

Pourquoi Le Theatre?

Abstract for "Knowledge and Performance are One Culture".

This paper attaches a theoretical framework to a series of convictions I developed during twelve years of practice as an artistic director, playwright, director, administrator, impresario and grass-roots collaborator. I want to draw some parallels between these different areas of practise, but I don't intend to unveil any "secret" that will improve performance in all these areas. In company with contemporary philosophers such as Dewey and Rorty, who reject the modernist drive to create a Summae, to create a world embracing system which comprehends all areas of experience, I am sceptical that a single theory of practise could encompass the different relationships to artists, government and public implied by the different roles I have experienced. Most important to my approach is the rejection of the Cartesian idea that practise is subordinate to theory-- I believe that the pursuit of capital "T" universal Truth is to be avoided, for it can only be found piecemeal, in the process of grasping small "t" truths, in particular local situations. It is this small "t" truth quest I'm pursuing here.

As a theatre practitioner I exist in numerous overlapping yet separate realities, but these tend to fall in two categories: the first is the immediate, localised domain of producing professional theatre for artistic expression and economic survival. The second is the distanced, globe-processing domain of university theatre departments, which train artists and cultural critics for artistic expression and to re-present the world in theoretical constructs. The moment of shifting between the viewpoints of these two realities provides a rich collection of similarities and disconnections; it has always been a stimulating hop, and many of my artistic ideas have been born from it.

Today, I voice my concern that the schizm between the two viewpoints is making it increasingly difficult to cross-over. Consequently, the reciprocal, ecological relationship between university theory and theatre practise is breaking down. Within their own realities, in microcosm if you will, the theatre and the university are each experiencing versions of this relational breakdown between theory and practise.

*Within the theatre, a general schizm between commercially viable and culturally relevant artistic work confuses artists as to for what, exactly, they have been trained.

*Artists feel the need to view their careers as entrepreneurial enterprises because of the distance between the romantic rhetoric defending the value of the performing arts and the social realities of multi-nationalism which U.S. Secretary of Labour Robert Reich's so chillingly describes in his book, "The Work of Nations".

*Theatre administrations often experience a similar schizm between their community oriented mandates and the strategic priority given to bottom-line-profits.

* In the Universities, Theatre Departments face the threat of a new utilitarianism in concepts of education which, under the guise of rationalization, right-sizing and deficit budgeting, place top value on technological equipment and market-applicable research at the expense of performing arts programmes. Responding to these necessities, many university departments are cutting back on their practical budgets: the hiring of professional instructors, external directors and master-class teachers, the costs of departmental seasons. Their bottom line then becomes theory: and the wellknown publish or perish paradigm for those who desire tenure. The rhetoric of university departments across the country is shrilly defensive.

My contention is that the growing disjunction between practise and theory in these areas is a natural reaction to the much-discussed, larger schizm, rooted historically in the Enlightenment, where the concepts of calculation, information and knowledge became separated from those of creative thought, invention and practise.

This is the point where everybody yawns and mutters "oh, not another anti-Babbitt rant"-- and since I know the problem I'm stating is not new news, I want to make it clear that this is my starting point and not my conclusion. After all, in many ways the schizm between theory and practise has worked very well since the Enlightenment. I would never claim that the leap between them is not a creative one. Popular culture has functioned to fling a tension bridge between the economic imagery of public life (provided by Adam Smith (1723-1790)), and the romantic imagery of private life (courtesy of Edmund Kean(1789-1823)). Over centuries, popular culture has responded powerfully to displaced populations, social upheavals, suddenly wealthy classes and the impoverishment of aristocrats. Its art-forms, from Commedia to Cabaret, have provided taut sutures between the high art of theoretically established techniques, and the low art of turning a buck. One feeds the other: one generation's whacky desperadoes (One Yellow Rabbit Theatre, for example) provide the next generation's Phd topics. Gaston Bachelard might characterize this low-high connection as the twin poles of imagining: the formal imagination which seizes on uncertain and inconstant alternatives, and the material imagination, "which is attracted to the elements of permanency in things".¹ The relationship between practise and theory can function, as Richard Courtney demonstrates in his series of books on Drama and Intelligence, Drama and Feeling, and the relationship between Play, Drama and Thought, as a mobius strip looping infinitely from self-acknowledging ritual (the acceptance of theory) to self-actualizing performance (where Theatre practise becomes philosophy on its feet).

When the loop doesn't twist any more, when one side isn't constantly renewed by its sense of the other, it becomes a circle. To the theatre, this means that one side, the inside, becomes a mirror for society, attached to stability and self-confirmation. The other is the other: everything that challenges and alienates. And the loop which doesn't renew itself becomes a treadmill, or a noose.

This will be true for the artist, for the theatre company administrator and for the university department

As far as the official line of the Canada Council is concerned, Anglophone culture is definitely a loop proposition, and not a closed circle. To back up this view is the achievement of the Council: since 195__ 189 professionally operative companies, including organizations representative of minority peoples and of women. Canadian plays are in healthy frequency on the stages of even "A" house regionals. In theory, the artist-bureaucrats of the Council combine deep experience of arts' practise with an arms' length principle in the disbursement of subsidies.

¹ Etienne Gilson, foreward, *The Poetics of Space*, by Gaston Bachelard (1964, Orion Press, Boston) ix.

Conflicting with this view is the reality of the battle-lines within PACT over the past 5 years, where more commercially oriented companies are rebelling against a perceived agenda to direct funding to so-called cutting-edge companies whose work, eschewing entertainment values, speaks to limited audiences. To the despair of these more marginalised companies, who generally do receive subsidy to a higher percentage of their operating budgets than, for example, summer Shakespeare companies, they are hardly closer to breaking into the audience market, the corporate subsidies or lucrative board-memberships of the older regional theatres. Again, conflicting with the Council's optimism, is the opinion, voiced by George F. Walker at the closure of his commercial run of Nothing Sacred, that there is a glass ceiling for Canadian plays in Canada. In practise, the professional community is dismayed by the current restructuring of Council programmes which seems only the logical conclusion of the increasingly interventionist approach to the client companies.

It seems clear that a breakdown between the Council's theory and belief, and between the theatre community's practise and experience, has occurred. The precise moment of severance is more difficult to identify. I think that the moment is embedded deeply in our social imaginary, and that it occurs before the material events of a company's development make it evident. The moment of the breakdown occurs because the romantic definition of the value of the arts, which has worked well for centuries, is no longer a *viable* theory to the meritocratic corporations which structure media, government and educational institutions. In other words, I believe our "social imaginary", (get definition from Gordon) has changed significantly, and that we are experiencing in a sort of trickle down effect, a new indifference to the romantic values that once insisted every community must have its theatre.

In countless letters lobbying and pleading, on everything from Canada's involvement in the Gulf War to the removal of the arts from tax-based funding, these values have provided the rhetoric for defence of the performing arts. By rote: **theatre fosters fundamental human processes which develop identity, belonging, communal values, self-reflective consciousness, strategic innovation and role flexibility**. When the nineties hit, the arguments were updated to include statistics from the Applebaum-Hebert report, the Massey report, and the Padfield study of the Edmonton Fringe Festival: we showed those darn government foundations that **arts mean business**. In a town like Parrsboro, Nova Scotia, for example, Ship's Company brings identity, tourists and new possibilities. But my heart fails me, so earnestly pathetic does this argument sound. The social programme designed in the United States by the likes of Robert Reich, is not interested in geographic or national community, hence in benefitting the diverse members of such a physically recognisable group. A contract that has endured for centuries, where those in power allow theatre as a mediating relationship with those they protect, is being ripped up in high places.

I argue that the community of the meritocrats is not geographical but electronic. As described by Robert Reich, the elite power-class of the computer age meritocracy live in a world of "abstract concepts and symbols, ranging from stock market quotations to the visual images produced by Hollywood and Madison Avenue, and who specialize in the

interpretation and deployment of symbolic information"³ . Its buzzwords are "team-thinking" "network" and "zone": it is characteristically trans-national and independent of public services, preferring to rely on the "in person service" of private educators, health-clinics and police.

³ Christopher Lasch, The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy (1995: W.W. Norton, New York) 39.