The Gastronome in You (v2)

performance score

*I Thought the Earth Remembered Me* (banished? productions at the ARTillery)
Capitol Fringe 2015  |  July 9–19, 2015  |  Washington, DC

in an area that is both open and closed
two low stools are arranged on a drapey piece of cotton muslin
It rises up around the stools to form a nest-like space
about five feet in diameter

a bowl of water sits nearby
a hinge jar of bread pieces sits nearby
a hinge jar of yeast starter sits nearby, with a pastry brush

I indicate to the other person to sit
I sit on the other stool and look at the other

BREAD:
I take the hinge jar with bread, hold it in my lap
I open it and smell the bread
I pass it to the other and say: *smell this*
I tear off two small pieces of bread and put down the jar
I hand one piece of bread to the other, and keep one myself
I say: *Take a piece of this bread and see if it tells you anything. You can listen to it, feel it, even taste it if you want.*
(If the other declines, I acquiesce.) I taste mine.
I say: *It's a bread that I made with a sourdough starter that I got from my friend Gigi. We’ve been using it for over 20 years now.*

GIGI I:
I say, matter-of-factly: *I first knew Gigi when we were studying about food together in Italy. We traveled together a bit, did some research projects together. Ate lots of nice food. He went on travelling, and set up a bunch of farmers' markets—in Italy, but also a few in Lebanon, even here in the U.S., in South Carolina.*
I reclose the bread jar, and then look away.

FERMENTATION:
I say: *The dough for this bread rose because of fermentation. Yeasts eat sugars, produce carbon dioxide, acids, alcohol, other by-products. It's a very simple but amazing process, and it used to be how we preserved a great deal of our food. Now, much less so. We still use it for things like wine and beer, cheese, pickles... but not as much.*
I look again at the bread jar, touch the top, pause.

I say: *But beyond the practical aspect of fermentation, what’s really extraordinary about it is the way it entangles lives together. It makes these necessary connections between different kinds of living things.*
I rub my hands together, rub my hands over my arms, gesture at the other.
I say: Like, right now, on me, on you, in us—there are trillions of yeast and bacterial cells. More that we have human cells. But without them, we’re not human. Because we don’t digest, our metabolisms don’t function, we just don’t live. So, like the bread, we’re made of fermentation, too. We’re fermentation vessels. And those cells need us to live as well—we’re necessary to them. We are where they live, we are what they eat. They live, grow, reproduce, and die with and within us. Constantly coming and going. They’re coming and going between us right now as we sit here.

GIGI II:
I laugh at myself a bit. I say: When we were in school together, Gigi invented this thing he called a bullshitometer. An imaginary device that measured the level of food blah-blah-blah in the room. Like when someone started talking about the passion of wine making or the mystery of olive oil. (Or maybe kept going on about fermentation.)
I make a bullshitometer with my arms.
I say: He’d put his arms together like this, and make this gesture.
I make the noise. I stop. I say: And when the needle rose, we knew that bullshit was present. It was a tool we used maybe a little too often.

MICROBIOME:
I reach for the brush and hinge jar with the starter. I open the lid.
With my right hand, I dip the pastry brush in the water and then in the starter.
As I paint my left hand with the starter, I say: You know, when you’re making bread—kneading the dough—there’s this crust that develops on your hand. The flour and water, yeast and salt, forming a layer. And the tendency is to try to wash it away, scrub it off. But it’s pointless, really. It just keeps coming back.
I look at my painted hand and turn it over, showing the dry side. I turn it over again, and look at the play of light on the wet starter.
I look at the other and offer my right hand. If a hand is offered back to me, I take it and press it between both of my hands. (If no hand is offered, I say: May I have your hand?)
I think about the yeast making contact between us.
I look at the other and say: When Gigi died two years ago, his mother gave pieces of his sourdough starter to all of his friends and family. And we took it with us to the places we were. And in it, we took Gigi, a part of him, quite literally. Because he’s in there, some of what made him human.
I pull my hands away from the other’s, turning it over, running my fingers one last time across the palm.
I say: And now he’s in you, too, and on you. And you’re in it. And on me.
I look at the other and wait a few seconds.
I say: So if you want to leave a trace of that combined being on the cloth for the next person who is here, go ahead. Or you can rinse your hand, or just leave it where it is, as a reminder that you, too, are always coming and going.
I put the bread jar to one side and stand up from my stool, lifting it to one side as well. If the other stays sitting for a minute, I remain crouched, at the exit of the space.
When the other gets up and leaves, I say: Thank you.