

***Good Theatre Got Soul:
Exploring Dr. Cristal Chanelle Truscott's SoulWork Method***

2015-2017^[1]

In reference to Offering 2 – “SoulWork” by Cristal Chanelle Truscott
in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

Abstract

In this interview, Dr. Cristal Chanelle Truscott speaks with fellow Performance Studies scholar Greta Gabriel about the foundation, evolution, hallmarks and application of Cristal's art-making method *SoulWork*. Exploring the birth of *SoulWork*, Truscott examines its rootedness in African American performance methods and techniques, as well as charting the aesthetic, artistic and cosmological genealogy of the method. Together, Cristal and Greta discuss how *SoulWork* looks, feels and sounds - both onstage *and* beyond the stage; in the classroom, in multi-genre art-making and in consciously crafted, dialogue-driven spaces. The interview delineates what the “work” of and in *SoulWork* method is/does, and investigates the emotional and physical nature of these labors. Select *SoulWork* vocabulary and philosophies are defined, and the contextualization of *SoulWork* within the field of performance arts training is addressed.

Introduction



(L-R) Rebekah Stevens, Tiana Kaye Johnson and Cristal Chanelle Truscott engage SoulWork during Progress Theatre's residency at Doris Duke's Shangri La Center for Islamic Arts and Cultures.

Photo by Daniel Hanchett. Courtesy of Progress Theatre.

Cristal and Greta first met when the two were cohorts in NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Performance Studies Department, pursuing advanced degrees. While at the Department, they served together on the editorial staff of *The Drama Review* as Assistant Editors. Closely following *Progress Theatre* since *PEACHES* premiered in 2001, this interview evolved based on Greta's sustained familiarity with *SoulWork* onstage, offstage, in workshop space and in script form over the course of almost two decades. Since 2007, Greta has been an administrative ensemble member with *Progress Theatre*, currently serving as Administrative and Development Coordinator with the company. In addition to this interview, Greta regularly assists in the company's archiving process. Documenting *SoulWork* in action through facilitating structured dialogues with *Progress Theatre* ensemble members, Greta leads larger, company-wide conversations focused on understanding *SoulWork* from the artist's perspective, and tracking its transmission and growth as a method.

Greta: How was *SoulWork* born?

Cristal:

As an undergraduate student at a PWI (Predominantly White Institution), I was very aware of how the culture of colorblind casting and training focused on coaching actors of color to read performatively "neutral" — which means performatively White — could ultimately lead to a deadening of one's creativity. Meaning that instead of approaching performance with the fullness of your creative and expressive archive, I saw actors approaching performance from a position of censorship of their creative inclinations and an erasure of the particularities of how they may or may not interpret a role because they were convinced that they needed to read "neutral." I had this piece that I'd written and wanted to mount with Black actors as my senior project. But I didn't want a neutralized piece. I wanted a piece that was bursting at the seams with creativity and emotional power. One of the first things I remember thinking about involved how to get this kind of performance out of actors who'd had their creativity stripped away with years of this suppressive training. I remember thinking "How do I communicate how to get what I want as simply as possible?" --- without having to go through all of my philosophical ruminations which were forming at the time as well. In the process of working on my senior project, which became *PEACHES* and Progress Theatre's (PT) inaugural touring piece, I began to create this vocabulary - like *Unending Climax* - to give people things to *do* as opposed to how to feel, of leaping off the edge of a cliff and not knowing where it's gonna go. Of *Emotional Availability*, creating an emotional map to the piece. I was in my mind asking, "How did I learn how to do this?" and I kept flashing back to my childhood, really tracking my artistic genealogy and thinking of ways to reverse engineer both the immersive and directed training I'd received. How did I learn how to sing a song? How had I come to understand Call & Response as a creative and performative practice? How did I learn how to build and nurture an ensemble — where everyone's input and voices contributed — and how to cultivate what we now call safe space? How did I learn how to devise work, to build civic, social and emotional power in performance? Gratefully, I'd been able to cast folks who also had their first artistic training in African American communities and cultural institutions. And at first, I was really worried that I wasn't going to be able to assemble a cast at all from this world of PWI training because I'd found a real hesitance, fear and resistance even, amongst my peers to being associated with culturally specific work. Many believed that perfecting their colorblind craft was the only way to go. But I'd managed to assemble a cast and they knew what I was seeking. It wasn't like they didn't know *how* to work in the aesthetic that I was

articulating. It was that they *hadn't been given permission in a long time*. They hadn't been allowed to bring the fullness of themselves to performance in this culture of colorblind training and casting. So, I'd asked questions like, "How do you know how to move this way?" "How do you know how to sing this way?" The consensus pointed back to what I call the "Cultural Conservatory," things we knew because we'd been immersed and trained in artistic expression rooted in Black communal spaces. Everyone comes from a Cultural Conservatory of some kind and has learn the things we know and do because they've been passed down by doing and passed down in ways that were beyond words. So, for this first ensemble, we were working with methods from Black Cultural Conservatory spaces and that kind of ensemble workshop exploration space was how *SoulWork* was born. The next thing you know, *Progress Theatre* had a vocabulary. We had an aesthetic. And we had a process of how to make the work feel and look the way I wanted. I think I was always interested in essence: what's the thing beyond words? Because that's the kind of performance I wanted to see: *something that moved me beyond words*.

But to get back to your question of why I chose to call it *SoulWork*...

The concept of Soul as a part of African American culture: soul music, soul food, soul brother, soul sister, that type of naming that was big in the 60s and 70s in popularizing what it meant to have Soul are really an experience that is, in essence, beyond words. Having Soul represents a visceral experience and a journey that is a surprise. Surprising because it has some unexpected element that just happened to have happened this time, on this day, in this space, with these people. The process of experiencing Soul or doing something with Soul is exploration. There's not an equation to get to it. For example, if you listen to old school Gospel or Soul and R&B singers — some contemporary singers too — but the point is people who understand Soul and are singing from an African American tradition... When these folks sing, the written or unwritten melody of a song is merely a guide. It does not have to be rigorously adhered to as the end all, be all. So there can be a note that is what it is in terms of being a part of the melody, but wherever the singer is, in terms of having Soul, means that she can take that one note and take it on a journey before she gets back to it. And every performance can be and will be different. Because, the soul singer doesn't know exactly where she's going to go or what she's going to do with the song before hand. The experience of singing with Soul means the outcome can be different every time. And what's more, in many Black communal spaces, people *expect* a song to be different every time. They don't want to come to a live concert just to hear a singer do the same thing they could hear from the recorded album. They are there live because they want to witness the artist in exploration and expression and they want to experience it with you. Same with Jazz. There's music as is written but there is also the culture and expectation and invitation for the artist to explore within that in performance. So, the dream, my dream is to have theatre that lives in that way and that is the goal of *SoulWork*. Theatre that got Soul is theater that has the potential for exploration and surprise at all times. When you see a show made with *SoulWork*, it can be and should be different every time. The end goal is not to set a show for consistency, but rather to craft an experience that lives differently every time it is enacted. Everyone is always exploring and there is always an expectation and invitation to find something new in exploration that allows the artist and audience to live in the Soul of a piece or experience the Soul of a piece in a different way. So, I'm not saying that *SoulWork* is the only way that theater gets to have Soul. But for me the identification and naming of Soul as an African American and culturally-specific concept and tool and philosophy and practice is central to the methodology that I teach and the artistic training that I offer.

Additionally, I'd say that Soul as a universal concept that is accessible to all living beings is also important because most people have some understanding or relationship to what they would call their soul. Not only or necessarily in a religious or spiritual sense. But in terms of the soulful quality of being a feeling human, having empathy and having experiences in life that impact your being in a way that is beyond words. Art is Soulful and can impact the soul. So in that sense naming what I teach and have developed, *SoulWork* is a universal invitation and acknowledgment that everyone has access to Soul. The way you do Soul is not gonna look like the way I do Soul. And that's good. That's the point. Be we all have access to Soul. *SoulWork* helps artists to tap into that.

So, all of the above apply. It's called *SoulWork* because I never want the method to be separated from its historical, aesthetic and cultural roots stemming from African American performance traditions and techniques and concept of Soul. It's called *SoulWork* because everyone has a Soul and access to it as a means of exploring and expressing the human condition artistically; but also in just connecting to each other Soul to Soul. It's called *SoulWork* because it is *Work*. There is a method. There is training and a technique to cultivating artists that perform with Soul and to creating artistic experiences that got Soul. And to suggest that generations of genius artistic expression and performance rooted in African American aesthetics comes about solely as a natural, innate gift or the reality of circumstance divorced from study, practice, revision, refinement, understanding and effort is not only offensive; but it's just not true. In my mind, all of those stories exist in the name *SoulWork*. And calling it the Cristal Chanelle Truscott Method can't capture all of that. Everybody can't make theatre with the Cristal Chanelle Truscott method because I am the only version of me. But everyone has access and the opportunity to make theatre with Soul.

Greta Why do you call this technique *SoulWork Method*? Why not the "Cristal Chanelle Truscott Method?"

Cristal: Well, I certainly think there is value in naming something you build and create and develop after yourself. Even just in the sense that people can never divorce you from your artistic or intellectual property — which is important. Giving credit is important. Saying our names. Saying the names of our teachers and bringing all of those legacies in to space. Often, I'll give a talk or a workshop and someone will say to me, "I love what you did! I love what you said! I'm gonna steal that." That's not an uncommon "compliment" in professional or artistic space: "I'm gonna steal that." My response always is, "But you don't have to steal it. Just cite me. Just call my name into the space and say I learned this from Cristal Chanelle Truscott." Say, "Here's how you can find out more about her work." Give credit where credit is due. People name drop all the time when they feel that name or person elevates them in space. When they feel that name or that person matters or that cultural reference. I guarantee you when someone studies Meisner or Adler or Grotowski or Suzuki — they are name-dropping all day. But, there is often a block for people in giving credit to Black genius, Black mentorship, Black innovation and a Black woman to boot. Maybe it's centuries of conditioning around cultural appropriation that subconsciously blocks folks of various races and cultural backgrounds from giving Black people credit because people are so accustomed to not having to do it and to not being held accountable for *not* doing it. I mean, "Just steal it. Just use it. Just take it. Just appropriate it." This story can be told in countless ways about a variety of Black cultural products and contributions across all fields going back generations and generations. And it's not just a matter of one person every now and then not

giving credit. There is a historical and systemic precedent, pattern and conditioning to appropriation connected to structural power and privilege. And I'm not saying it never happens, that credit is never given. It totally happens. But I'm saying it's important to support a cultural practice of giving credit with specificity and honor if someone taught you something or enriched you or inspired your work or your own innovation. Say their names. It matters. They matter. We matter.

Greta: Can you share what proper nouns - people, places, things - constitute the earliest genealogy of *SoulWork* - aesthetically, cosmologically, artistically? What informed its birth?

Cristal: The *earliest* genealogy... Well, my ancestors, as far back as I can go. I wish I knew their names.

And yet, without their names, I will say, my ancestors — all of them. And aesthetically, I would say, Negro Spirituals. And particularly in the way that they existed as Field Songs and their journey to becoming what we understand as Gospel music. *Aesthetically*, that kind of sensation when you're in a church and people are getting the spirit. Or even at a party or concert. And the same song has been going on for 20 minutes and nobody's tired of it because there's a communal exploration of the spiritual, and the emotional canvas of that song, and whatever needs to be communicated, purged, explored, discovered, etc. It's a journey. This song can start out really pretty metered. And then, by the end, it can turn into this wail of sounds that are both recognizable and something completely new. I always think about the Spirituals and Field Songs as the earliest iteration of what we understand as a remix. That Field Song can be sung one way in the morning...when people are working, it's a determined, maybe angry, but an energetic, "awake" work song...but by the end of the day it's this wail. Because people are in pain and people are tired and there's sorrow. That anger has given way to sorrow. Not that sorrow isn't there in the morning. But different emotions manifest as the lead emotion at different times. Also, aesthetically and *artistically*, Jazz. I love what Jazz does in terms of this idea of taking a note — which is also what soul singers do and gospel singers do — taking a note that you're supposed to sing and then bending and exploring it. It becomes something else. I love how unpredictable Jazz songs can be and traditional Black music in general. In Jazz, I have always loved the surprises in the music; how long the songs can be and how the rhythm changes, the tone changes, the pace changes sometimes several times in one song. And that every shift makes sense experientially without necessarily making sense logically to everyone. Your body understands it, your emotions understand it, your heart understands it. Your soul understands it. It's expression that demands the support of the community and the ensemble. People who are listening gotta say yes. If the horn player goes in a direction for their solo, then the percussionist gotta say yes. They can't go "Hey, what you doing? Stop!" They go with it, they support you as you leap. Watching Jazz musicians give each other turns to do their solos is one of my favorite things, because they are in this state of "Yes," of just like, wherever you go, we're gonna go. And to me that's the Call & the Response. So I love that. And these things I've pointed out in Jazz exist going as far back as Negro Spirituals and everything that came after.

Cosmologically, I would say *SoulWork* lives in this idea that time is simultaneous and continuous. So it's less about the beginning/middle/end, and more about everything that's happening all at once, it is the performative realization of the past,

present, future...or the ancestors, the living, the unborn and the spirit world as expressed throughout the African Diaspora. It's this understanding that multiple realms exist at once, so it's polyrhythmic; holistic. The same way that the living, dead and unborn are all together, with *SoulWork* your body is engaged, your emotions are engaged, your voice is engaged and your intellect is engaged in synthesis, as opposed to in a linear progression. You have to go toward the tool that's gonna help you do what you want to do at the moment. It's a constant freestyle. Instead of pretending to live in the moment, instead of pretending that this is the first time something has happened to you...what if you go on stage in an emotionally available state so that you really *are* living in the moment and you *don't* know where you're gonna go next? You know you're gonna do what makes sense in the world of the piece. But, there's not a set thing that you have to do. You get to respond to what's happening on *that* day, in *that* moment, for you, for *that* audience, because it's a Call & Response. You're relying on the audience to say yes. And if the people say no, then you gotta go where they go. Then they've become the Callers and you've gotta respond. To go on stage with that level of unpredictability; to feel and go where you need to go - that is *SoulWork*.

Greta: How would you describe the *work* of *SoulWork*. What is getting done in *SoulWork* method? What does the labor look like?

Cristal: There is a progression and degrees of intensity for someone training in *SoulWork*. But it is a simultaneous process versus a serial process. So you are learning multiple things on multiple levels, even if they are not explained to you immediately as they are happening. The structure of a *SoulWork* session is immersive by nature. So even if on a given day we are focusing on *Unending Climax*, every other aspect of that session or rehearsal is reinforcing or introducing 10 other *SoulWork* principles that you are learning simultaneously by way of immersion or practice or call and response. *SoulWork* space doesn't spend a lot of time in explanation or rationalization. It requires a trust and a commitment to doing.

One of the foundational levels of labor is achieving *Emotional Availability*. And that's work because so much of what we do day-to-day is guarding emotional availability; is not being vulnerable. So, *SoulWork* works with how you not only make yourself emotionally available but also how you navigate your relationship to your emotional archive. The point is to access the emotion and to know yourself, and know your body and know where these emotions are and live. And that takes a lot of energy! *SoulWork* is physical from the start; there's no passive way to get into *SoulWork*. There's no intellectual way to get into *SoulWork* - I can explain it to someone, but essentially, it's really about *doing*. It's experiential and that's another thing that centers the method in African American culture as it operates very much so in the way of oral tradition. It's about what is *said and done* - versus being lead by script analysis, sitting around a table and mapping out exactly how you are going to craft a certain moment in advance. And there is even a *SoulWork* way of approaching script analysis. But, my point is that *SoulWork* operates with oral tradition as its base. Oral tradition is handed down experientially - the same way that children learn language. *SoulWork* is about finding ways to recreate that experience in artistic training. It's the work of using every aspect of your being and your body - all of your tools - intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual - to lead people on a journey of discovery, not trying to be the master of whatever they will discover. It's

like opening up a porthole and inviting the performers and the audience to be vulnerable and map their own emotional journeys as they go.

Greta: There's a very conscious relationship between *SoulWork* and vulnerability; part of this relationship is a deep level of integrity and responsibility in terms of the emotional demands of *SoulWork*. Can you specify how the method both accesses, and safely "stores," vulnerability?

Cristal: This is why *SoulWork*'s basis is not emotional recall. I really stress that it's not memory based. In fact I would say that the Emotional Availability aspect of *SoulWork* is the antithesis of emotional recall or sense memory. *SoulWork* is successful in training artists not to rely on memories but rather on the archive of the body. Trying to conjure up something painful that happened to you repeatedly for the sake of a performance effect is psychologically dangerous, in my opinion. And the thing is, emotional recall gets stale. You have to keep surveying your life for triggering memories to stay reactive. If you're using a memory that works now, it may not work in the future once you've healed from that pain or once the joy is less fresh. If you're using abuse to trigger emotions - you don't need to be reliving that. If you're using imaginary circumstances or imagining how you might react to a personal tragedy, this can also be psychologically damaging. And imagination as the *only* source can end up creating superficial work, a state of "play" vs "work." And even in the most gentle applications I've seen of these ways of accessing emotion with imagination or recall, they don't work consistently. If you're not fresh or if you're not feeling particularly sad that day, it's much harder to use emotional recall than to use Emotional Availability because Emotional Availability is being present and open and allowing the body to experience what is happening around it basically. My thinking is the body has lived in this world, in this life. There is an archive of emotion - in the heart, the mind, the soul, the spirit and the body - that you don't have to name; it is *there*, the body remembers it. *SoulWork* creates a special kind of safe space in ensemble and classroom spaces because it's not a confessional space - people are just experiencing being human beings in each other's presence, experiencing *going there*. When one person is open there is contagion. And then there is safety. *SoulWork* helps [practitioners] to live in their bodies everyday - grounding and accepting what their emotional archive is and not being ashamed of it and not holding it and releasing it. And the more people work together over time, the more and more safety builds and people begin to see what their thresholds are, and there is a trust that the community will say *yes*. They'll say *yes* to going where you need to go - to holding you up, lifting you up, to holding you back, to catching you, to following you, etc. Call & Response is built into this functioning micro-community of an ensemble or cast; it keeps every member of the ensemble grounded and in control of crafting and simultaneously freely exploring the emotional journey of a piece.

Greta: So far we've talked about *SoulWork* on the stage for performers. What are some examples of *SoulWork* for non-performers? Are there potential areas of application that exist outside the world of theatre and traditional performance?

Cristal: Community Dialogue. Community Conversations. Community events, meetings, gatherings. In addition, there are also classroom-based applications that can be applied when teaching any subject from K-12 through to college. *SoulWork* creates a

different level of critical thinking so it functions as a catalyst for engagement and encouraging collectivity and collaboration. So, in any classroom *SoulWork* can be used as a way of creating safer spaces. I also teach *SoulWork* for playwriting and directing -- there are lots of inroads that are not necessarily about being an actor, but are about theatre-making as a whole or art-making as a whole or just about crafting experiences that maximize inclusion, participation and engagement. *SoulWork* is a process that helps unearth both collective creativity and the unique contribution of an individual.

Greta: So *SoulWork* also functions beyond the stage as a set of tools for crafting space?

Cristal: Yeah; for spaces and experiences. Absolutely.

Greta: As an artist and an academic, you've long had a proverbial foot in many fields of study. What is the conversation between *SoulWork* and your multiple home disciplines? What are these disciplines and what is the relationship between these bodies of knowledge and *SoulWork*?

Cristal: Philosophy, Religion, Africana Studies, Performance Studies, Music and Theatre. I think one of the things that drew me to Performance Studies is the potential for "and" - the inherent interdisciplinary nature. The holistic nature of the field is very much connected to *SoulWork* in that it allowed this idea of investigating what performance is and using performance as not only a practice but as a tool for analysis. It's the investigative tool, right? It's not just something you get into as a research tool. Performance is literal and figurative and memory-based and quotidian, etc. This idea that experience can be research and that we can use performance to gain knowledge, not just to observe, but to explore, to gain knowledge that is critically and theoretically relevant.

Greta: It's interesting that you talk about performance as a means to gain knowledge. Overall, a deep hallmark I hear is that *SoulWork* is deeply process-based, and explicitly *not* product based. Is this an accurate description of the orientation of the method?

Cristal: Absolutely. Because the process leads to the product and the product is always different.

SoulWork does not want the product to be the same, it wants to constantly discover anew. I always tell the ensemble that the play is what it is right now because of the ensemble, and when someone else comes into the ensemble, it will be what it will be because of who the ensemble *then* becomes. Duplication is futile, boring and impossible. The best thing is going through the process and letting it be what it is because it is *you*. That's the thing about *SoulWork* cultivating the individual creativity of the person. It's about *bringing* what is unique to you to the work.

Greta: *SoulWork* as you've described it has such an expansive breadth of application. It's also got all these divergent disciplines/ingredients feeding it, fueling it, informing it. That said, what commonalities do you see in people - artists and others - who gravitate towards *SoulWork* training?

Cristal: They want to change the world and serve their communities. *SoulWork* artists are activists at heart. They are cultural workers and community organizers. If they were doctors perhaps they'd be finding a way to open a free health clinic. But, they're artists, so their way to be of service is to make meaningful work that inspires and affects change in the way people think and experience and engage each other and the world around them. Being an artist — they see it as their contribution to the progress of the world. They feel a deep responsibility to humanity, to society, to community. *SoulWork* is about an awareness of self and an awareness beyond the self. Meaning, an awareness of self and community, as always interconnected and responsible to each other. About an awareness of society, an awareness of Call and Response, an awareness of...being responsible for what you give and receive. It's an awareness of your complete humanity, not just going through this society, but through this life. When I start my acting classes, I always have everyone close their eyes and we breathe. We start with gratitude for the day, for the people who came before us and survived so we can be here. *And everybody's got that story*. Breathing in their own potential and breathing in their dreams for themselves and for the future - it's this larger space of being an interconnected human.

NOTES

[1] The following interview took place over multiple sessions from December 31, 2015 to January 29, 2017.

Cristal Chanelle Truscott is founder of touring ensemble Progress Theatre. An Africana and Performance Studies scholar, she is former Theatre Program Director and Interim Department Head of Music & Theatre at Prairie View A&M University. She holds an BFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts where she studied at Experimental Theatre Wing; and an MA and PhD from NYU's Department of Performance Studies with a research focus on representations of Muslims in American Theatre before 1950. She is a Doris Duke Impact Artist with work supported by NPN Creation Fund, MAP Fund and NEFA National Theatre Project. Her play *PEACHES* is published in TCG's *Plays from the Boom Box Galaxy*. She is currently developing a multi-site/site-specific, large-scale performance "intervention" entitled *Plantation Remix*. Based in Houston and a graduate of High School for Performing and Visual Arts, Cristal has been teaching *SoulWork* nationally and internationally for over 15 years.

Greta Gabriel is a freelance multi-media artist and independent scholar. In addition to working with Progress Theatre, Greta works with Philadelphia's Association for Public Art, as well as serving as a Facilitator with Milwaukee's Frank Zeidler Center for Public Discussion. Born and raised in Philadelphia, she is a graduate of Central High School and holds a BA in American Studies, with a concentration in Ethnic Studies, from University of California, Santa Cruz. An Oakes College alumna, Greta earned her MA in Performance Studies at NYU. Her research

background is in visual representations of minstrelsy in early American advertising and greeting cards.