

Festival de théâtre de rue de Shawinigan Shawinigan, Quebec

The City as Material and Occasion: A Reflection on Street Theatre

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On a weekend in the summer of 2004, the *Festival de théâtre de rue de Shawinigan* transformed the downtown of Shawinigan into an enormous, rowdy stage for the eighth year in a row. While counting on the familiarity that the Festival had established for its public with street theatre, this edition confirmed the direction sketched out last year by its multidisciplinary programming: in addition to companies and actors, visual artists, performers, musicians and sound artists took over the town. Because the event seems to be taking on a life of its own and extending beyond the disciplinary framework, this is a good occasion to reflect on the image the festival gives us of the practice of street theatre.

We could also get carried away by the metaphors that the very name evokes. Let's start by observing that street theatre already lends itself to celebration by its very locale, which is festive in principle: by taking place in the public avenue, it is imbued with the animation inherent in the city, which gives it both a public impact and an added resonance, a ready-made stage and set, a living material.

At its simplest, street theatre is movement, animation, shifts and displacements in the everyday where it arises. Whether it establishes the boards of a stage (the superimposed containers of *Dieu seul me voit* by the collective Trio Vert, the *Citoyen sous observation* by Théâtre de la pire espèce, or the intimate tent of Théâtre de la tête de pioche), or blends into the circulation (the magical *Taxi-Habitation*, by Béninois Dominique Zinkpè, which travels in the downtown by carrying and bringing together crafts from one point to another), whether it takes place on the storefronts of the streets (les Piétons, Didier Lucien) or the backyards of lanes (le Théâtre des deux Maries, Mobile Home or Sara Hanley), blends into the crowd (all of the mobile presentations like the Nomadurbains, Princesses Peluches, Anne Marie Ouellet, les Marionnettes du bout du monde or *Tout le monde* by Eugène Théâtre), whether it uses unexpected apparitions or is staged like a show with a set time, street theatre always has an aspect of celebration to the extent that it transforms the familiar or ordinary context (even when it undertakes to stage a scene from the most banal incidents of everyday life, like *Couple* by Julie Béchar and Stephan Pelletier).

In the expression 'street theatre' we can also hear the ambulatory nature of the practice: theatre off the stage that takes place in the public domain, using the ingenuity of the nomad to adapt to the site and take advantage of the circumstances where it takes place. Able to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the context and characterized by the resulting economy of means, it is a sort of second-hand theatre. There is a carnival dimension that can explain its similarity to street performance – public amusers, strolling musicians, jugglers or clowns – which, less

present in recent editions, remains nonetheless an integral part of the event and the poetics of companies (in *Les urbanologues associés* by the Piétons, for example, there is all the comical eloquence of the mime and clowns)¹. This carny spirit, which lends itself to the recreation of bodies and spirits, is also found in the improvised game of skill by artist Christopher Varady-Szabo, who invites passers-by to throw mud balls at a wall of straw (with no other prize than the pleasure of doing it) or the badminton terrain cobbled together by Bob Wagner in such a way that he interpreted the striking rackets into sounds for the amusement of spectators and players.

The street is also a collective space; creating street theatre is in a way playing for everyone, at everyone's place: the collective street is also a popular space. The actors are not addressing theatre subscribers in a performance hall or institution with its own codes and values, but each and everyone of us, the man in the street. This man in the street is first of all a passer by: the street theatre public is also a stroller, free to come and go, so that the presence of this public, this moving crowd, is an event as is the appearance of the artists that focuses the crowd's attention (this would be like a resurgence of the old theatre, when in the 17th century, people went to the theatre to see the crowd and be seen by it).

Street theatre is also festive in the nature of certain shows, for it is not merely a poor theatre, in the sense of an economy of means. When they perform their spectacular feasts like the well-named *Théâtre d'une rue*, companies like Générrik Vapeur use the street as an outdoor stage whose scale lends itself to renewing with the rituals of ancient celebrations. Action takes place in a parade, with actors literally making the architecture part of the playing field; the crowd is sometimes invited to participate, leading to moments of exaltation, and the whole thing often ends in a display of fireworks that make the culmination of the show. In these shows, the street is exploited as well in its linearity, since it makes the temporal dimension visible. At the same time, others model their action on the succession that allows this structure – one thinks of the scenes from *Concerto pour Héraclite* soberly performed by the Agence de développement séquentiel, a group of visual arts students assembled under Richard Martel.

Never far from the celebration, this can sometimes touch on transgression, as shown in the performance of Monty Cantsin during the Festival de l'été 2003 : this autodafé of offices and computer equipment connects with a pagan ceremony that is almost trancelike.

The street is also the circulation system of the city – and it leads the theatre as it ventures onto balconies, into doorways and windows, basements and backrooms and lanes, and even into the domestic, private space. For street theatre, and this is the case at least for the Festival de Shawinigan, is also sometimes a theatre of the interior. The street opens onto all places; theatre that makes it its stage eventually goes indoors. In this sense, the theme of the 2004 edition, *États d'habiter*, which transformed the outside public space into a succession of interiors, arose naturally from the logic developed over the years. Interpreting the theme of the event at its simplest, it is an interior inhabited that allowed people to see the *Intimité II* of the duet Le Gallou/Plaisance : a closed cubic space with little eyeholes on the corner of Tamarac street, set

¹ Similarly, we can understand the inclusion of a percussion performance like that by Malambo in looking at the intersection between theatre and street arts. Using the *boléadoras*, an Argentine instrument made of little balls on the ends of cords that strike the ground to produce rhythms, the musicians are also in the act of performing a dance, which incites the primal euphoria of rhythm and speed.

up like a room, in which the two artists did no more than spend time, chatting, sleeping or reading.

The mobility and circulatory function of the street incites artists to explore and rediscover the city. This aspect is inherent in this festival, transforming the public place into stage and set, exploiting the architectonics of the street and the buildings, and awakening old sites like the old Roxy cinema – location in 2004 of the colourful performance by the *Fermières obsédées*. This same mobility can also lead us to interpret the street as a pretext for moving the spectator in the city, as with the solitary wandering in *Bienvenue à* by Arggl! (Olivier Choinière), where the listener, wearing headphones, walks through the streets listening to a prerecorded monologue.

While street theatre makes the street its stage and set, we should not be surprised by the ease with which visual arts projects are integrated. There is a sort of metamorphosis of the urban space that operates not only during the performance, but transforms the urban space for the entire duration of the event. This is the city as a lived-in space that is transformed. The show *Fuite inoffensive* by Mario Duchesneau, where hanging clothes create a huge stage curtain for the downtown parking, brought spectators up the stairs next door to discover on the hill a house apparently filled with clothing pouring out the windows. Martin Renaud, had shoes all over the sidewalk and even outside the festival site, and the impromptu *Attroupements* surprised passers-by.

This programming of visual and sound artists made even more explicit another aspect of street theatre; the simultaneous coexistence of rhythms and durations. There were visual interventions (*La famille élargie* by Cooke/Sasseville) and performances, but also specific routes to follow (*Soudaines ablutions* by Florent Cousineau, *Tsunami* by Uniwave). A variety as well in the relations with the public, from the company performing for the crowd to the work for a single spectator (Cie du Thé à la rue), with works in the form of guided tours (*Petites détresses humaines et autres maux* by Catherine Sylvain, *La chute de Slack* by Gaétan Laporte) giving rise to patient line-ups, the possibilities are endless. This is even without mentioning the cooperation of the spectator called upon by certain artists. Enclosed in a box for some hours with a paper attached to it asking to be taken elsewhere, Christian Messier incited spectators to be part of the action, while Lise Gagné, creator of the Festival poster, proposed that visitors mount a platform to be photographed for part of the poster. Over the hours, she produced a collective portrait of the public that gave rise to a reflexive duplication of the event. The poster became a tool of creation. While the Conques Claquent also proposed a reflection of the event by composing through sound sampling, the animation resulting from the roles of the participants took over the sound document.

We note, in addition to the auditory and visual traditions, the variety of sensory solicitations provoked by certain interventions : the warmth in the box containing the silent Christian Messier, the only indication of his presence; the cool rain welcoming visitors at the ends of a lane produced by Florent Cousineau; the tactile sensation of the clothing scattered by Mario Duchesneau, soaked by the rain, or those on which we had to walk to pass by the platform of Lise Gagné. Another metamorphosis: with all these clothes, the city seemed to be like a messy bedroom.

Note in closing that it is perhaps because it is called street theatre that this year it affirmed its character as a crossroads of disciplines, places and persons. Maybe the adjective has become more important than the noun, or simply more decisive, redefining the theatre.

For this festive potential, inherent in the nature and context of street theatre, is what the event wants to expand on, inviting other disciplines to take part, with musicians like Thus, Nautical Almanac, Geneviève et Matthieu. While at first glance it might risk losing its definition on opening onto multidisciplinary, the event in fact reveals the focal point of all the practices, the crucial importance of the context and the pragmatism that it implies. The cooperation between street theatre and performance, sound and visual art, is not arbitrary; all these fields have a concern for the public space and public life, which they help to stimulate and reflect.