

TWO DECADES OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED THEATRE OR WHY I SEE GHOSTS

by Dale Hamilton

Turning fifty seems as good a time as any to reflect on one's life. Optimistically, fifty years is the half-way point. Realistically it's more like two thirds. A gardener friend of mine, who is also turning fifty, thinks in terms of gardens. She sees her future as maybe twenty or thirty more gardening seasons. That's not a lot of growing time. I see it more in terms of theatre. Maybe a dozen or so more theatre projects. That's not a lot of growing time.

Combine the ever-quickening passage of time with a long-standing obsession to do some good in the world and it can add up to some seriously contemplative moments. "You're staring into space again, mom" is what my son says. "Looks like you're seeing ghosts again, mom" is what my daughter says.

And when I'm staring into space, these are some of the ghosts I see, as I contemplate my passionate, if convoluted, 20-year engagement with community-engaged theatre.

Setting the Scene

But first, I'd like to set the scene (pun unintentional, OK intentional). I'm the founder and artistic director of a very small theatre company that does very big theatre. Based in a village of 300 souls in southwestern Ontario, I've been writing, producing and directing community-engaged theatre for over two decades. I approach playmaking from a community and individual spirit-building perspective, having witnessed the power of theatre to act as a catalyst for community engagement, as well as personal and social development.

This kind of playmaking features a local volunteer steering committee and non-competitive casting, resulting in large casts and crews of volunteers telling their community's story with the guidance of a professional core, minimally playwright, director and designer. The name of my company is Everybody's Theatre Company (ETC), and, as the name implies, everybody who wants a part gets a part.

I'm a sixth generation rural Canadian and, after traveling and living "away" for over 10 years, I returned to buy land in the same valley where my ancestors have lived and farmed since the early 1800s. I also returned (although I didn't know it at the time) to enter the local and provincial political fray and served a three-year term

in the early 1990s as a municipal politician in the pre-amalgamation township of Eramosa. My great grandfather sat on this same council, so in that sense you might think political involvement would come naturally. But as the only woman and the only artist on council, it did not come naturally. I felt like a vegetarian at a cattlemen's convention, a stranger in a strange land, a lateral thinker in a very linear world.

To cut a long story short (or more accurately, a long process short), I became deeply involved in the issue of land use, using theatre successfully as a catalyzing and galvanizing element. In 1990 this took the form of a community-engaged play called "The Spirit of Shivaree: the Eramosa Community Play". This play resulted in a flurry of political, cultural, social and individual transformation which lasted throughout the rest of the decade and the repercussions of which are still being felt. As recently as last week I was taking a theatre colleague on a hike, trespassing on land formerly owned by my family and re-telling the story of the play. As we stood in my dead uncle's field overlooking the Rockwood Conservation Area, it hit home to me that had it not been for the play and its aftermath, we would be standing in the middle of a suburbia like any other suburbia anywhere in North America. Suddenly all of the literal and figurative blood, sweat

and tears seemed worthwhile.

In the 1990 Eramosa project the community spirit engendered by the play process broke the barrier between theatre and politics, with several like-minded cast members running, successfully, for local municipal council and winning a voting majority, having recognized that in order to attain their vision for the future of the township, they would need to move from the theatrical stage onto the political stage. Our first “act “ as politicians was to entirely re-write the township’s Official Plan, paving the way, so to speak, to restrict development on agricultural land outside the village boundary and defending that position, when challenged by a Toronto developer, at the Ontario Municipal Board.

It was, we were told, not your average OMB hearing, featuring a significant number of cast members from the play getting up to speak, subjecting themselves to intense, sometimes border-line abusive, cross-examination by the developer’s Bay Street lawyers. The stakes were high for the developer and his hired hands too, millions of dollars high. During the course of the two-week hearing someone from the community read a poem, there were people in tears, a fist-fight almost erupted in the parking lot, I was accused of being anti-Semitic and xenophobic. In an unprecedented move the board chair allowed us to show video clips from the play process and there was spontaneous applause in the usually staid courtroom atmosphere. William Lyon MacKenzie’s great grandson took time off work to become an official party to the proceedings, challenging the Toronto lawyers with oratorical skills that would have made the “Little Rebel” proud. It was exhilarating and exhausting.

I still remember finding the verdict in the mailbox at the end of my lane and sitting under a sugar maple for what seemed like hours before I could find the wherewithal to open the legal-sized envelope marked “OMB Decision”. It is next to impossible to articulate how land that holds the memories of multiple generations can get in your blood. I recall a moment of perfect lucidity in which I felt my ancestors, especially an

“old maid” great aunt who had devoted her life to the farm, looking over my shoulder as I opened the envelope.

We won, by the way. The OMB rejected the development outright. It was a bittersweet “victory”; the township was almost \$100,000 poorer as the result of legal and professional fees and the developer was over \$400,000 out of pocket which, not surprisingly, fueled his antagonism. In one memorable phone call, he threatened to charge me with trespassing if I ever set foot on the family land again.

I have in fact trespassed many times since the developer’s death several years ago. One of his sons, a lawyer in Toronto, now owns my family’s former farm. The full time farm manager, a local man, says the owners come out maybe twice a year. The son of the developer took a run at a development proposal on the same land shortly after his father’s death. I was very nervous that the community spirit would not arise again; that all we’d been able to do was to delay development. But his proposal didn’t get past the first meeting, with the council chambers overflowing with people voicing their strong opposition.

Perhaps we were successful partially because we didn’t adopt a “no development ever” stance. We simply wanted more say in where the development would be and what it would look like and to ensure that the rate of growth took into account the well-being of the existing community.

Instead of the rural estate houses (known to some as “monster homes” or “commuter castles”) which were proposed for agricultural land outside the boundary of our township’s designated settlement area (Rockwood), we were able to negotiate a more progressively planned development which did not entirely decimate the existing landscape, including a significant ridge and vista. The resulting development features a naturalized storm water retention area, more park space than the bare minimum required by law and mixed-affordability housing stock, the designs for which were based on “vernacular” rural Ontario farmhouses, with front porches and garages tucked at

the back like sheds, instead of dwarfing the house out front. The result is a human streetscape that seems to say: “Here the car is not king”.

In terms of phasing, its 15 years later and the final phase is only now being built. Even though this development doubles the size of Rockwood, villagers have had time to gradually adjust to their new neighbours.

One of my son’s friends lives on one of those new streets and when I drive him home, I see evidence of a viable street life, with people out front on their porches calling across the street to each other, instead of being corralled into isolating backyards. If you ever find yourself driving through the village of Rockwood, on Highway 7 between Guelph and Acton, take a few minutes to turn off the highway into Rocky Ridge, the development I’ve just described, and see how it feels.

There were some happy accidents along the way. For instance, the land we approved for development in the village happened to be owned, for generations, by Ted Jolliffe, one of the founders of the CCF Party (the forerunner of the NDP). He was very picky about who he’d sell to and we ended up, happily, with The Seaton Group - young, innovative developers who were more than willing to try something different.

The stakes were indescribably high for me throughout this process. Not only was my family’s farm the target of the proposed “commuter castle” development but a family member committed suicide in response to the loss of family land. No project since has matched, nor likely will, the intensity of my first brush with the remarkable power of a community that is fully engaged in determining its future. Perhaps partially as a function of my age, I have recently come to accept this and no longer use the Eramosa project as a measuring stick against my subsequent adventures in theatre, politics and community development.

Root Systems and New Growth

The work of Everybody’s Theatre Company

(ETC) is based on the philosophy and methodology of Jon Oram and England’s Colway Theatre Trust (now Claque Theatre) with whom I apprenticed in the late 1980s and with whom I co-produced “The Spirit of Shivaree” in 1990.

It has occurred to me only recently (probably while seeing ghosts) that my approach has, over the years, taken a number of twists from the British model. This is not to say that I have a quarrel with any other model; I simply want to acknowledge my roots and, at the same time, my new growth. I will (I hope) be forgiven the agricultural analogy when I say that the new growth in my work seems less like a single tap root and more like rhizomes, with shoots rising above the surface, fed by a complex root system below.

Active Promenade

Some of this new growth has taken the form of what I’m now calling “active promenade theatre”, with the audience moving significant distances from scene to scene, in full defiance of any line between audience and performers and using landscapes and streetscapes as ready-made backdrops, with nature employed as the brilliant if less than predictable lighting designer.

This has sometimes been referred to, by myself and by others, as a “theatrical hike”. I now prefer “active promenade” as a descriptor because I think the former label diminishes the heightened theatricality that this style of theatre can engender. It’s not simply a relaxing hike with a few vaguely connected vignettes thrown in between the scenery and the trail mix. At its best, active promenade can become an intensely collective experience at the intersection of the cultural, the architectural and the natural worlds.

Active promenade theatre can perhaps best be described in contrast to what I’ve taken to calling “enclosed” promenade theatre, wherein the audience moves minimally within an enclosed space surrounded by several stages; an approach mastered by Jon Oram of Claque Theatre. Active promenade, on the other hand, takes the form of an outdoor guided journey with the story unfold-

ing along the route and amongst the audience, bringing with it the added (but not insurmountable) challenge of maintaining the through line and the audience's attention. To some extent it's about being in the moment – for instance if a noisy flock of Canada geese fly overhead during a scene, this can be seen as an opportunity for improvisation or an enhancement of the overall theatrical/natural experience, rather than an annoyance. It can serve to take theatre off its pedestal, not only obliterating Brecht's third wall but making the performers and the form itself responsive to the here and now.

Doing It Outdoors – A Canadian Thing?

Another factor that distinguishes the work of Everybody's Theatre Company from its British model is the almost irrepressible urge to do it outdoors. Why outdoors? In part I think it's a Canadian thing, although nothing involving human nature can be reduced, generalized and fully explained by social constructs such as man-made borders. However, I do recall both British and American colleagues asking, not unkindly, why I, and several of my Canadian colleagues, keep doing these plays outside. I used to feel the need to justify such apparently irrational behaviour. I saw this inclination to "play outside" as a liability, something from which I needed to wean myself, something to let go of.

But now I see it as an asset, an unconscious stylistic statement of sorts. There's something immensely appealing to me in lacing up hiking shoes to go out (literally out) to the theatre. But granted, this comes from a woman who wore hiking boots with her wedding dress and whose marriage ceremony involved the "performers" and the "audience" hiking through the woods.

Arguably (and I love a good argument) there's one thing the majority of Canadians have in common - a deep appreciation of the outdoors. I use the word "appreciation" rather than love because, as in human relationships, appreciation can embrace the paradox of loving, loathing and

fearing all at the same time. So why, as a multi-generational rural Canadian, should I fight this predisposition towards the outdoors? I've given up the struggle.

In a theatrical context, if this means being limited to late spring, summer and early fall production times, then so be it. Not that winters would or could be spent in hibernation - there's always that little pastime known as fundraising to keep a body company during those long winter nights, curled up in front of a glowing computer screen.

That said, many of us hike, ski, skate and even camp in the wintertime, so outdoor winter theatre is not at all out of the question; as evidenced by Caravan Farm Theatre's popular sleigh ride theatre in the interior snow belt of British Columbia.

What's the worst that can happen in outdoor theatre? Granted, there was the 30-foot papier-mâché puppet that almost melted in the rain (Fort Qu'Appelle, 1992). OK, there was the tail end of Hurricane Fran that whipped up dangerously high winds and torrential rain (Rockwood, 1996). But these are challenges, I'm convinced, that can be overcome with rain dates and when all else fails, indoor rain locations. Hockey arenas will do the trick.

Robert Winslow's 4th Line Theatre, located on his family's farm near Peterborough (Ontario) has been persistently and deliberately avoiding a roof for over a decade and it's part of the appeal, particularly in a rural setting such as 4th Line. Similarly, Murray Schaffer's outdoor productions, as well as Blyth Festival Theatre's outdoor Donnelly series, have certainly proven themselves to be immensely successful over the years.

And what's the best that can happen if a show is rained out? I think we found the answer to that back in 1990 during the run of "The Spirit of Shivarée". One of our 12 performances, mid-run, was rained out at the last minute. The cast had already gathered for warm-ups when we had to call it off. The run was entirely sold out, we'd been getting great local and national media atten-

tion and the cast was flying high. With adrenaline flowing and no show to do, they couldn't just go home and watch TV, so someone suggested we gather in the parish hall and talk about what we might want to do next, after closing night. It was an electric evening, with people jumping to their feet full of ideas for the future, punctuated by thunder and lit by sheet lightning. Out of the creative fervor of that rained-out session emerged the seeds for an active theatre group, a songwriting group, a writers' group and a political "wing" motivated to pursue the issues explored in the script. Out of the "crisis" arose the creative.

In the case of the Fort Qu'Appelle (Saskatchewan) Community Play, director Rachel Van Fossen and the steering committee made the brave (and I think wise) choice to stage their production against the incredible natural backdrop of the Fort Qu'Appelle Valley. It happened to be the rainiest summer on record and about an hour before opening, the heavens opened. I was there, acting as a consultant to the project, and watched the cast and crew pull together to transport the huge show to (where else?) the local hockey arena. And during the performance that same night, I watched performers, in many cases people who had never acted before, helping each other adjust their lines and improvise their blocking with a generosity of spirit all too rare in professional theatre and in life.

The most memorable example of this, on that rainy opening night in Fort Qu'Appelle, was an actor playing the part of a Mountie. Originally he was to have ridden down from the hills into the audience on an actual horse. But, there in the hockey area, rain pounding on the tin roof, he executed a brilliant bit of improv. Grabbing a hockey stick as his steed, he charged into the scene and delivered his lines without missing a beat. At the closing night party, it became clear that the adversity and creative spontaneity of pulling off that opening performance had been a strong factor in the obvious camaraderie, in some cases cross-cultural, that had developed amongst the cast; a silver lining to the cloud, so to speak. It would appear that my bias toward doing it out-

doors runs deep. For instance, when Jon Oram and I collaborated on the Eramosa Community Play in 1990 and the Blyth Community play in '93, I found myself, in both cases, adding (as if there wasn't enough to be done) a theatrical walking tour leading the audience to the venue. The idea of the audience moving through the local landscape/streetscape was just too appealing.

Urban streetscapes hold a similar appeal. It seems to me that there's something inherently valuable in creating an environment in which local residents, who most often drive through their streetscapes at the speed limit or beyond, walk these same routes with groups of their neighbours, encountering local stories and characters, getting to know the people behind the buildings and each other.

This was certainly the case in Kingsdale, a high-density low-income neighbourhood in Kitchener (Ontario) in which I produced an active promenade community-engaged play in 2001 in the context of a crime prevention pilot project. Wilson Ave., which runs through the heart of Kingsdale, had always been just plain old Wilson Ave., with no one asking "who's Wilson?" Research revealed that the street was named after Dr. Wilson, a prominent physician in the last century. Audience members got to "meet" Dr. Wilson under a Wilson Ave. street sign, the role being played by a young man with aspirations of becoming a medical doctor. People have told me that they still think of Dr. Wilson almost every time they drive the street named in his honour. This is only one example of how active promenade theatre can alter people's perceptions of their community.

Echo Casting: Authentic Passion

ETC has developed an approach to community engagement that I'm now calling "echo casting". This means, whenever possible, that descendants of local historical characters are cast in the role of their ancestors. Perhaps the most dramatic example is from "The Spirit of Shivarée" in 1990, wherein we cast Richard Lay, a direct descendant

of Farmers' Revolt leader William Lyon Mackenzie, in the role of his infamous ancestor. But this was a stroke of luck in that Richard lived in the community; and, as our society in general becomes more mobile, such casting becomes a rarity.

However, echo casting is more than ancestral; it also encompasses casting that attempts to match the actor with the role in order to maximize the resonance of the performance for both the performer and the audience. An example would be casting a contemporary school teacher in the role of a 19th century school teacher; or, in the converse, casting a woman in a position of powerlessness in her real life in the role of a mayor or commander of an army. A more direct form of echo casting can be drawn from ETC's "All Over The Map" in 1998, which cast actual members of the Women's Institute, our community partners in the project, as Women's Institute members in the play.

I would make the case that there is a ring of authenticity to such "echo" performances that is difficult for even the most seasoned professional actor to match. That is not to belittle professional actors (some of my best friends are actors, really). Their performance would almost certainly be more skilled, more polished, but it would have a hard time matching an echo-cast character in terms of authentic passion, as compared to performed passion.

Community Soundings

I don't want to leave the impression, in the case of the Eramosa project, that the activities and activism that arose from the play simply fell into place. There were many talented people who essentially mounted a campaign of community organizing that impresses me to this day. And when I say "talented" in this context I'm not referring to theatrical talent – I mean the farmers, soil scientists, architecture students, hydro-geologists and rural planning pros from the nearby University of Guelph; all of whom gave us both their time and their expertise.

In Eramosa we utilized "Community Soundings", a public consultation process developed by the Rural Learning Association (RLA), the roots of which date back to the New Canada Movement of the 1930s and before that, Danish Folk School traditions. A key architect of the Sounding process was the late Alex Sim, a rural sociologist and author of the classic study of suburbia, *Crestwood Heights*.

The word "sounding" is nautical in origin, the analogy being that if depth soundings are taken in a community, then submerged obstacles can be avoided. This community consultation process, which ran parallel to the play process in Eramosa, involves a facilitator from outside the community asking a series of deceptively simple questions about what people think and feel about their community. Over the years I've added a question, inspired by celebrated Canadian author Alistair MacLeod. When students ask him what they should write about, he answers: "Write about what worries you." Likewise, in a sounding, I find it useful to ask people what worries them, what keeps them awake at night.

A Community Sounding can involve dozens, even hundreds, of people meeting in a single full-day session or a series of shorter sessions. A sounding can also take the form of a "kitchen table" session, with a handful of neighbours gathered in a private home. In Eramosa we did both. We began with a large Sounding in the town hall and then branched out into smaller Soundings in people's homes. The result was a process of public participation that scratched well below the surface. The tangible results were a series of public education sessions on development-related issues and a collaboratively written document called *The Eramosa Green Paper*, described by professional planners as "a model for public participation and innovative approaches to rural land use". Many of its recommendations were eventually incorporated into the township's approved Official Plan, although, it's worth noting, not before the previous council was voted out of office. I reread *The Green Paper* recently, and it does in fact withstand the test of time.

The “Community Soundings” process has since been picked up and adapted by Claque Theatre with whom I apprenticed so many years ago. I like that – my working relationship with my mentor now feels to me like a two way street, with the flow of ideas going both ways.

Story Gathering & Drama Searches

As part of a collaborative script development process, ETC hosts what we call “Story Gathering Sessions”; in part to attract those who might have a strong aversion to anything smacking of big P politics or even anything that looks like a meeting. I learned the hard way to make these sessions very informal, ideally around a campfire or fireplace and not to call them research sessions. When I promoted these same sessions as “research”, I was the only one who showed up. When I made them a fun thing with hot chocolate and marshmallows around a fire, I got great turnouts and ended up with more material than I could possibly use.

The next step is to take the raw material (ie: local history, myths and rumours) and infuse it into a series of improvisation sessions open to the public; Drama Searches, as Jon Oram calls them. This requires acrobatic-strength flexibility on the part of the playwright, but is certainly worth it, increasing as it does the sense of ownership and buy-in on the part of the community.

The same can be said for the song-writing component of a community-engaged play, as demonstrated by musician and composer James Gordon who has developed a process whereby, with his guidance, non-musicians collectively create a song in one or two workshop sessions.

Community Imaginings

Building on RLA’s Community Sounding process is a component I now call “Community Imaginings”. It first came to light in the Kingsdale project, during which I hired Ruth Howard (now AD of Jumbles Theatre) to do some design workshops in the community. Because the story line

of the script hinged upon the streetscape of the neighbourhood, we had workshop participants create a 3D model of their streets. It was a wild session, with young children working alongside teenagers and adults to build a basic model of their neighbourhood and then to add elements of what they’d like to see. Since that time I’ve used it successfully not only as a fun, tactile, participatory community engagement tool, but also as a multi-generational script development opportunity. For one thing, mucking around with play dough, dinky toys, etc is a great way to draw in very young children and get a sense of how they feel about their community.

Community Spirit

The process outlined above has, without exception, led to a tangible enhancement of community spirit. I’m fond of saying that if you can raise community spirit, almost anything is possible; community spirit being the most basic (and the most frequently neglected) building block in creating a healthy community. That is not to say that community-engaged theatre projects work miracles; that conflicts and alienation evaporate on opening night. But what these projects can do is build on the creativity inherent in conflict, recognizing that, given human nature, conflict within a community is inevitable and can actually be a symptom of good health and vitality; a sign that the community is not brain-dead and cares enough to argue, to engage itself in its own future.

A Creative Hybrid

Maybe some of the time I’ve spent staring into space is starting to pay off; because it now seems clear to me that what’s required to propel the community engaged theatre “movement” forward is the creation of a hybrid model, taking the sometimes painful lessons learned over the past two decades and transforming them into new growth.

After my most recent community-en-

gaged project produced in Guelph (Ontario), I knew I had to do things differently next time (that is, after I got over the phase when I vowed never to do it again). But Guelph was different; during the course of that particularly tumultuous project, I experienced a deep sense of frustration, bordering on despair, with the community-engaged theatre process in which I've been engaged. This is when I started thinking hybridization.

So what, ideally, would this hybrid look like? Something simultaneously beautiful and functional; something inspired and inspiring; something capable of transforming itself and inspiring transformation in others; something complex and adaptable and yet hardy enough to withstand the elements, no matter which way the political and funding winds might blow.

But what would this hybrid actually look like, on the ground? I will attempt to sketch the characteristics of the community-engaged theatre hybrid I'm imagining, recognizing that its fundamentally organic nature will insist that it continue to grow and change.

1) Inclusivity and the Epic Burnout Factor

Granted, when you say "anybody who wants a part gets a part" then, of necessity, you must arise to the inevitable challenges and consequences inherent in such a bold (insane?) statement. An inclusive theatre project inevitably becomes an epic undertaking and along with it comes the challenge of finding "epic" funding. Otherwise, the result is too little time and too small a professional team, accompanied by the inevitable burnout. This was certainly the case in Guelph.

A question that has consumed me at times since the Guelph project is how we can reduce burnout for the professional team. If this problem is not addressed, the community-engaged theatre "field" is in danger of losing theatre professionals, particularly senior artists, who grow weary of spreading themselves too thin. Team burnout also has an impact on the quality of the experience we are able to offer the community participants.

I couldn't resist attending a conference in

Toronto called The Healthy Arts Manager in the spring of 2005, partially because the irony of the title made me laugh out loud. People flocked to this conference, looking for ways to end (or at least curb) their stress as arts managers. A telling moment for me was when a conference delegate told me how, over the course of her eclectic career, she'd worked both as a suicide crisis worker and a technician responsible for monitoring heavy water at the Pickering Nuclear Power Plant. She then took a job managing an arts organization and found the latter to be more stressful than the other two jobs combined. There is definitely something wrong with this picture.

I have temporarily suspended the operation of ETC because, after the Guelph play, I could not imagine taking on another epic project such as this without more financial support. I believe that we tapped every available source for funding, (federal, provincial, municipal and foundations), in addition to fundraising events. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of work (even with incredible in-kind volunteer labour) still left the professional team with too much work to complete in too little time.

It always seems too simplistic to say, "more money would fix it", but more money would in fact go a long way towards fixing it. For instance, the majority of the stress experienced by the professional team in Guelph could have been greatly reduced if we'd simply had the wherewithal to buy ourselves more time and resources.

But there are other pieces to the burnout puzzle that don't have to do with money. For instance, how can the professional team support each other better? How can we avoid factions and conflict and deal more effectively with people's need to vent? I'm convinced that we need to create more opportunities for "community spirit" building within the professional core. The case could be made (and has been made) that a busy rehearsal simply schedule doesn't permit this "luxury", but I feel strongly that the benefits of re-examining the project mid-stream to check in with each other in a respectful way is time well spent.

We have always held weekly team meetings, but they are inevitably jam-packed with logistical details related to getting the show on its feet by opening night. By way of contrast, after the play closed in Guelph, I had a face-to-face evaluation/debriefing session with the choreographer and she spoke eloquently about her experience in the project. I wish we'd made time for sessions like that as part of our process, rather than leaving them until after the fact. A crucial characteristic of my new hybrid would be a planned program of Participatory Evaluation to be infused into the process from the beginning, for both the professional team and the community participants. This is dealt with in more detail under point # 9 below.

And what about the inclusivity wildcard? I've come to believe that there are different ways to involve everybody without necessarily throwing the casting doors wide open, although I'm still convinced that open casting is the best option, given there's the time, budget and spirit to make it happen. Here are two options I've identified that stop short of full-fledged inclusivity but still engage anyone who wants to be engaged.

2) The Community "Comora"

The word "comora" is one I've concocted so it begs some explanation. It's inspired by an Irish Gaelic word that means "celebration" but is also used in Gaelic phrases meaning "to convene in an extraordinary way" and "to act in a disorderly manner at a lawful public meeting such as an election."

I'm imagining a Community Comora to be a totally all-inclusive, come-one-come-all theatrical experience; a combination pageant, carnival and parade, but an active parade, with both the performers and the audience on the move and mixing it up - orchestrated creative chaos, so to speak. And all this followed by a feast, party and dance. Such an event would, obviously, fall under the general category of active promenade theatre, the distinction being that it would act as an extended prologue to what I'm calling a Compact Community Play - a more contained and

closely scripted full-length theatrical production (that could itself take the form of active promenade) and that could run for several weeks. The Comora, on the other hand, might run only one or two weekends.

The compact version would be based on the same community stories as foreshadowed by the Comora, but would be fundamentally different, featuring a much smaller cast, some professional, some not, but clearly people who are able to make the time commitment because they're being paid or because they don't need or want to be paid.

The combination of a Comora and a Compact Community Play could work particularly well in the context of an established theatre company wanting to do a community-engaged project within their regular theatre season and therefore requiring a run of four weeks or more to make box office numbers work. Asking community volunteers to perform almost nightly for a month or more is simply not realistic.

I see two prime purposes for a Comora. First of all, it would act as an effective community engagement and inclusivity tool; ensuring that everybody, even those with little time to spare, or with little or no familiarity with the culture or the language, can become as involved as they are willing or able, without burning themselves out by devoting hundreds of hours to the rehearsal and performance process.

The second purpose would be to present a dramatically linked chronology of the community's history, providing a springboard for the smaller more tightly scripted version. It would also provide a sweeping overview, a teaser for the Compact Community Play to come; the playwright's task being to expand key scenes from the Compact version in order to involve everybody who wants a part in the Comora. This would require a particular "breed" of playwright and it seems to me that it would not necessarily need to be the same playwright who writes the Comora as writes the Compact Community Play intended for the longer run, in the same way that plays or novels are adapted for film by screenplay

writers.

It also occurred to me after the fact that the notion of a Comora bears some resemblance to the work of England's Welfare State, Toronto Island's Shadowland and to Clay & Paper Theatre's "Night of Dread" Halloween parades in the Dufferin Grove neighbourhood of Toronto's west end. The difference I see is that in the case of a Comora, community volunteers would not simply carry a banner or manipulate a puppet. A Community Comora, in the way I'm imagining it, would be not only visual but also strongly narrative and would therefore play a pivotal role in the collective telling of the community's story, whetting the community's appetite for the play to come.

3) Multiple Casting

Another streamlined approach to inclusivity involves a smaller script, calling for fewer characters, but with multiple people cast as the same character. In this way, the process can involve as many people as turn up for casting, but in a less than epic context. Multiple casting brings its own set of particular challenges and benefits, as we discovered in ETC's 1998 active promenade project called "All Over The Map", in which the audience was bused through two townships about to be amalgamated. I'm not sure the director of that production would agree that it's a sane approach to casting, given our time and budgetary restrictions, but it did make for some very creative rehearsals in which 4 people playing the same character were rehearsed at the same time; the result being "teams" of characters who supported each other in a more collaborative approach to character exploration.

4) The Volunteer Factor

I doubt anyone would argue that North Americans have less time for voluntarism now than they did 20 years ago. An imagined hybrid must somehow adapt to this reality or face extinction. Granted, some volunteers are able and willing to go "above and beyond", but we must create a volunteer-friendly process that does not overtax

those giving us their precious time. Even though volunteers often tell me (usually on anonymous evaluation forms) that too much has been asked of them, they always preface it by saying that they also got a lot out of the experience. Nevertheless, I want to ensure that volunteers don't leave the process feeling burned out, or in a worst-case scenario, abused; and that project budgets reflect the true dollar value of volunteer support.

An obvious response is to hire sufficient staff to adequately support volunteers in their efforts, recognizing that some volunteers are more labour intensive than others. By way of example, in a "memorable" moment in a past project, I had three key volunteers back out at the last minute, in all cases due to family or professional crises. And there simply was no money in the budget to hire additional staff to fill these holes, resulting in a scramble to bring new volunteers on board, or in some cases, do twenty hour days myself in order to meet deadlines. Given the unpredictability of volunteers' lives, it is now abundantly clear to me that any hybrid model must include an "understudy" for each key volunteer position, whether on stage or back stage.

My hybrid would also insist on contracts, not just with paid professionals, but also with every volunteer. It was a valuable (if painful) lesson for me as a producer that verbal agreements are fertile ground for small or massive misunderstandings, even when the task at hand seems clearly defined. In one case I was accused of asking too much, and in another, that I had taken back too much responsibility. Such contracts ("pacts" I call them sometimes, to keep it less formal) can go a long way in ensuring that everybody finds meaningful roles that validate their efforts, while at the same time maintaining some quality control and moving ahead in the face of the deadlines that are simply the nature of the theatrical beast.

And finally, in response to feedback on evaluation forms over ETC's past two productions, future projects must pay more attention to more fully integrating the backstage crew and musicians, ensuring that they become part of the "community spirit" experienced by cast mem-

bers.

5) The Poverty and Marginality Factors

It troubles me deeply (and I'm not alone) that community-engaged theatre processes can sometimes make entry difficult for those living below the poverty line or those on the margins of mainstream culture. This is a serious concern that the new imagined hybrid must rectify if it's to remain viable.

One significant barrier is time commitment. I know from personal experience that the rehearsal and production commitment required of volunteers is, for instance, almost impossible for single mothers living in poverty. I say almost impossible because it can be done and it has been done, although not without the strength of super woman. We simply must make it more possible for the most vulnerable, the most harried, the most marginalized to enter into our community-engaged creative process, without superhuman powers being required.

I like to think that adding a "comora" component, as described in the section above, could be part of a solution, as could multiple casting. Another option is incorporating video into the live production as a way to lessen the time commitment required. Participants can come and be videotaped in a matter of hours and then this footage incorporated into the live show, as we did in the Guelph project. The downside is that the people in the video sequences don't get the same sense of connection and community as the "live" cast. It is, nevertheless, an entry point to possible future projects in the same community.

Another more labour intensive approach would be to undertake smaller scale play projects with specific marginalized communities within larger communities and then integrate those participants into a larger inclusive project. This, of course, requires more time and therefore more money.

6) Engaging the Unlike-Minded

I can foresee the imagined hybrid wilting and

fading if it cannot find a way to engage (even if only through attending as an audience member) the people with whom we do not always share a worldview.

In Guelph, at the suggestion of the director, we steered clear of direct references to the hot issue of big box stores coming to town, choosing instead to reflect some of the same emotions inherent in such an issue in historical and futuristic contexts. The line of thinking that convinced me to take this approach was that if we were "in their face" with contemporary issues, we'd never engage the unlike-minded.

But even with this more subtle approach, we were, unfortunately, unable to significantly engage the present mayor of Guelph and her like-minded councilors (elected on a pro-big-box-business platform), even though the director, Jon Oram, and I met with the mayor personally and invited her participation, at least as an audience member. Four anti-big-box city councilors did attend the play and sent emails to their fellow councilors who were on the other side of the issue, encouraging them to attend. But they did not.

Seeing as these politicians were unwilling to attend anyway, perhaps due in part to the fact that some cast and professional core members were known anti-big-box crusaders, we might just as well have launched into a more direct portrayal of contemporary events, not replacing, but alongside historical or futuristic components. As a result of the Guelph project, I have strengthened my conviction that, as long as both sides of a debate are presented fairly, contemporary scenes can have the most direct and solid impact on a community. This certainly was the case in the Eramosa project.

I'm willing to bet that contemporary public figures, when they discover that some reasonable facsimile of themselves is to be portrayed in the play, will come to see it, if only to find out in what light they're being cast, or if they have grounds to sue for libel. Public figures almost always care about how they will be viewed by history and sometimes make decisions that, on the

surface, appear to be out of character for them, if they believe it will enhance their “legacy”.

As long as public figures and issues are portrayed fairly, the unlike-minded should be able to be engaged without being offended. And one would hope that the play might even be food for thought for them, consciously or subconsciously. I now believe that if we do not face contemporary issues in a direct way then we are only dancing around them and doing, if not a disservice, than an under-service to the community.

7) Crisis & Choice

Early on in the community-engaged theatre movement, it seemed prudent not to propose a pre-conceived project to a community, but rather to wait until invited into a community. But the pattern that arose was that communities that had the wherewithal to initiate a project were the least likely to “need” a project. The projects tended to be spear-headed by middle class amateur theatre enthusiasts looking for some fun. There’s nothing wrong with that, but if the community development and social justice goals of community-engaged theatre are to be realized, a different tack must be taken.

It’s been said that community-engaged theatre works best in communities undergoing some form of crisis and my experience has dictated that this is often the case. One doesn’t have to look far to find a community in crisis, but as Jon Oram pointed out in a talk given at a conference in New York in October/05, if one is not invited but rather pinpoints a community and makes the initial approach, then one must move slowly in order to build trusting relationships before the rest of the process can even begin. And, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, this takes longer and therefore requires more resources.

8) The Dispersal Phase

Some readers will date themselves by recalling that old Peggy Lee song, the refrain of which goes: “Is that all there is? Is that all there is, my friend?” I found myself singing that refrain fre-

quently since the closing night of the Guelph play in November/04. Looking back over the Guelph project, I believe we did meet many of our objectives: the project was certainly collaborative and all-inclusive and achieved many of its community development and personal growth goals. And according to our participant survey, the vast majority of the cast found the experience to have been valuable to them personally, as well as to their city.

My frustration with the Guelph project was with how it exemplified the lack of a coordinated “dispersal phase”, a term coined by Dr. Edward Little. I’ve never wanted to be part of the “circus” that leaves town, but, in Guelph, I was. I take responsibility for not being able to make the case to funders that the dispersal phase is essential and that a person I would describe as a community development artist, preferably someone local or with strong ties to the community, should be left on the ground and paid part time for at least 6 months to assist the community in making the community-engaged play “a beginning, not an end,” as Jon Oram tells the cast on closing night. Or, as Ted Little puts it: “to blur the lines between beginnings and ending”.

As Savannah Walling of Vancouver Theatre has documented, a lack of guided dispersal can border on irresponsibility, particularly in troubled communities. My experience has proved that leaving dispersal entirely in the hands of the community is rarely fruitful. There is most commonly a burst of planning and a few activities but then it dies off entirely or slows to a trickle as people get reabsorbed into their busy lives.

This is not to say that leadership for dispersal must come from outside the community; one or several leaders from within the community (and with proven community development skills) need to be identified and need to be paid a living wage in order to facilitate dispersal. The end of the play can in fact be a beginning, and there are always moving testimonials about individual growth, but the collective action needs focused attention that volunteers are rarely able to offer in our fast-forward society.

I'm not generally in the habit of issuing ultimatums - and it really isn't an ultimatum so much as a statement of fact - that I will not undertake another community-engaged project without sufficient money for a dispersal phase.

9) Participatory Evaluation

In retrospect, it is abundantly clear to me how crucial it is to get agreement at the beginning from the entire professional team to undertake a process of participatory evaluation throughout the project. When the quality of the process behind the scenes deteriorates, even in the midst of a hectic rehearsal schedule, time simply needs to be taken to evaluate "on the run" and adjust course accordingly.

Such evaluations, for both the cast and the professional core, are most useful when undertaken in the spirit of curiosity rather than criticism, attempting to build on each other's thoughts, by responding, in the language of Social Therapy, in a "yes and" frame of mind. This kind of framework can serve to minimize blame and defensiveness and asks instead "if I were that person, and given the circumstances, what would I do differently?"

Post-project evaluations are hard to pull off, as people move on to their next preoccupation and, are of course, only useful in future projects, rather than the one at hand.

10) Funding As Fertilizer

At the risk of taking the rural analogy too far, I'm seeing funding as the fertilizer in this little hybridization experiment.

It always seems simplistic to say that all challenges could be eliminated by a bigger budget, but it would certainly go a long way in terms of easing the pressure that projects, particularly all-inclusive projects, place on the professional team and the community.

I've tapped every government and foundation source that I know, but it simply amounts to not enough to do justice to inclusive projects. Inclusivity comes with a big price tag and I'd rather cease operation than entirely abandon it.

Turning people away is simply the antithesis of what I believe community-engaged theatre is all about.

It now seems clear to me that we need a new category of funding for inclusive large-scale community-engaged projects by established artists, including both gathering and dispersal phases. Large-scale inclusive work simply does not fit well into existing funding categories. For example, for a project that shall remain nameless, we requested \$10,000 from one funding body and were awarded \$7,000. Likewise, we requested \$17,000 from another funding body and received \$12,000. Grants such as this, offering less than is required, entice the applicants to accept the money, knowing that it's not enough but, because of their commitment to their work and to the community, they accept it and then they pay the price. I cannot stress enough that under-funded projects take a serious human toll. Overworked professionals cannot help but deliver a diminished quality of experience for the community volunteers, not to mention compromising the integrity of the art.

I've sat on several arts council juries over the years and I know how it can happen- at the last minute the jury ends up cutting everybody back so they can spread the money around more. I've done it myself as a juror. But now I see that there are clearly two categories required; the first being emerging or established artists undertaking relatively small focused projects within a defined community of common interest (for instance, the residents of a women's shelter). Secondly there are the epic undertakings that open the casting doors wide open in a geographic community and are most often proposed by artists experienced in full-scale community-engaged inclusive projects. In terms of annual operating funding, I'm told by colleagues that this is not necessarily a solution in itself because it turns out to be less than can be raised on a project-to-project basis.

Almost two decades ago I and others started the long process of convincing arts funding bodies to recognize the value of collaborative community arts. The next task, as I see it, is to

make the case that we need to sustain the community arts movement rather than scattering inadequate seed funding to more and more projects. This is not to say that new projects should not be funded, but I think a balance has to be struck. I call it Pilot Project Spectrum Disorder (PPSD), characterized by the irresistible urge to keep funding more and more new work with little regard for what's required to sustain models which have proven their worth over time (recognizing that these "models" themselves are not stagnant).

In addition to encouraging arts councils to adjust their funding categories, I'm also very interested in encouraging established high-profile theatre companies to produce community-engaged projects (including Community Comoras) as part of their season and, if that's what it takes, to see it through the lens of audience development.

Staring Into The Future

Staring into space contemplating the past can be useful; the danger being that you get stuck there. My therapist (if I could afford one) would, I imagine, be happy to know that in recent days (and nights) I've begun to contemplate and actively plan the future and how to put this imagined hybrid to use. What follows are a couple of ideas about how to fill the final few decades of my life.

1) 4th Line Theatre and the Parallel Universe

I've very recently been invited to co-write a community-engaged project with 4th Line Theatre near the village of Millbrook (near Peterborough, Ontario), including a series of Community Soundings, Drama Searches and Community Imaginings, culminating in a production as part of their 2008 season. Artistic Director Robert Winslow has secured a Laidlaw Foundation grant for the research and script development phase. I've already given a presentation at a public meeting in Millbrook and am extremely impressed with the theatrical and political momentum that

is being built.

I'm excited about this project for a number of reasons. For one thing, 4th Line Theatre and the surrounding community appear to be running in a parallel universe to Eramosa Township, facing many of the same issues we faced in the early 1990s. Millbrook is just the other side of the Greater Toronto Area Greenbelt and just slightly off the edge of the Oak Ridges Moraine, leaving it a target for major suburban development.

These are tumultuous times for these townships and 4th Line is ideally positioned to make a real difference in terms of encouraging community input into decisions that could irrevocably reshape the countryside. They definitely "qualify" as a community in crisis and are ripe, I believe, for a community-engaged project.

When I visit 4th Line, I experience an almost constant stream of déjà vu and am left with a sense that the lessons learned over the past 25 years are going to come in very handy in this new project.

I'm also excited about using certain elements of the imagined hybrid in the 4th Line project, including the possibility of a Comora; a test run of sorts for this approach to community engaged projects within a conventional theatre season.

2) Everything Under One Sky

Most people, especially those working in community development and related fields, are aware of phrases like "one-stop shopping for services" or "everything under one roof". In this case, I'm using a more outdoor and less consumer-based phrase and am proposing something quite different called "Everything Under One Sky" or more simply "One Sky".

"One Sky" would bring small groups of urban young people, willingly, to my 16 acres situated an hour outside of Toronto and would create a natural and social environment in which they can first of all experience civic DIS-engagement and then civic RE-engagement because I feel strongly that we all, by nature, crave both.

“One Sky” would serve “complex needs” youth. I’ve deliberately chosen the phrase “complex needs” over the plethora of other available adjectives (at-risk, street-involved, cross-over kids, etc.) in that I think it’s a relatively accurate descriptor of that complicated, convoluted, confusing time known as the teenage years.

A significant difference between what I’m proposing and other multi-service programs is that “One Sky” would involve taking the young people, willingly, out of their context and having them enter a deliberate dis-engagement phase and then to re-engage them in an intergenerational context, including young children, older youth mentors, adults and “elders”.

In examining what makes for a healthy community, diversity seems to be a key. This is one reason I’m proposing intergenerational regeneration. I fully realize that I’m doing so at a time when youth led initiatives are becoming popular. My experience, to date, with youth driven initiatives is that they can go off track unless those with hands-on experience (so almost inevitably older) offer the required support and direction. This is why I’m proposing that in the case of “One Sky”, youth and adults collaborate on program design and delivery, avoiding an over-idealization and generalization of the capacities of both youth and adults.

This focus on young people is not new for me, having undertaken several HRSDC Youth Service Canada projects in Kitchener with complex needs kids.

And it’s also not new to me because of my own complex-needs teenage years in the late 1960s and early 70s, which featured hanging out in the smoking area in high school and trying any drug that came along; that is, until a theatre “intervention” took me from the smoking area to the drama room. Theatre wasn’t a magic bullet, but it always seemed to be there when I needed it. When I ended up as a mental institution patient, writing my first play was the most effective therapy. And, in a period of my life I don’t ordinarily include on my résumé, I ended up selling jewelry on the streets of Gastown in

Vancouver by day and waiting tables at a jazz and blues club by night. I was doing so much cocaine that I didn’t really need a place to live because I didn’t really need to sleep.

During that time of my life, again, it was theatre (writing plays) that was my lifeline and I moved to a Gulf Island to write and do natural drugs (specifically psilocybin), as compared to synthetic street drugs; a move which, in retrospect, certainly turned my life around and quite possibly even saved my life. I suppose this was my self-imposed, self-designed disengagement phase and probably accounts, in part, for my conviction that “One Sky” will work, fully acknowledging that nothing works for everybody.

Creative Dis-engagement

I imagine the One Sky program guiding young people on a journey that begins with time alone in the woods with a journal, a sketchpad or a digital camera, where they can experience creative dis-engagement from society. Call it a postmodern vision quest, if you will, although I certainly don’t see it as a spiritual experience involving a miraculous message from an external deity, but rather a self-reflective process. I would liken it to Jane Jacobs’ analysis of a healthy community as containing the opportunity for “anonymity” (civic disengagement) and “familiarity” (civic engagement).

Six Point Re-engagement

The next step would be to re-engage these same participants in a collective intergenerational process of regeneration. I’ve attempted to organize the proposed process into six categories, recognizing that overlap is inevitable.

1. Re-engagement Through Creativity/Performance: This would involve the youth working and playing together to stage an original piece of active promenade outdoor theatre. All I know is that it might involve canoes and circus. The details of the production are all speculation at this

point because I want to build it with the young people collaborating with senior theatre and circus artists to create and perform their stories and songs, using Community Soundings, Drama Searches and Community Imaginings as part of the process.

2. Re-engagement Through Group Reflection: Structurally, One Sky would include what I'm calling Inside Out Sessions, which worked well in all the Youth Service Canada projects I've coordinated over the years. Basically these sessions look like daily group check-ins and serve not only the goals of participatory evaluation, but also ask the group to engage in collective reflection in four realms, some of which, coincidentally, bear some resemblance to Native Medicine Wheel teachings. These quadrants are: the physical realm, the emotional realm, the intellectual realm and the spiritual realm. This structure is offered to the young people as a guide, to be used only if and when it seems useful and recognizing that all of these realms can and often do bleed into each other. My experience is that this bit of structure (again, emphasizing that it's optional) has proven useful to many young people, offering a few guideposts along the sometimes rocky road of talking about how they're feeling.

Other components of Inside Out Sessions include: 1) developing a "pact" or code of conduct together; 2) finding your personal song through collaborative song writing; and 3) an exercise called "Life Spirals" in which the participants are asked to plot their life story, past, present and future, on a spiral, using words and/or drawings, as well as identifying their life goals and passions as points around the spiral.

Inside Out Sessions are an area in which I'd like to explore the possibility of utilizing Social Therapy, an approach outlined in the accompanying articles by Dan Friedman of Castillo Theatre and Esther Farmer of the East Side Institute.

3. Re-engagement Through Feasts: At a recent conference attended by a group of complex needs

youth, they were amazed at the concept of eating regular meals together, as was the case during the course of the conference. They reported that they almost never sat down together at home and ate as a family. One Sky would reintroduce not only the habit of eating together, but also of feasting, requiring the young people to work together, with adult guidance, to cook a communal meal for themselves and families in the community.

4. Re-engagement Through Employment Training: This would be achieved through HRSDC's Skills Link program, which provides professional job preparedness training, opportunities for job placements and a stipend for the youth. One Sky would also offer hands-on life skills training, although it wouldn't be identified as such to the young people: it would just be doing what needs to be done (cooking, shopping, cleaning, etc) in order to live together communally for several months.

5. Re-engagement Through Politics: This component would attempt to defy the lines between the "audience" (the electorate) and the "performers" (the elected officials). It would also challenge the concept that a line even exists between the personal and the political, between performance and politics. This would involve the young people attending political meetings, interviewing politicians and publishing articles and photos in local newspapers. I believe that this would be the most productive at the local (municipal) level because, at least in Canada, these elections are non-partisan and elected officials can "perform" as themselves rather than being handed a "script" by a political party. This would be an attempt to impact the sense of alienation felt by many young people towards politicians.

6. Re-engagement Through Giving: The essence of this component is to re-engage the youth into society through voluntary giving. This is based on the premise that having a job is important but that we shouldn't allow capitalism to fool us into believing that making money and con-

suming goods is enough. It's based on the notion that most people, given the opportunity, will give back to society. One Sky would achieve this through random acts of kindness aimed primarily at young children and seniors in need.

"Conclusion"

At the risk of being accused of postmodern rhetoric, my conclusion is that there is really no conclusion. This is borne of a sincere conviction

that community engaged theatre really is an ongoing process and therefore cut and dried conclusions are tricky at best. However, I do believe that through the process of imagining and articulating a new creative hybrid for community-engaged theatre, I've been able to re-ignite my passion for what I consider my life's work and I invite my colleagues to challenge me, disagree with me and perhaps even join me in the next stage of the escapade.



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Dale has been writing, producing and directing theatre for over 25 years and has been instrumental in the "Collaborative Community Theatre" movement in Canada, following an apprenticeship in the late 1980's with England's Colway Theatre Trust (now Claque Theatre). Dale approaches playmaking from a community and individual spirit-building perspective, having witnessed the power of theatre as a catalyst for community enhancement and personal growth. Her process features non-competitive casting, resulting in large casts of volunteers collectively telling their community's story. Another hallmark of her work is the use of promenade outdoor theatre, with the audience moving from scene to scene, defying the line between audience and performers and using landscapes and streetscapes as ready-made backdrops, with nature "employed" as the technical director.