

Parminou Theatre
Victoriaville, Quebec

The *Rencontres Internationales de Théâtre d'Intervention* (R.I.T.I.) Symposium [the international symposium on street theatre]

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Maureen Martineau (based on the written symposium proceedings prepared by Anne-Marie Grondin and Marie-Noëlle Béland)

In fall 2003, the Parminou Theatre in Victoriaville, Quebec, in collaboration with the French community of Belgium's *Centre de Théâtre Action* [centre for street theatre] organized three one-day symposiums on street theatre. The symposiums were hosted, respectively, in Montreal on 1 November by UQAM's *École Supérieure de Théâtre* [school of theatre], in Gatineau on 5 November by the CÉGEP de l'Outaouais [Outaouais community college]; and in Quebec City on 7 November by Laval University.

Symposium goals

Assess the state of street theatre in Quebec in comparison with its state of development in the rest of Canada and elsewhere in the world, especially Europe and Africa.

Moderators: Richard Leroux and Jacques Languirand
220 participants

First Panel: the practice of street theatre in Togo, English Canada and Quebec

Introduction to discussions

Presentations by: Atavi-G Amedegnato, Edward Little and Maureen Martineau

Atavi-G Amedegnato, founder of *Théâtre ZIGAS*:

Atavi-G Amedegnato is leading a fight for a renewed appreciation of cultural heritage by means of an art form known as the *Théâtre du Recyclé* [theatre of the recycled]. His organizing concept is the challenge of rescuing discarded elements of popular culture. This premise is the basis for an *esthétique du laid* [aesthetic of the ugly], which shows in visual form the process of rescuing what society has rejected and abandoned, be it human or otherwise. If individual members of society are to resist, they must rely on their own culture or risk being uprooted and transformed into consumers. By rediscovering their cultural bearings, they can protect themselves against passive acquiescence.

Maureen Martineau (Parminou Theatre): member of the Parminou Theatre for 25 years

After an initial search and analysis of the feedback, 85 groups and individuals from Quebec and 75 from English Canada were identified as practitioners of street theatre.

Street theatre practices seem to have three major defining characteristics: **social impact**, a **collective process of creation**, and **dissemination in the community**, through alternative networks rather than institutional cultural networks.

The areas of life addressed are wide-ranging: psychosocial development on the **personal** level (focus on personal affirmation); the **community** level (theatre of social awareness); and the **societal** level (political theatre with overtones of protest, e.g., counter-culture demonstrations).

Street theatre takes an approach based on critical analysis, consciousness-raising and a democratic relationship between artists and community members.

Edward Little: professor specializing in “Theatre and Development” at Concordia University, Montreal. How can our practice merge aesthetic achievement and social action? Who observes and who judges?

Edward Little has developed a matrix for distinguishing the criteria that define street theatre from those associated with other forms of theatrical art.

Street Theatre	Mainstream Theatre
Relevance	Quality
Cultural Expression	“Art”
Communalism	Liberal individualism
Cultural democracy	Democratization of Culture

Paul Biot: director of the French community of Belgium’s *Centre de théâtre action*.

The French community of Belgium (numbering about six million Francophones) supports some 15 professional troupes that are part of the street theatre movement. Paul Biot describes their core features.

Core features of street theatre in Belgium’s French community

- The main mission of theatre companies belonging to the street theatre movement is to use the dramatic arts on an ongoing basis to work with people who are socially or culturally underprivileged. Together they undertake actions that shape theatrical practices designed to help the participants better understand how the society they live in really operates.
- For such theatrical companies, the priority is to put their action-related efforts into *participatory creations* produced by those they work with, stemming from the principle of **collective theatrical creation**. This means that everyone participates in the conception, production and public performance of the original work, which is then held by everyone as their collective property.

Paul Biot raises the issue of why we should look for an international dimension to the practice of street theatre. He maintains that there must be a political critique of why, how and with whom we create. Mainstream culture is increasingly becoming a groundless culture. It no longer has roots, or the soil in which to take root – nothing to prop it up. The dominant system is divisive. It sub-divides into fragments – political, social, economic, cultural, etc.

Those who are subservient to the system suffer in a way that does not admit of such distinctions. It is up to theatre to **reconstruct the connections** among these different fragments; its function is to keep reconnecting what has been disconnected.

Part Two of the Symposium: questions and comments from the audience (excerpts reflecting a number of viewpoints)

What defines and unites all these alternative theatre practices?

- Why this need for self-definition? Is there not a risk of creating a ghetto, a theatrical subculture?
- We need to find the things we have in common so as to empower this approach to theatre. There are nuances among genres of music and painting – so why not accept nuances among the various genres of theatre?
- Every kind of theatre is interventionist; the difference lies in the effects it creates. In an institutional theatre, I can make a political gesture, but then everyone goes home without noticing any impact. Collective creation promotes awareness. You start with nothing, just a group of people brought together, and you let things unfold. The process is more important than the final product.
- Professional theatre is elitist. We're reacting to this state of affairs, it's what brings us together.
- What sets us apart is giving expression to a critical vision of the theatre. The effort to raise consciousness is not necessarily tied to doing something useful.
- Sure, let's provide definitions, but we should be sure to ask – what are we going to do together? "They" is the plural of "he" and "we" is the plural of "I." We should be attempting to say "we." Let's find whatever it is that will let us say "we."

Why are we doing street theatre?

Are we working just so that people living in an unjust society will feel better, or are we working to change society? It's what's at stake in the "why".

- In working on theatrical creations with people who live every day in a state of profound alienation without even realizing it, what's at stake is breaking through the dominant discourse and creating some alternative to monolithic thinking.

- We're talking about two things. There's the theatre concerned with members of the public troubled by personal issues and there's also a more political kind of theatre concerned with the public at large.
- The thing that brings us together is taking back the power to act. We share a common goal: raising consciousness.
- What counts is asking the questions.
- As far as social integration is concerned, you can't integrate people without asking the question as to why they've been excluded in the first place, and without getting them to ask that question as well. The point is to get them socially integrated in a critical way. Our actions have to go hand in hand with greater awareness. Whether we're working with one person, a collective or the public at large, the political discourse must be part of it.

The funding issue

- Going without public funding means those who work in street theatre have to fall back on commissions and sponsorships, which leads to a kind of commercialization of street theatre. The creative space available is shrinking because of the lack of support from public agencies.
- One of the CCA's responsibilities is to recognize different forms of art. For two years, they've operated the Artists and Community Collaboration Fund. One of the reasons for this program is to gain a better understanding of street theatre. It needs different criteria and incremental budgets as well.
- Belgium is still the only place in the world where street theatre is recognized as a legitimate approach to theatre, and has been since 1984. This recognition was confirmed recently in the *Décret sur les arts de la scène* [decree on the performing arts], which identifies street theatre as a particular dimension of the dramatic arts.

The complete symposium proceedings are available on the Parminou Theatre's Web site: www.parminou.com, under the tab, R.I.T.I. (*Rencontres Internationales de Théâtre d'Intervention*).

Other useful sites for links:

- www.theatre-action.be
- <http://theatreanddevelopment.ca>

Street theatre magazines:

- *Revue Alt.Theatre*, <http://www.teesriduniyatheatre.com/quarterly.htm>
- *Revue Cassandre*, <http://www.horschamp.org/>