



## INTRODUCTION

Robert Parsons is a professional actor based in the San Francisco Bay Area, who works nationally in theatre. I saw him in performances at the American Conservatory Theatre while I was student there, and then we were both teaching at the Berkeley Repertory School of Theatre when I approached him about doing this project. This interview was conducted via Skype in early 2012. This was also one of my earliest interviews.

# PART I: **BACKGROUND AND TRAINING**

**RP:** I grew up in Northern California... till I was nine, when my dad died. Then my mom decided to move the family back to Boston because she needed support from both her family and my dad's family that at the time were residing in NY and Pennsylvania.

**JW:** Just you? Siblings?

**RP:** Two siblings; older brother and sister.

**JW:** Are they in the arts?

**RP:** My brother teaches psychology of Religion and mysticism at Rice University, and my sister is a professional organizer... and she also takes care of my mom who now has dementia and she's doing the heavy lifting on that.

**JW:** What was your dad doing?

**RP:** He was a minister... an Episcopalian minister. I was actually born in Japan because my parents were there doing missionary work for ten years. I arrived at the tail end of that, I was two years old when we left Japan... I actually know a lot of actors whose fathers were preachers.

**JW:** Yeah, I find there is a lot of overlap. I was going to say that it doesn't surprise me at all that a minister's kids were an actor involved in the ritual of the stage and a teacher of mysticism. I know a lot of actors that were like, "I could have been a monk or an actor".

**RP:** Yep; Exactly. It's our church, I guess.

**JW:** What was your mom's vocation?

**RP:** She was a registered nurse... she stopped that when the kids were born and became more of a housewife... and then went back to it after my father died. And then she became a potter... she did a lot of pottery... and sold it ...she was really good, people loved her work.

**JW:** So, she worked professionally as an artisan.

**RP:** I wouldn't say professionally... she worked a lot on her own and then she'd have these group sales at her studio... but she could have done so, she was good enough, but she didn't care to make it that. People who liked her stuff bought it, and that was enough for her. She also made a lot of pots for friends and gave a ton of stuff away— she was famous for her teapots and her commemorative bowls.

**JW:** Do you have any other thoughts on your early life experiences as they are relevant to acting?

**RP:** One was when I was a young guy, probably... I might have been eight or nine... my mom rented one of our rooms in our house to this poet who also happened to be in the Black Panther Party. There were a lot black panthers running around our house during those years, not exactly sure what was going on there... but this renter, Don Bolton, sort of took me under his wing a little bit and acquainted me with a kind of poetical way of thinking... teaching me to see the world in a different way. And I think that was maybe my first intro into seeing that there were other ways to communicate. I think I wrote some poetry then... it probably softened my innards a little bit. As a kid you get brought into something like that and you're made to feel special, as though your particular way of seeing things is unique and worthy of being shared with others. So, I think there may have been something in those early experiences for me that served to

awaken the more creative or artistic side of my nature... um, I think also the death of my father when I was nine was a major player in laying the groundwork for a life in the arts. I think, before my dad died, I was a really bubbly, happy kid ... I was somewhat shy amongst strangers, but I was generally happy-go-lucky... and I think after his death I became much more of an observer and the quieter, shyer version of myself became the dominant quality, and the happy-go-lucky kid sort of disappeared for some time. I think there's something about actors that tend to, in day to day life, be more observational... and then when they're working they get to be fully engaged for the two or three hours of the play ... life on stage that they can fully commit to in huge ways, body and soul... and not everybody rolls that way. I know a lot of people that are very extraverted in their day to day to day lives but would just freeze up if they ever had to step on a stage or address large groups of people. And then... I wasn't really that young...I was twenty two, a year or so out of college... and a really good old friend of the family's... he had been a boyfriend of my mom on and off for many years, and was an artist here in Berkeley... just said to me one day over a cup of coffee... 'You should be in the theatre, you know, you should be in theatre' ... and it awakened this sort of dormant part of me that had maybe first started blooming all those years ago with Don Bolton, back there in the black panther poetry sessions. That suggestion to go into the theatre—it rang a bell for me. And so, I just started taking classes. ...and there was something that I just attached to immediately.

**JW:** So, you were out of college and back home and thinking what should I do with my life and this guy comes along and says “this is what you should do with your life” and it actually hit home...

**RP:** Exactly. I'd been in NY working right out of college, but I wasn't an actor. Then I got a job in Boston and moved up there... that was when my friend mentioned the theatre to me. And from there I just got hooked and eventually ended up applying to graduate programs for acting.

## TRAINING



"Blasted" by Sarah Kane at Shotgun Players

**JW:** Can you talk about what drew you to training, what kind of training you had, what your experience was with it, and how it matured in you since then?

**RP:** I came into acting late into the game. I played sports in college. I took some acting classes and it spoke to me on that level that everyone talks about—this is something I have to pursue. I did the ACT Summer Training Congress to see if this was something I really was interested in. I wanted to make sure before I made the leap. That was a reassurance for me, and I started applying to grad school. I ended up at Temple in Philadelphia where I did the 3-year MFA. That training is your standard MFA training. The thing that spoke to me the most was the physical stuff. It allowed me to de-attach from my over intellectualizing of things. That's the thing I've battled most as an actor and had to quiet as I go about preparing or when I'm actually on stage. When I got out of grad school, I started doing a lot of Suzuki work, Bogart, and viewpoint work. That's the part of the training that speaks to me the most, perhaps because I played a lot of sports growing up and I'm accustomed to using my body in those ways. I'm better when I'm thinking less and getting in touch with the physical side of the work—it allows me to tap into the subterranean stuff where, as they say, 'the gold lies'. That's where I always need to be as an actor, and I've come to trust that.

**JW:** You did the MFA and you continued to train in these physical forms because it fed you. Do you continue to seek out ongoing workouts or trainings for yourself, or is most of your workout working at this point?

**RP:** It's a combination. When I can, I'll pop into a Suzuki class. There are some things in the Bay area. Do you know Jeffrey Bihl?

**JW:** I don't know Jeffrey, which is surprising.

**RP:** He was in the Suzuki Company. The training from him is this pure form, straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. He often has drop in classes. I do that still. Any kind of meditative practice I try to do, which is great to quiet the mind and let the jumping monkey out. When I'm on the road acting, it's much harder.

## **PART 2: STORIES**

SUGGESTIVE OF

**SUPERNORMAL CAPACITIES**

IN PROFESSIONAL ACTORS



## TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

**JW:** Another theme I'm interested in is people who are involved in some kind of spiritual, or what I would call transformative, practice. There are all kinds of transformative practices that people involve themselves in, but its work on themselves, work on transforming their basic instrument and vessel. I like to distinguish between instrumental work (work on ourselves) and technique work. I agree though there is overlap and a feedback loop. On that, you said you practice meditation. I'd like to explore a narrative of this—how you got interested in working on yourself and the work you did on yourself.

**RP:** My brother has always been hooked into this kind of work and he got me on board. He's been doing Tai Chi for 25 years. I did some of that, which I like and also some meditation, which he introduced me to. I started taking classes in Berkeley. I did it more when I first started studying. It's easy to fall off the meditation bandwagon, but I do still keep it with me, and I still use it. I do find it quiets my mind in a beautiful way. I've been doing it for about 15 years off and on. That bumper sticker, 'Don't believe everything you think', describes it best. Meditation allows me to not believe everything I think and to trust that everything I have as a unique individual is enough for whatever work I am doing.

## THE RIVALRY: THE ENERGY OF HISTORY



Robert Parsons as Abraham Lincoln in "The Rivalry" by Norman Corwin at Ford's Theatre

**JW:** What's the show?

**RP:** It's the Rivalry. It's the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

**JW:** Who you're playing?

**RP:** Take a guess.

**JW:** Lincoln. I don't know what Douglas was like, or any of the other Characters for that matter.

**RP:** Douglas was 4'11. They used to call him the 'Little Giant.' Then again, it's this weird radio thing. It's a hybrid—part stage, part radio. We have costumes and a set but there are also microphones on stage.

**JW:** Are you enjoying playing Lincoln?

**RP:** Yes. I did the same play before in DC at the Ford's Theater a couple years ago. I think that's how they tracked me down actually. That was a full-on production of the script. This production with LA Theatre Works is just a different animal. We are playing a lot of universities. There are some towns where we play the main theater, and we also teach a lot and have post show discussions with students. It's fun but it also has its obstacles.

**JW:** You actually did it in the theater where Lincoln was assassinated?

**RP:** Exactly. It was pretty intense. Of course, you are also dealing with the Washington audiences. A lot of those people are from a political background. You get a lot of congressmen, senators, and Supreme Court justices that come and see the shows at Ford's. So, you have a very richly energized crowd. Everybody that's there seemingly wants to be there, and the thing about Lincoln is that everyone wants to claim him as

one of theirs no matter what side of the aisle they may be sitting on. So, it's interesting to get a Supreme Court Justice, like Arthur Kennedy for instance, saying what a Lincoln fan he is, and then Harry Reed on the other side saying, 'Lincoln's my man!'

**JW:** Certainly, at his time he wasn't universally popular, but he's transcended that in the last 150 years and become some kind of an archetypal hero.

**RP:** Absolutely, he's iconic.

**JW:** He's right up there with Gandhi and King and those people standing up for universal principles, which is why I think it's been easy for people to get on board.

**RP:** Absolutely.

**JW:** Are there a few peak moments that stand out to you or experiences in your life as a performer?

**RP:** Starting with *The Rivalry* at Ford's Theater, that experience was filled with those kinds of moments for me. I do believe it was somehow due the play and the story, but also the environment, the audiences' involvement in it, and the energy that was flowing

around the whole thing. It may be an imagined energy where we think, because Lincoln was killed in this building it adds to the experience. Whether it's real or imagined doesn't really seem to matter, I think. Either way it's palpable. At the end of that show, there's a moment where Lincoln leaves the stage as the clean-shaven, freshly beaten candidate for the Senatorship of Illinois, and reappears one short scene later, as the now bearded President-elect. And while off stage for that short minute, they slapped a beard and the presidential suit on me and off I went. It was a very beautifully articulated physical change created by the wonderful designers at Ford's—incredibly precise and detailed. I would then enter directly under the famous box where he was assassinated, which is now partitioned off, adding to its power and mystique, to deliver a final speech. As soon as I hit the stage—now made to look like the Lincoln that everyone knows—I could feel the energy in the audience instantly change. Part of it was that it was visual. They did an amazing job making me look exactly like him. But it was also the result of the entire evening culminating in this one moment where the Lincoln that everyone feels like they know and is in a way a part of them, a part of the fabric of this country, finally appears. I could actually hear a collective intake of air from the audience, almost a gasp, and sometimes I could hear people beginning to cry. That energy was created by the audience and their connection to history and to this iconic figure, and it was transferred to me like lightening to a rod, just straight into my body. It was an amazingly charged experience. That is another platform for this supernatural thing that we've

been discussing. There are some nights when you walk out on stage that you don't feel like you're connected to the circumstances of the play, or you might feel like the audience isn't interested or doesn't 'like you'—thoughts which immediately lead an actor out of his body and into his head. And then there are other nights where you can sense an excitement and an energy in the building at ½ hour, you can hear it through the monitors in your dressing room, and all you have to do is jump on the horse and it will take you. That was the case every night doing *The Rivalry* at Ford's. What that something 'is' is a really good question. But I know that it's not something that happens all the time, so when it does you note it—it becomes special and wonderful--it's what keeps many of us going I think—hoping to find other experiences that are equally vital and charged. I think it also makes us realize that helping to tell important and moving stories in this way to large groups of people can not only be incredibly rewarding but also a very powerful way to remind ourselves and each other of our shared humanity no matter how diverse we may be. And that's a good thing right?

**JW:** As an actor, did you find yourself doing anything new to participate in that, beyond what you were directed to do?

**RP:** Often times, it's just getting on board. You always hear that in acting class—you have to commit, you have to go to the fullest extent that the stakes will allow you to go.

If all those things are in place, it allows you to take that imaginative leap, which then allows the body and the instinct to take over. If I'm doing that then I think the work is where it needs to be.

## THE BLACK RIDER

**JW:** I find that a lot of us are implicitly seeking these experiences. Are there any other peak moments that you can share?

**RP:** I was thinking of a very different theatrical experience, which was one of those once in a lifetime type deal. It was when I was doing *Black Rider*, directed by Robert Wilson at ACT, and then The Sydney Festival and The Ahmanson in LA. By some twist of great fortune, I was cast as an understudy for the show when it came to San Francisco from London, and because Marianne Faithful was in the show, I got to go on twice a week because she didn't want to do the matinees, and therefore her understudy—who was also in the cast—went on for her and I went on for him. I was also lucky enough to go to Sydney and LA with it because Marianne didn't stay with the production—and in those two venues I performed the show every night. The thing about that experience is the theatrical form of it is so precise and exacting. It becomes less about interpretation and more about doing exactly what the director asks. Bob Wilson says that if you do it exactly the way he tells you, you will find something beautiful and ultimately freeing

within the confines of that exacting structure. You will find a sense of the whole that you just won't see until you do it exactly the way he wants you to do it... and the detail he demands can appear at first to be in the realm of minutiae—the smallest gesture, the way you raise a finger or the amount that you turn your head. It's a different way of working because as actors we are trained to be interpreters—so there's an adjustment period where you wonder what the hell it is you're doing—but after being with it for a while I began to understand what Wilson was getting at ,which ultimately was a tremendously pure and unencumbered form of beauty. It was remarkable because it's a form of theatre that doesn't rely on text as much as other elements—like light and movement and set and costume and make-up and of course the amazing 'score' that was written by Tom Waits. Of course the text was remarkable as well—written by William Burroughs—but you had the feeling that the story could still be powerfully conveyed without text and it showed how integral things like the way bodies move through space and the speeding up and slowing down of time can be in the way a story is told. Throughout the show there was a deep stratum of connection between the performers that was very powerful even though much of the time people were in their own particular space and their own particular light. That connection created a unique energy that transformed everyone in the building--from performers to audience—which manifest itself in this vast almost non-corporeal world that again had different rules for space and time. It was a wonderful, beautiful, and often times incredibly disorienting



theatrical experience that I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to be a part of. It taught me a lot about presence on stage and the incredibly focused and precise energy that is needed to create truthful moments within a highly stylized theatrical setting.

## EQUUS AND THERAPY

**JW:** I've often found times I've worked through some personal things or it keeps me connected to myself and keeps me healthy. Many places don't want to know about your personal business and want you to come in and do the job. I find the desire to make it quite personal when approached with meaningful work. Have you ever had an experience of wanting to work on yourself or bringing that part of yourself to your work?

**RP:** I think you can use those things but, for the most part, people expect you to be private about using them. I think 'leave your shit at the door' is the general rule. If you are working in an ensemble and with people you know and trust, you might be allowed and even expected to open that up a bit more, which can be helpful during a rehearsal process but also can be detrimental depending on the need of the individual. When I was rehearsing and performing Equus I was involved in therapy, and so playing Dysart, who is a psychiatrist in the play, was synchronistic. If you can use personal experiences to launch your imagination and find a compassionate connection to the character it can

certainly be a valuable tool in an actor's toolkit. It can also be a dangerous thing when not used constructively.

**JW:** Can you share what you were working on and what it was taking you there with the focus on doing the work?

**RP:** I was dealing with relationship issues. I had gone through a traumatic breakup and was uncertain about a lot of things—what I thought was true and what was actually true were questions that I was grappling with. The therapy was helping me reestablish a foundation so that I could answer those questions in a more mindful way. In *Equus*, as the psychiatrist journeys through the play, he keeps questioning everything about his life, what he's been taught and what he's learned. As I was working on myself, I was able to transfer the same questions I was asking personally, to my character. It just happened to dovetail like that, which might happen a lot for actors, but at that time it seemed like Manna from Heaven because it allowed me to keep working through stuff I really needed to work through and on multiple levels. I felt more raw than usual after that run because of the intense double whammy that was happening, but I ultimately think it helped speed the healing as well as creating a supercharged incubator for the creative process. I think in this case I was launched into the world of the play in a way that might not have been as easily accessed otherwise.

**JW:** The more present I am to what is going with me right now allows me to connect to material where I feel like I could be of service to that piece because it matches up to what I am going through. There are these major archetypal traditions, like the phoenix, where we have to melt down. If we are present to our own mythology, we can use it. In terms of supernormal functioning, I think there is a level of artistry, there is a greater circulation or destiny I am participating in.