

Collective Gutsink
St. John's, NL

Watching and Writing with a Critical Eye Critical Writing and the Arts: A Public Round Table Discussion (Jan. 14, 2004) & Professional Development Workshop for Writers (Jan. 17, 2004)

by Lisa Moore

In January 2004, the St. John's interdisciplinary, improvisational performance group *Collective Gutsink* organized the panel discussion entitled, "Watching and Writing with a Critical Eye," at the Anna Templeton Centre. The panelists were interdisciplinary artist Lori Clarke; AGNL curator of contemporary art, Bruce Johnston; Noreen Golfman, of the Woman's International Film and Video Festival and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at MUN; and Montreal-based, international arts journalist and lecturer, Philip Szporer.

Philip Szporer began the discussion by saying he was in Newfoundland for the first time and he had been struck by the strength of the artistic community.

"You get a sense of the immediacy of the arts here, and its importance in peoples' lives," Szporer said.

Before becoming a freelance writer and broadcaster who focuses on dance, Szporer had been a dancer himself. He said that although dance had developed significantly in the 80's and 90's in Montreal, there was a great deal of resistance to publishing the critical response dancers needed and deserved. Often reviewers who were comfortable writing about the visual arts, film and literature felt unqualified to write about dance. At the same time, the media is stingy when providing space for arts writing in general and even stingier when it comes to dance and performance art.

Szporer feels there is a need to constantly fight for publishing space and airtime to promote the arts. Politics, business and sports always take priority in the media, elbowing out the arts whenever possible. However, Szporer feels strongly that art criticism is key to fostering audience and development of the performing arts. Even a straight forward interview with a dancer about his or her creative process can make a work accessible to those with little or no dance background and can bring in new audience members.

Szporer talked about the importance of being able to identify your audience when writing art criticism. A reviewer of dance, for example, is typically writing for three audiences, according to Szporer: 1) the dancers and choreographers who already have a thorough knowledge of the

history of dance and its vocabulary, 2) audience members who have a keen interest in dance, though are not dancers themselves, 3) people who know very little or nothing about dance but are open to learning about it.

Noreen Golfman also spoke about the tricky matter of audience. Golfman had been a political commentator for the local CBC evening news show *Here and Now*. She talked about the particular demands of a television audience – the challenge of writing lucid, sophisticated arguments that could be delivered in three minutes flat - as well as the demands of producers and directors in the television industry who were operating from their own understanding of audience. Golfman compared television writing - which is meant to appeal to the widest possible audience - to the writing one creates for academic audiences. In academia, Golfman suggested, writers are often rewarded by keeping their audiences as narrow as possible, in the interests of specialization.

Bruce Johnston mentioned that an audience is necessary for the completion of a work of art. Johnston was, at the time of the round table, working as a curator for the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador. As a curator in a provincial gallery Johnston has written a number of exhibition catalogues. He said that in the 19th century curators were historians and registrars who wrote catalogues in order to document the holdings of the gallery. Of course, the role of the catalogue changed in the 20th century so that it incorporated aesthetic interpretations of art work. This later form of catalogue created canons in the history of visual art.

Johnston pointed out that the catalogue is written for a very particular readership. Most catalogue consumers are experienced gallery goers and have some art history background. Exhibitions and the production of the catalogues that accompany them are usually state-funded and as a result there is a certain amount of tacit censorship employed in production of these texts. Governments require what is known in the business of running state-sponsored art galleries “transparency,” “responsibility” and the need to “consult the appropriate stake holders.” These terms usually mean that the art work displayed and the catalogues written about it must not be offensive to the general public.

Lori Clarke, who spoke to the audience as a working artist, talked about the importance of writing while creating performance art and choreographing dance. Clarke, recently named by *MacLean's* magazine as one of Canada's top ten emerging artists, says she feels a dialogue between artists and critical thinkers is imperative for the creation of a healthy arts community.

Everyone agreed that audience is often defined by the venue in which the writer is publishing his or her critical work. A writer creates a different sort of work for radio than for print. The radio voice must be intimate and chatty, taking into account the broadness of the audience, as well as listener's fractured attention – since people listen to the radio while driving or peeling potatoes. A critical essay for a specialized magazine about interdisciplinary performance would be a different work than an essay about the same topic in *The Globe and Mail*. All of these works differ significantly from academic writing or art catalogue writing, which assumes a more specific audience.

Szporer spoke about the importance of building an audience for criticism within a vital artistic community like St. John's, suggesting writers pitch essays to the local newspapers and magazines as well as cable t.v. stations, university radio stations and CBC radio. Writers must continue to battle for space in the media, Szporer suggested, for the discussion of artistic production.

Everyone agreed that without critical writing the arts are in danger of becoming hermetically sealed. Arts journalists affect not only the way an audience perceives a work but the way artists continue to create. In a similar way artists foster and develop great critical writing.

Many of the professional artists in the audience were unanimous in suggesting that they wanted reviews that responded to their work honestly and responsibly. We spoke as a group about the particularity of our community. Because St. John's is relatively small, one is likely to be reviewing acquaintances and sometimes friends. Though this is the case, most of the artists in the audience said they preferred to be reviewed negatively, rather than not reviewed at all. There was a unanimous agreement that there is nowhere near enough critical response to art work in Newfoundland. Everyone agreed on the importance of critical dialogue for emerging artists, and established artists who are constantly transforming themselves and their work.

Szporer concluded by saying that social change happens with collective action. Writers and artists must fight against the ghettoizing of the representation of artistic production in the media.

I left the symposium with a sense of what the artistic community expects and needs of the critical writers in St. John's. We need critical writers committed to understanding the history of art in the Atlantic region and in Newfoundland in particular. We need writers who can help make this work known nationally and internationally. We need writers committed to an ongoing dialogue with the arts.

In the 1970's, as writer Sandra Gwyn once said, Newfoundland went through a cultural renaissance and a new found appreciation for the indigenous arts – visual, literary, musical, dance and performing - exploded. The theatre troupe *Codco* became famous, both at home and nationally, for its hilarious, biting political satire. Visual artists such as David Blackwood, Christopher Pratt, Mary Pratt and Gerry Squires began to gain international reputations. The band Figgy Duff began touring Canada with a new brand of folk rock, uniquely Newfoundland. The artistic community in Newfoundland was flourishing, and like all thriving artistic communities, it required a healthy critical practice to document, explicate, enrich, and just generally race to keep up with it.

The day of the panel discussion St. John's was hit by a massive snowstorm and all over the city people were sent home from work early. It also turned out that the original venue chosen for the panel discussion had furnace troubles and there was no heat in the building. The panel organizers had to get the word out about the venue change that afternoon. They did so through e-mails and calls to local media and panelists. Even under such difficult conditions almost 30 people waded through waist deep drifts of snow to attend the discussion. What does that say about the interest in critical writing in St. John's? What does it say about how our arts community works/networks? Everyone was hungry for the discussion.

The second part of the *Collective Gutsink's* "Watching and Writing with a Critical Eye" initiative was professional development workshop for writers. Phillip Szporer lead 14 local writers through a workshop on how to write critically about different kinds of performance.

Szporer spoke about the sort of critical writing that one reads in *The Village Voice*. Some of the critics who write for *The Village Voice* have been writing there for more than twenty years and have an intimate knowledge of the history of art in that community. These critics have watched the development of entire careers, from inception to maturity and when they write they work from that perspective.

Szporer said it was important to consider, when writing about a single work, at what point it has been created in the development of an artist's career. Is the artist emerging or established?

He suggested we write simply, be informative, descriptive, engage the audience and amuse the audience. He said, "You want to amaze the audience." He spoke about providing context rather than value judgments. Though it's not the critic's job to soothe the artist's feelings, phrases such as, "I liked that," or "I didn't like that," may be irrelevant.

Finally, Szporer offered participants a chance to write about a particular work, a dance performance by Sarah Joy Stoker, which we watched on video tape. The results, considering the time constraints, were impressive.

Since Szporer's visit at least two participants have begun to review the arts on a regular basis for local publications. It was exciting to have Philip Szporer share his writing experience with us, not only because the workshop was informative and practical, but because he has an infectious and sincere passion for writing and the arts. He spoke charismatically and provocatively about critical writing – no small feat. It was also exciting to see so many practicing artists in the city supportive of and hungry for written, public responses to their work.

Lisa Moore's *Open* was a finalist for the 2002 Giller Prize and a national bestseller, and her work has also appeared in Canada's most prestigious literary magazines. She writes a biweekly column in the *Globe and Mail* and lives in St. John's with her husband and two children.