

Jumblies Theatre
Toronto, ON

Easy to Say: Reflections on the roles of art and the artist in Canadian adaptations of the Colway Community Play form

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A note from the Co-Authors:

This essay is part synthesis, part reflection and part polemic. As co-rapporteurs at the May 2004 Canadian Community Play Exchange Symposium hosted by Jumblies Theatre, our reference point is a day-long discussion held at Toronto Island, and attended exclusively by artists who have worked in this specific form of community play. The thoughtful contributions of the artists taking part in the discussion inform the bulk of the essay's content. We have tried to do justice to their ideas, without getting bogged down in precisely who said precisely what. While we as co-authors take full responsibility for the conclusions we draw here, clearly we cannot take full credit for the same.

Present at the symposium were: Varrick Grimes; Dale Hamilton; Ruth Howard; Noah Kenneally; Ted Little; Simon Malbogot; Julie Salverson; Mara Shaughnessy; Cathy Stubington; Rachael Van Fossen; Savannah Walling; jil weaving and Tanya Williams.

At times it has seemed, certainly in England where the Community Play form under discussionⁱ originated, as if the artists involved were competing over the 'best way' to accomplish the work, rather than investigating and welcoming the potential for different approaches. Furthermore, for all the talk of 'high artistic standards' being important, previous conferences have not tackled, head-on, the multitudinous possible meanings and applications of those words, with an open-ended look at the wildly different aesthetics possible in a nonetheless Colway-based process. The May 2004 Community Play Exchange Symposium seems to have launched, at last, some meaningful shared discussion around questions of aesthetics.

Through a mixture of standing by certain precepts introduced by the Colway model, pushing these to their logical extremes, inserting our own artistic priorities, and negotiating the ensuing tensions and contradictions, we Canadian community play practitioners have stretched out, but notably have not detached ourselves, from, the Colway model, and moved towards new forms and creative processes.

The notion of inclusion -- the idea that anyone who wants to be involved can be, in any area of production -- is one of the Colway guiding principles that Canadian artists continue to embrace, and stretch, albeit to varying degrees. Fidelity to this principle of inclusion, when taken

seriously, obliges a reshaping of the art itself. Canadian artists have in different ways molded artistic form to accommodate this imperative according to our individual artistic sensibilities, turning, for instance, large numbers of participants and their widely varying abilities to advantage: teams of people carry a giant eagle or salmon or mastodon; simultaneous scenes transpire in different pockets of the audience; a multiplicity of styles within an artistic whole gives an entirely appropriate sense of working in a different medium.

A related guiding principle taken seriously to the point of stretching the boundaries of the form is the much-touted notion of balancing process and product. While the balancing image is quite orderly, the situations in which we have found ourselves require a different metaphor: perhaps a giant mixing spoon would be more apt. Inconsistent attendance and a constantly changing cast hold implications for what one can create, as does working through challenges of difference among participants. These elements constantly intervene in the progress of the work; as a result the process and product begin to fold into each other and become in their combined state part of the “different medium”: a medium that makes the most of a continuum between art and life. Evident throughout discussion is the ease with which the artists slip from talk of aesthetics to talk of social engagement and back: a sense of the art extending beyond the obviously “artistic” aspects of community plays.

While this might arguably be an underlying objective -- community life becoming art, and community art becoming life, i.e. becoming social change -- the actual business is nonetheless the striving for artistic excellence in presentation. The artistic product – the created thing -- is of utmost importance, even when the process stretches out increasingly in both directions. As one artist notes: saying that the making of the event is the event “does not mean that you’re not caring about how it ends, it means you “care more somehow through the whole thing.”ⁱⁱ

Along with this concern for the underlying aesthetic as a whole, living “thing”, comes a third guiding principle: the conception of the artist at the centre, rather than at the side saying, “I’m facilitating everybody else here”. As much as community play practitioners are constantly asking what is right for the community, and proceeding with complex ethical concerns in mind, most are nonetheless unapologetically following their own artistic interests, and bringing their own backgrounds, as directors, writers, choreographers, designers and puppeteers, into the work. The artist’s own need to grow and change in her/his art-making may well be the primary element driving adaptations of the community play form in Canada.

Different artists have found different ways to navigate this tension between adherence to a beloved and powerful model, and a growing necessity for innovation. When speaking of community-engaged projects that do not claim to be full-fledged community plays, we seem to feel freer to talk about the new directions which the work has taken. In these new ventures that may not necessarily “try to imitate the community plays”, but are still “a hundred percent in the spirit of the community play model”, we can freely pursue adapting those elements that initially captivated us. Artists attending the symposium refer to, for example: “getting away from the idea of there being a recognizable play narrative”; having “different things happening simultaneously”; playing with “what is public and what is private material”; “figuring out ways that the audience is participatory in the story”; moving to more of a “team” approach to creative process; or exploring “other forms of performance that are maybe less naturalistic, maybe less narrative based, maybe less like plays.” These hybrid creations -- which still adhere to principles

of inclusion, linking of process and product and experienced artistic vision -- can be places where the aesthetic advantages and limitations in their particular combination become exciting, and can “blossom into” something that couldn’t be the same – or as “good” - anywhere else.

If this “blossoming” is what we all aim for, despite our differences, there still remains the question of how to talk about it. We need to continue developing a vocabulary and claiming our artistic territory with the words of our choice. We wish to articulate values and criteria for practices where relations between art and social context are so pivotal that, in a sense, they actually become the artistic medium. The audience’s sense that there is a performed connection to real life is vital to the power of this kind of aesthetic experience. A “loosening up” of the artistic structure need not be considered as defective “gaps”, but rather as an integral element in the aesthetic “fabric”.ⁱⁱⁱ The power of social and aesthetic ritual is often particularly vibrant when an audience must consider the nature of the performance quite differently, precisely because they find themselves in a non-habitual theatrical setting and relationship to the performance.

Although these aesthetic possibilities may be less available to the exclusively professional theatre, it seems both sensible and accurate to avoid promoting a separate set of aesthetic standards, especially in a climate where we may find ourselves unwillingly segregated, in the eyes of some of our artistic colleagues, from the sphere of “important” art, while to others “art” is considered incidental to what is seen as our “important” work. We must insist that community-engaged practices remain within a larger discourse around theatre and performance aesthetics. The specialized terms of reference needed for community-engaged arts, when more thoroughly articulated, should also shed light onto “mainstream” theatre aesthetics, since the inter-relatedness of process and product and the relationship between performance and audience are realities that equally apply to all forms of theatre/artistic production. Perhaps the study and development of theory around relational aesthetics^{iv} can actually take us closer to an understanding of how and why an audience member lives a powerful, transformative experience at the theatre.

Artists at the symposium have all been able to stretch their sense of artistic role to embrace the extended functions encountered, while still placing activities squarely within the world and language of art. This sense of artistic identity in shifting artistic waters is evident in the way the artists talk about cornerstone principles of community play work, in the places artists have taken the work on the other side of community plays, and in these preliminary examinations of aesthetic parameters and terms. Equally evident is a desire to talk about the work in a way that acknowledges its inherent contradictions, and difficulties: as one of us cheerfully says, “Easy to say, hard to do!”

This essay and the symposium itself have been concerned with the “saying” part, which is also hard. Through attempting to “say” what the work is about, artists at the symposium manage to shed light not only on community-engaged theatre, but perhaps, on theatre, performing arts and art in general.

With regard to the “doing” part, we hope that subsequent gatherings will enable further investigation of specific differences in aesthetic style, from project to project and from artist to

artist, and, especially, of what combination of artist and community priorities, and of social and physical settings, all in relation to each other, result in these artistic choices.

A formidable task, but one we look forward to tackling.

Ruth Howard and Rachael Van Fossen, January 2005

Copies of the full transcript of the discussion are available on request (jumblies@sympatico.ca).

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The Colway Theatre Trust, under the artistic leadership of Ann Jellicoe and subsequently of Jon Oram, initiated and developed this form, beginning in the 1970's. The form was introduced to Canada by Dale Hamilton in 1990 with the Eramosa Community Play. Ann Jellicoe's book Community Plays: How to Put Them On, was published in 1987 by Methuen. Jon Oram's company *Claque Theatre* in England has developed out of the Colway Theatre Trust.

ⁱⁱ "The making of the event is the event", was an inspirational statement made by artist Paula Jardine at the Documenting Engagement Institute, held in Vancouver in January 2004. It resulted in a "suite" of eight videos by the same name, available for purchase through Pacific Cinemateque.

ⁱⁱⁱ This concept of "gaps in the aesthetic fabric" as an integral part of community play artistry is the brainchild of Ted Little, Associate Professor in the Theatre and Development program at Concordia University. Dr. Little's recent article "Towards a Poetics of Popular Theatre" provides a more comprehensive account of his theory in this area.

^{iv} The Nicolas Bourriaud book Relational Aesthetics, published in 1998, has provided a much-needed theoretical framework from which to depart in looking at community-engaged art practices. The more recent publication of From One Place to Another, by Miwon Kwon, marks another important step toward investigation of the relationship between artist, audience/community, and the work of art.

LIST OF WORKS CITED

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