as far as fashion goes. Below the knee. Everything else stays the same.

I wear a black pair of pants, and an Oklahoma T-shirt. Then we get to the face, where there's a handlebar mustache. I'm bored with the kind of mustache I have now. I had a different mustache before and a very flimsy Mohawk that I got rid of. It was too pathetic. I've been tempted to cut my mustache off. I have dreams that other people take away my mustache—and therefore my ideas and inspiration. I am a little superstitious. Unfortunately, one of the mustaches that I would love to try is the kind that Hitler wore. He ruined it for all of us. That's yet another crime that Hitler has committed: taking away an option for mustached men.

Right now we don't have enough time to get bored. We're pretty much constantly working on something new. Prior to rehearsal we generate a lot of material. We never have a goal in mind; we just have a process in mind. Rehearsals are scary because anything can happen: that's where the project starts. Ultimately, we have prepared for rehearsals for a month and come in with all sorts of material. After two days, we've thrown out every single thing and started completely from scratch. Now that we know that this is how we work, we don't spend much time worrying about what the project is going to be. We trust that somehow we'll figure it out in the room. We don't need to script the rehearsals. The best preparation for rehearsals is to watch a lot of television or maybe read a book, if you can find something that you haven't read before that's not predictable. It's hard. I'd keep myself away from thinking about rehearsals by drinking a lot, if I still drank, I'm sure. And I'd love to smoke, I have to admit.

I'm sure I forgot something, but that's part of the experiment.

YJL: Actually, I just have one more. This is just for personal pleasure. Which way would you rather die: eating the mushrooms or drinking the leftover juice? (laughter)

PL: Eating the mushrooms. They're just beautiful and they're pure things.

YJL: Even though they're growing in a filthy bathroom in the filthiest corners?

PL: Yeah, but they're themselves.

KC: And many, many mushrooms are magic, so you could have a really good time.

YJL: Excellent.