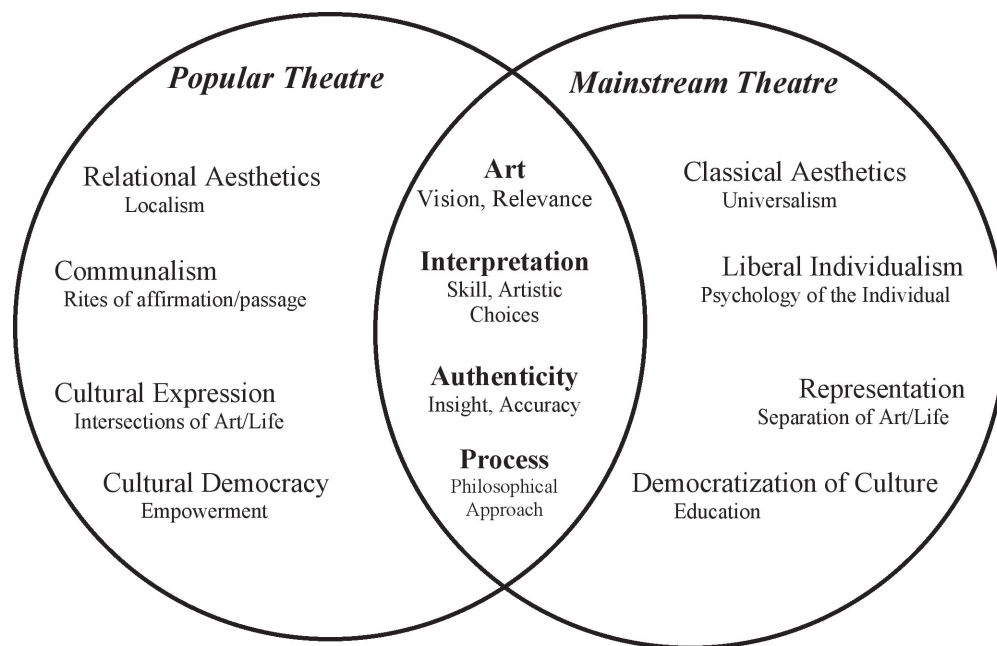


TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF COMMUNITY-BASED THEATRE...

PART II: AVOIDING THE MISSIONARY POSITION

by Edward Little

Directors and authors of community-engaged theatre are charged with the responsibility of discovering ways in which the ideologies, intentions, and values of projects can be expressed as an aesthetic weave and a social weft in the creation of an artistic fabric. The ubiquitous separation between art and social action, however, means that evaluations of artistic accomplishment in community-engaged theatre are usually subject to a naturalised criteria of “artistic excellence” determined by, and for, mainstream theatre. To resist this (and taking a page or two from Brecht’s Epic theatre and John McGrath’s Working Class theatre), I propose the following diagram to represent points of intersection within a comparative hierarchy of aesthetic values as a generalized starting point for a provisional “poetics” of popular and community-engaged theatre.



At the top of the hierarchy, both approaches aspire to vision, relevance, and quality in the artistic product. Similarly, both value skill, originality, and artistic choices in interpretation, and in accuracy and authenticity of insight. Mainstream theatre, however, traditionally favours a classical aesthetics that privileges liberal individualism through an emphasis on the skills and accomplishments of author, director, designer, and actor-in-role; seeks universality in representation; and advocates a clear aesthetic separation between practices involving “art” and the participatory life of the community. To achieve the widest possible

dissemination of its artistic products, mainstream theatre subscribes philosophically to the democratisation of culture.

Community-engaged theatre, in comparison, values a relational aesthetics in which vision, relevance, interpretation, and authenticity proceed from localised cultural expression that is rooted in a communal sense of utility, participation in art and public life, and a “grass-roots-up” inspired philosophy of cultural democracy.

A binary approach to this paradigm posits that these parallel sets of values can co-exist, but only as expressed in separate practices. This



ignores the degree to which key aesthetic values are held in common. A Ven, or continuum approach, argues that they must co-exist — and suggests that they constitute central values informing the processes of “production” and the products of “consumption” respectively. The continuum approach insists that cultural democracy and the democratisation of culture be recognised as interdependent, complementary parts of a vigorous, inclusive, and expanded vision of theatre and cultural life. This offers a veritable Kama Sutra of aesthetic alternatives to the commonly prescribed missionary position in which categories such as “amateur/professional,” “popular/mainstream,” or “life/art” are seen as competing and/or mutually exclusive.

An Aesthetic of Cultural Democracy

Cultural democracy is predicated on direct public participation in the creation of a living, responsive culture. It defines the opposite end of the continuum from the democratisation of culture — or what Roy Shaw, a past secretary of the British Arts Council during the Thatcher era, refers to as the “high arts.” The democratisation of culture is concerned with promoting wider public access to “high arts” through touring, regional funding, networking, and most importantly education. Shaw seminally championed the view that “high art” should, by definition, transcend such differences as class by appealing to our common

humanity. The “sophistication” of “high art,” however, means that in order to “inherit culture, you must make an effort, sometimes a considerable one,” and therefore education must be the “prime factor in facilitating greater access to the arts.” Advocates for community-based arts, such as Owen Kelly, counter that an exclusive practice of democratising culture can also be seen as a system for the “popularisation of an already decided cultural agenda” — one which values consumption of the arts over participation in the arts.

Cultural democracy is a powerful mechanism of authorship in community-engaged theatre. It generates the raw material comprising both the social weft and the artistic weave. It seeks to reconcile what Alison Beale calls “the antithetical relationship” between culture — defined “as a way or ways of life particular to peoples and nations” — and art — defined as “a set of activities chosen according to elite and traditional values for support and promotion of the state” (356). The aesthetic expression of cultural democracy is multiple: diverse voices foregrounding authenticity through direct community participation, artist/community partnerships, and interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to planning and artistic creation.

Cultural democracy represents and reflects the social and cultural diversity of streets, neighbourhoods, and cities. To this end, authors and directors of community-based projects often integrate ritualistic elements not only into performances but into “gathering” (pre-production) and “dispersal” (post-production) phases of the theatrical event (Bennett 12, 96ff). These socially or culturally specific activities can range from conservative evocations of barn-raising, dances, auctions, fairs, weddings, funerals, and the like to more radical practices involving gang initiations, street protocol, and the sex trade. Such elements of cultural expression serve to reflect or challenge local values or concerns while heightening the sense of authenticity and relevance of the project as an artistic expression of “a way or ways of life” (Beale 356). Audience participation in ritualistic elements adds a more visceral experience,

and ritualistic gathering and dispersal activities break down amateur/professional and popular/mainstream binaries, blur the lines between beginnings and endings, and create an extended theatrical event in which art and daily life are not regarded as mutually exclusive. An aesthetic of cultural democracy is less about a specific performance event and more about an integrated vision of art and life that unfolds over a substantial amount of time. Local knowledge is essential to an appreciation of art created from the impulse of cultural democracy. Shaw called for considerable effort to comprehend high art — community-engaged theatre also requires a commitment far beyond an hour and a half in order to render its particular social weft visible within its aesthetic fabric.

There are, of course, risks and pitfalls for authors and directors within an aesthetic of cultural democracy. Floyd Favel Star warns against simplistic and literal stagings of ritual onstage, advocating instead that art lies in finding the

roots of the ritual and working with an embodied evocation of some aspect of this essence (84-5). Similarly, simply representing “life as it is lived” without editorial intervention — particularly when such representations involve instances of social injustice — can contribute to reductive and voyeuristic portrayals that may actually work against the initiating impulse to challenge marginalising hegemonic structures. Furthermore, authors and directors working in an aesthetic of cultural democracy are often under considerable pressure to include too many contributions from the community—irrespective of their relevance to a project’s artistic vision — and to represent consensus. This can result in a loosening of the kinds of condensation, timing, and immediacy that are strengths in modernist art, as well as in a dilution of ideas or dramatic conflict. To counteract these liabilities, authors and directors must embrace an overarching narrative strategy that is capable of sustaining multiple points of view in dramatic suspension without evoking simplistic



closure while remaining within a project's need for consensual participation. The artistic treatment of dissonant voices requires a directorial approach that renders such tensions a subject of creative theatrical exploration in a manner analogous to Augusto Boal's concept of "analogical induction": the simultaneous creation of multiple analytical perspectives (45).

Cultural Expression

Cultural Expression in community-engaged theatre is the stuff of the social weft. As noted above, it embraces an ethos of direct and meaningful community participation in the creation of theatrical art. Subscribing to pedagogical principles of active learning, an aesthetic embracing cultural expression aspires — to varying degrees and in varying ways — to be a theatre by, for, and about the members of its constituent communities. It resists the rigid separation of artist and audience common to professional models. Artists and community members work together to create varying types and degrees of authorship involving the aesthetic expression of both shared and individual experiences and concerns.

To ensure that participation is widespread and meaningful, any approach must recognise and accommodate divergent notions of community and social action. These are fundamentally drawn together under Raymond Williams' conception of community as "the necessary mediating element between the individual and the larger society" (95). This is often reflected in an aesthetic in which the community is positioned as protagonist with the internal and external struggles of individual members staged as elements of dramatic conflict. An overarching intent common to community-based theatre is to create an iconic representation that celebrates negotiated values, privileges human creativity (as opposed to expensive and resource-consuming technological solutions), and affords a pragmatic appreciation of the potential utility of art as a resource-effective means of addressing community concerns. To this end, the directorial use of

simple, yet creative transformations illustrates a central principle of a popular theatre — perceptions and reality are transformable through group action. This pragmatic sense of the potential social efficacy of community-engaged theatre opens creative possibilities for a dynamic and dialogic experience that reaches out to new audiences and prepares the way for various additional kinds of communal input and dialogue extending into the dispersal phase of the project. Cultural expression values the local over the universal, and individual emergence within a community context over individual accomplishment. Boal characterises this as a "rehearsal for change." In such ways, an aesthetic of cultural expression stages collective representation and activity as an emancipatory act, highlighting relationships between individual expression, growth, and community development.

Communalism

Whereas liberal individualism in mainstream art tends to place great value on the skill of the actor-in-role, the aesthetics of cultural expression and communalism value the community performer-as-role. The local nature of the work means that community members will often know the everyday roles of any given performer, and this will be clearly in mind as they witness the performer onstage. The staging of personal testimony is often used as the most direct way of staging a performer-as-role's struggle against personal limitations, social conditioning, or cultural taboos. In community-based projects with multiple constituencies, a key directorial challenge is to make the principle of performer-as-role appropriately visible to audience members not from the particular performer's social or cultural background. The aesthetic expression of this can be analogous to the Brechtian narration of role, the use of allusion or dramatic irony in mainstream theatre, or even an in-joke.

The liabilities of an aesthetic of communalism often pertain to choices about localism, and about the treatment and positioning of performer-as-role within the aesthetic tapestry. Lo-

calism in content — local stories or legends, or even adapted universal myths or canonical texts — can fall victim to reductively self-congratulatory and sentimental representations. Authorial and directorial considerations for any particular text must also balance social efficacy and artistic merit: not in terms of a text's suitability as a vehicle for writers, directors, designers or professionally trained performers, but rather in terms of its ability to strike a creative balance between, on the one hand, staging community power relations and concerns and, on the other, the talents, skills, and personal realities of community participants. The sophistication (or lack thereof) of directorial choice and ideological clarity in these areas is a measure of artistic skill and interpretation.

Where cultural democracy and cultural expression largely constitute the social weft, communalism within a relational aesthetic makes up the aesthetic weave. This comprises the artistic treatment and realisation of the negotiated intentions and values of communalism, cultural expression, and cultural democracy. The directorial challenge is to stage community as a form of Brechtian *Gestus* — revealing such things as unexamined beliefs, social dynamics, relationships of power, and coercive tensions between socially and culturally specific notions of “public” and “private” spheres. Directorial choices that render the processes of creation visible in the performance event can be used to draw viewers' attention to the politics of production as a reflection of specific constructions of cultural expression and cultural democracy. Aesthetic accomplishment relates to the artistry with which such factors are rendered visible and constructed, and therefore are negotiable and subject to change. Theatre semioticians and anthropologists also challenge community-engaged theatre directors to adopt an awareness of how theatre's formal qualities might be used to draw attention to unconscious distinctions and categories relating to inherited notions of beauty and utility. This might be done explicitly through the kinds of extended and participatory “gathering and dispersal phases” noted earlier,



or more subtly through the creative positioning of rhetorical (form-related) and authenticating (locally-significant) conventions. Authorial and directorial choices establishing relationships between these conventions can provide a distancing effect or allow editorial commentary through the juxtaposition of local and universal significances. An aesthetic of communalism can be further evaluated by the sophistication of its engagement with resonant social and cultural roots within its host community. These can be expressed both in text and more formalistically through movement, gesture, music, linguistic rhythms, tones, and idiosyncratic syntax that are arranged and deployed in ways that confirm authenticity while offering possibilities for analogical induction through defamiliarisation. Casting performer-as-role against type can also serve this end.

A striking testimony to the power of communalism comes in the form of an anecdotal story that Jon Oram (a former artistic director of Britain's Colway Theatre Trust) likes to tell about London-based critic Michael Billington's response to Colway's 1984 Dorchester commu-

nity play (written by David Edgar and directed by Ann Jellicoe). An adapted version of the play was subsequently produced at the National Theatre under the direction of Sir Peter Hall, starring Dame Judi Dench and Tim Piggott Smith. Billington is reported to have compared the two productions by stating, “When I saw the community version, I was moved. When I saw the national’s version, I was impressed!”

As the Billington anecdote suggests, the effective staging of communalism and cultural expression is, to a very large degree, the source of power in community-engaged theatre. As in ritual, the community participant does not compete with the skill and conditioning of professional artists: rather, the community performer’s greatest strength lies in its relational aspects — the authenticity, relevance, and frame of reference of their performance for their host communities. In a post-modern context, to be either “moved” or “impressed” (or some combination of both) is a subjective experience that is largely contingent on environmental factors, which include an individual’s sense of belonging within a matrix of geographic and relational communities and the degree and nature of an individual’s participation in the theatrical event. A key directorial challenge within an aesthetic of communalism relates to striking a similarly dynamic balance along a continuum extending from affirmation (reification of a community as it is currently constituted and understood) to community intervention (cultural intervention, social change, or community advocacy in the face of a dominant or threatening other). If the balance tips too far towards affirmation, the result can appear sentimental, nostalgic, self-indulgent or self-congratulatory, and lacking in either social or political analysis. Too far in the other direction, and the work risks the stridency of agitational propaganda and the alienation of community members. An artistic balance of the two presents the human condition of the community to itself in aesthetic ways that open space for new perspectives, dialogic engagement on both visceral and intellectual levels, and a demonstrated potential for social change. This

is the measure of a project’s relevance to its community.

Relational Aesthetics

To experience a community-engaged theatre project’s relevance to its constituent communities is to begin to recognise the aesthetic fabric in its entirety. Relevance with a relational aesthetic, however, must extend beyond simplistic portrayals of community and performer-as-role to evoke an examination of complicity. As noted, the qualitative measure of relevance is largely contingent on the creative and artistic balance struck between community affirmation and community intervention. If affirmation of identity becomes too tightly tied to a literal approach, there will be considerable pressure to “tell it like it is” and risk what Julie Salverson characterises as the “lie of the literal”: an approach that risks re-traumatising participants, particularly in work involving personal testimony (1997: 38). On the other hand, participants might express a desire to retreat from an unflattering portrait by invoking premature closure, or to project a sense of moral consensus or community solidarity where this is not yet in evidence. At the same time, what constitutes affirmation at a local level may well achieve intervention at broader regional, or even national, levels. In wrestling with the implications of Canadian policies on multiculturalism, for example, affirming participants’ ability to cope at a local level with a status quo that Smaro Kamboureli characterises as “a sedative politics” designed to “manage” ethnic diversity may well be an essential first step towards engendering future collective intervention that challenges essentialised conceptions of the immigrant experience as simply “an obstacle to be overcome” (82, 87). Finally, as Kershaw points out, elements of the “radical” may be found in nostalgic theatre, reminiscence theatre, or even museum theatre (19). The responsibility for ensuring relevance through intervention, however, especially in terms of dramaturgy, narrative structure, and collective authorship, falls heavily into the hands of the director(s), whose

job is to ensure artistic integrity. Salverson cautions that reductive triads of victims, villains, and helpers risk an “eros of injury” that prohibits explorations of complicity (2001: 67). Rachel Van Fossen, in approaching writing for the large-scale collaborative community play, likes to point out that as soon as enough community members are compelled to talk about an issue but tell her “oh but we can’t have that in the play,” she knows she has found a key social thread to be woven.

A relational aesthetic that would reconcile art and social action begins with a fundamental commitment to including community members “in both the creation and dissemination of theatrical work that opens space in public forums for people whose voices often go unheard” (Graham 11). The role of the director in this process is inevitably a form of creative mediation. The need for artistic self-examination and a corresponding re-examination of the primacy of art in this re-

gard is receiving renewed theoretical attention in Canada from the likes of Catherine Graham, Jan Selman, Julie Salverson, and Rachael Van Fossen. In a talk given at the Ontario Arts Council’s 2003 Community Arts Conference, Salverson called for renewed attention to the “art” in community-based work and an end to the notion of artist as mere “facilitator” of the community’s voice. Van Fossen, delivering the keynote address at a Regina symposium on community arts, called for artists to accept full responsibility for their role as co-creators in community-based work and for recognition that artists must also be (or function as) agents of change in themselves.

A Final Context

In late 1997, the Canadian Conference for the Arts released the Arts in Transition Report and Paper — one of several studies that informed the



Canada Council's decision to implement the Artists in Community Collaboration Fund (ACCF). The report was undertaken with funding from the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation and the Department of Canadian Heritage, and was compiled after consultation with federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal cultural departments and arts councils, and close to two hundred Canadian artists and arts professionals. The report concluded that audiences for the performing arts in Canada are either declining or not growing adequately and that there is an urgent need "to integrate the arts more deeply and widely in the broader community" (2, 3). The report warned that "unless the work of an arts organisation is rooted in and meaningful to its community, its survival is precarious" (18). It stressed the need for meaningful participation in art (as distinct from spectatorship alone) and it suggested that arts groups and artists must do more to engage with the increasing cultural diversity of the country (30, my emphasis).

The report further noted that education, training, and funding of artists in Canada continue to emphasise "modernist traditions" that place primary value on the artist as solitary creator — an approach overwhelmingly oriented to the development of artistic skills. As the report points out, this model "has produced and continues to produce many exceptional artists and works of art." At the same time, it found that many younger artists find (the modernist approach) confining, unable to accommodate their desire to work more closely with communities and incorporate social and ecological issues into their art (5, 6).

Conclusion

I believe we are charged with an urgent task to imagine and articulate criteria for artistic excellence that can inform directorial and authorial choices; engage with popular, community-based, and related theatrical expression on its own generic terms; and avoid using the criteria of oranges to assess the accomplishments of apples.

Community-engaged theatre shares with its mainstream counterparts the ability to evoke the communicative power of art: its resonant power of abstraction and its ability to engage contradictory ideological perspectives without imposing resolution or closure. Beyond this, community-engaged theatre is making significant contributions to a vigorous, inclusive continuum of theatrical practice in Canada and abroad. Community-engaged theatre promotes greater access and relevance in theatre arts, it encourages populist participation in art and social dialogue, and, through cultural democracy, it resists proselytising the kinds of socially and culturally specific "missionary positions" which prescribe and limit the role of authors, directors, spectators, participants, or witnesses engaged in the theatrical act.

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