

# Looping the Loop: Making Knowledge and Performance into One Culture

## *Separation of knowledge and performance*

There is an artificial separation between academic and production staff in university theatre departments, and between theatre policy-makers and artists in the profession. The separation of knowers from performers generates a sort of "bewildered anxiety" about the ability of theatre to survive. I want to address the source of this anxiety, and to propose that certain measures can help allay it.

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Uncertainty about the relevance of both theory and practice to our modern situation seems to be triggered variously by the funding cutbacks, the decline in audience, the franchise concept of theatre or the approach of virtual entertainment. Blame shifts radically depending on our viewpoint of the modern situation where the moral, the political and the aesthetic are profoundly dissociated<sup>1</sup>.

Commensurate with the difficulty of matching values to practical spheres of action is the tendency to separate thinking from doing. If knowledge systems inform performance, and performance systems inform knowledge, we have an infinitely self-renewing loop. But our loop has been arrested: cut into 2 distinct self-referential circles that hold one another in mutual suspicion. Theatre theorists are characterized by practitioners as didactic, jargonistic and irrelevant, while the latter are perceived by academics to be naive, backward, and unworthy of the art-form. What causes this?

## *Is it that Canadian Theatre lacks a single rallying point?*

PACT meetings through the 90's have demonstrated an almost total disagreement as to what Canada is, what culture is, what theatre is, and what the price of survival should be<sup>2</sup>. But its **not** the lack of a single point perspective that matters, so much as that, in its absence, mainstream Canadian theatres operate independent of contemporary theoretical discourse, committing instead to a late romantic world-view that is increasingly bizarre given the status of romantic humanism in the world today. Romance pays the bills, but in the process, practitioners become closed off from the vitality of ideas.

## *Why do Practitioners refuse to discuss their theories of practice?*

From Bryden MacDonald to Morris Panych, we get evasion. Echoing Brecht's frustration at the lack of ideological engagement, Alan Filewod asks in a 1991 editorial "why the theatre ... seems so removed from the historical events that call its very future into question"<sup>3</sup>. *Therefusal to discuss* asserts the independence of art from social, moral responsibility. In Brecht's terms, it conspires with the ideology of mass culture in a process of *reification* where cultural assumptions are presented "as it were, incognito"<sup>4</sup>.

## *Theorists, for their part, avoid discussion of practical process*

Study focuses primarily on play text, and (to a lesser extent) on production; seldom on artistic or audience processes. At its worst, theory abandons social awareness to become concept-drunk on philosophical meta-schemes. Sometimes, possibly, these help us to *re-read* theatre so as to explode in new directions--as with structuralist theatre-- but the general **avoidance** of any epistemology of practice inhibits such philosophies from speaking to practitioners. Until recently, the silence on performance theory has been profound: as if practice in Canada was considered unsuitable for discourse. The

contributions of semioticians have helped, but that language is not an actor-centred language<sup>5</sup>. It's a Barthes-Foucault- fiesta.

One of my favourite books this year, is Linda Hart's anthology Making a Spectacle<sup>6</sup>. Out of the 18 essay contributions, some of which treat ground-breaking feminist directors, not one deals with actual production process. This is the more odd because feminist performance asserts the primacy of process, just as feminist artists engage ideologically with theory.

***There are enormous benefits to connecting theory with practice***

Despite the different mindsets they demand, the moment of shifting between the viewpoints of practice and theory is deeply creative. I like to describe it in terms of Richard Courtney's "whole thinking": a dramatic process that integrates cognitive, affective, aesthetic and psycho-motor skills; one that understands knowledge and performance as interactive parts of consciousness. Courtney's books on Drama and Intelligence, Drama and Feeling and the relationship between Play, Drama and Thought<sup>7</sup> assert the function of theatre as *lived philosophy*.

***Its a grand claim, and one to which current performance epistemology does not live up.***

R.P. Knowles has pointed out the two training systems most commonly in use : 1) versions of the Method: linear, psychological reductivism, and 2) versions of Peter Brook's "empty space" approach: fundamentalist, "ur" universalism<sup>8</sup>. By focusing on the actors mind and body respectively, these avoid philosophical discourse.

To these, I would add the Theatre Sports movement, which has a highly developed theory, and is also widely in use. Johnstone's emphasis on status comes close to engaging the power structures of the world. However, the improvisational format combined with his surrealist emphasis on spontaneity, dilutes its accountability, and the integrity of its statement.

There are other epistemologies of performance familiar through grassroots workshops and masterclasses. Of these,

***Eugenio Barba's Performance Epistemology appears complex and inclusive.***

Any group engaged in "an autonomous construction of a meaning which does not recognize the boundaries assigned to our craft by the surrounding culture"<sup>9</sup> belongs to Barba's Third Theatre. This, he insists, is not an ideological, nor an aesthetic nor a sociological category of "non-aligned" theatre; no, to belong to the Third Theatre means to focus on the craft of the performer. Barba's (still developing) dictionary of theatre anthropology categorizes diverse cultural performance according to a structuralism of physical gesture. This is very ideological, though not, perhaps, in a way Barba would wish. For, while it provides a valuable resource for performers and theoreticians, his structuralist categories devalue the cultural context of a gesture. Moreover, by declaring his autonomy from his own culture's ideology, Barba's theory values the aesthetic for its own sake. Despite its amassing of encyclopaedic wisdom, it amounts again to a *refusal to discuss*. The "autonomous artist" of the Third Theatre disengages from the values and boundaries of her community.

I don't want to reject the positive aspects of the Third Theatre too quickly. The artists' profound explorations of craft, and their total responsibility for every aspect of production from mandate to movement is extremely empowering, in a culture where artists don't enjoy much power. Moreover, Barba's motive in making "autonomous

meaning" is to escape the co-option of theatre by the capitalist value system. He thinks it can be done by professionally motivated groups with strong cultures.

***The problem is that the seeming alternative of the avant garde has always existed in collusion with commerce.***

A hundred years ago, when the avant garde evolved, "visionary artists" took up opposition to the "commoners" of the consumer society. But pervasive beliefs in progressive enlightenment bound them back together in the myth of the perennial avant-garde<sup>10</sup>. Aesthetes disregard social norms until they are pursued in cults of "auteur" worship. Then watch: *Can they withstand the temptation of delicious co-option?!* The terror that theatre will founder between its ideal purpose and its commercial reality is itself a Romantic preoccupation: just like ours, the Belle Époque theatre of France was anxious that government policies, producers' greed, the general decline in morals, in dramatic quality and the dominance of spectacle over text, would destroy theatre as an art form<sup>11</sup>. The anxiety I spoke of at my outset is part and parcel with our concept of art in a beyond-our-control society.

Barba has a way to assuage it: disciplined training and commitment to the integrity of artistic vision will keep the art pure. In so many ways I find this admirable. But.

***Strong group cultures fail in capitalist contexts of progress and change.***

Team management theory asserts that "strong group culture" results from the close relation of practitioner to mandate. Its members excel in methodology; they experience job satisfaction and personal empowerment. However, a strong culture is not *necessarily* the best thing to have. Afsaneh Nahavandi says, "The stronger a culture, the more resistant it will be to change, and the less capable of flexing its structure so as to deal with new procedural challenges or the requirements of restructuring"<sup>12</sup>. Third Theatre groups' resistance to the social paradigm of its larger culture will make them the first to bite the dust when internal schism or external challenge, arrives. The Canada Council calls this "the explosion of the collective" and watch for it as a natural, inevitable event in the life of a theatre group. The next step: Arms length Boards of Directors that remove mandate and policymaking from the artists.

***If not strong group cultures, Who will survive?***

Those organizations that mould themselves best to the social imaginary and guess the shape of the future. Those who are the happy inheritors of the cultural legacy of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and who therefore support the withdrawal of morality from economics and the withdrawal of politics from art; those, in short, who know

***The business of feeling***<sup>13</sup>.

The business of feeling describes the activities of our mainstream theatres as they grapple together the **economic** imagery of **public** life with the **romantic** imagery of **private** life. The sheer magnitude of this as a pattern formula for blockbuster profits was demonstrated to me by an extra-ordinary workshop by Hollywood script consultant Linda Seger<sup>14</sup>. She demonstrates how romantic (love) and economic (money) themes, alternately united and polarized at special times within a particular story structure, reveal a "universal" human dilemma. This capital "T" Truth speaks, she says, to the broad spectrum of people struggling to survive as individuals in a freemarket economy where transience and government infrastructure weakens the possibility of solidarity.

Seger's mass culture "model" is sufficiently flexible that it claims to contain all experience, and all possible contents. Method, Internationalism, Kooky satire, Visionary Art. (Everything, that is, but Brecht or Boal). Worse, her theory is predicated on an economic proof of success so built in to our culture that it is practically impossible for alternative concepts to succeed. As a universal theory, Seger's dominates or co-opts all our practice.

***Indeed, our entire rhetoric of art serves the Romantic-economic tensions of Seger's system!***

We assert that theater fosters fundamental human processes that develop *identity, belonging, communal values and self-reflective consciousness* necessary for progress. Art is necessary to the *quality of life* which motivates us to live in an alienating world. As the social safety net comes under attack, we also argue that *arts mean business*, quoting from Canadian Conference for the Arts' useful statistics.

Arts defense speaks a romantic-economic language that avoids ideological areas such as social controls, cultural visibilities, and strategies for community evaluation and change. Consequently, the educational, political and aesthetic genres of practice remain the work of separate organizations, as these realms are everywhere separated into a hierarchy which exiles the political, sinks education to the bottom and enshrines the artistic at the top.

Arts defense arguments do not offer a solution to the isolation of the moral-political-aesthetic realms in modernism: the seemingly inescapable imaginary of our dominant cultural paradigm.

***Is it possible to think or act outside such a subtle and pervasive ideology?***

*Yes*, because contemporary philosophy rejects the concept of any universal truth. *Yes*, because the more political of our second-stage theatres also challenge the ideas of singular truth, absolute identity and the benevolence of technology. Sally Clark's Life Without Instruction represents single point perspective as a rape. Michel Garneau's Warriors shows violent warfare to be integral to the romantic-economic collusion<sup>15</sup>. And *yes again*, because

***the assertion that there are no universal theories brings with it the necessity to engage the political dynamics of a situation.***

An example of this may be seen in the Canada Council's dilemma between the application of Internationalist and Regionalist standards in company evaluations. For years, for various diplomatic reasons, Council was committed to the "universal" modernist aesthetic known as Internationalism. Once the singular standard for art was sufficiently protested, Council noticed the damaging effect it was having on, for example, the 80's generation of Newfoundland artists. They incorporated regionalism into aspects of their funding language. But the two viewpoints are not binary oppositions.

Sometimes, it's appropriate to support Internationalism in a regionalist context. In 1991, I was one of 13 people who bought a ticket for Carbon 14's tour to Red Deer, Alberta: Le Dortoire, an Internationalist show, that was cancelled due to lack of interest. The Touring Office justified their subsidy as a worthwhile risk given the need to expand western audiences' experience. In principle, I support that risk, and that desire to challenge the audience. Yes, different theories *are* applicable in different situations, but

***only a study of the moral, political and aesthetic situation can enable one to decide how to act.***

A full consideration of situation involves acknowledging the relation of process to product and the relation of both to culture. It involves recognizing how the ideology of *given hierarchies* affect group motivation<sup>16</sup> to use *given methodologies* to realize their aims. Whole thinking is required, which understands that every act is also a theory and, vice versa, every theory is, at its *inception*, a significant act.

Its easy, and a bit trendy to advocate whole thinking as a solution. Sorry! I have hinted in the paper at some tangible measures that discourage our *dandyist* refusal to participate in community, and help us engage artistically in issues of public consequence. For starters, the insistence that *discourse is an attribute of the artist*, and that *performance process is of central concern to theory*. Then, the replacement of our valuation of the new, the original, the individual talent with *the valuation of mature group vision*.

When a group loops the loop of my title, when its theory enhances its practice, which in turn deepens its theory, they have achieved a mature group culture. Its features are: *flexible yet collect ive (team) values, clearly demarked boundaries, dialogical action objectives with and within the community, performance-production methodologies, evaluation strategies, leaderships, specializations, and systems for quality control.*<sup>17</sup> As my final recommendation, I'd like to say: Abandon accepted arts defense rhetoric, because its whistling in the wind.

For the moment, though, I lack the courage. The entire infrastructure of Canadian arts admin would descend on me, likely to lynch me in my own loop! Again, the language of the soul helped, superficially, during the attempt to close down Dahousie's Theatre Department, because so many people still buy it.....

I too, am consumed with anxiety, hanging as I do between the two circles of knowledge and performance.

Additional Notes: What would situation theatre be?

Not the political didacticism of the 1920's, because the subtleties of emotional context, of race and gender and generation contexts cannot be sloganized.

Situation can be linear, or need not be. Situation communicates experience as material culture, expands and contracts structural assumptions from a moment, uses metaphor and analogy as a matter of convenience, in a kind of scaling activity where they are not made into universals or allegories, rather as a self-commentary. Situation is labywrinthine, leading audience through or over the passages of a maze, and then back out by a different route. Its cyberspace and the walls are illusory. The wisdom it gives is a sort of apprentice-ship wisdom, "if you were, and if it happened that, during a, when all the others were, and if it sounded like, and looked like, and nobody, and so you, and all the feelings of, well, what might happen is, and so if it arrives that, you won't ever be me or experience this but, you can use my story if you want to."

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990) 368.

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<sup>2</sup> The PACT AGM of May 1991 in Ottawa saw administrators and artistic directors alike breaking down under the strain of disagreements as to the role of theatre. Presentations by representatives from Toronto's Black Theatre Workshop, Native Earth Theatre and Quebec City's Theatre Repere left the theatre establishment shaken rather than inspired.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Filewod, "New Theatre/ New Crises", Canadian Theatre Review #67 (Summer 1991) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "Modern Theatre is Epic Theatre", Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964) 34.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Aston and George Savona, Theatre As A Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance, (London: Routledge, 1991) is an example of a useful semiotic hermeneutics for theatre; yet actors find it simultaneously naive and opaque.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Hart, ed., Making A Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Courtney, Drama and Feeling: An Aesthetic Theory (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 1995); Drama and Intelligence: A Cognitive Theory (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 1990); Play, Drama and Thought: The Intellectual Background to Dramatic Education (Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> R.P. Knowles, "Frankie Goes to Hollywood North; or The Trials of the Oppositional Director ", Canadian Theatre Review #76 (Fall 1992) 7.

<sup>9</sup> Eugenio Barba, "The Third Theatre: A Legacy from Us to Ourselves. The discoveries of craft that unite disparate groups and individuals" New Theatre Quarterly, Vol 8 #29 ( Feb 1992) 8.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1989) 424-426.

<sup>11</sup> Frantisek Deak, Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant Garde (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1993) 13.

<sup>12</sup> Afsaneh Nahavandi and Ali R. Malekzadeh, Organizational Culture in the Management of Mergers (London: Quorum Books, 1993) 19.

<sup>13</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "On the New York Production of The Mother, 1936" Collected Poems (London: Methuen, 1978) 48. Brecht understood that " the spectator/ like a business man/ investing money in a concern,...invests/ Feeling in the hero: he wants to get it back/ If possible, doubled....

<sup>14</sup> Linda Seger is the author of "Making a Good Script Great" (Los Angeles, 1990) Ms. Seger was invited by Telefilm Canada and Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia to give a

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workshop in Halifax, Dec 11-14, 1994. She shared these theories with participants during the course of the sessions.

<sup>15</sup> Sally Clark, Life Without Instruction (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op Press, 1994); Michel Garneau , Warriors (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1994) 65.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of role motivation and organization hierarchy, see John B. Miner, Role Motivation Theories (London: Routledge, 1993) 19-24.

<sup>17</sup> This figuring of mature group characteristics is partly indebted to a professional pamphlet: Team Management Systems, U.K. Ltd., Handbook For Excellence (Cheltenham: Fineman, 1992) 22-36.