

The Risks of Empathy and the Lessons of Self-Reflexive Dramaturgy in *DIFFER/END: The Caledonia Project*

By Andrew Houston

How do we understand something? We understand something by approaching it. How do we approach something? We approach it from any direction. We approach it using our eyes, our ears, our noses, our intellects, our imaginations. We approach it with silence. We approach it with childhood. We use pain or embarrassment. We use history. We take a safe route or a dangerous one. We discover our approach and we follow it. (Goulish 46).

A Conceptual Approach

I begin with this quote by Matthew Goulish because, although in his consideration of ‘understanding’ and ‘approaching’ he was addressing the subject of criticism, he was thinking about art; in particular, he was thinking about how performance (re. theatre) may best confront problems, a world full of problems, in need of “small acts of repair.”¹ Goulish ponders *how* to engage a critical mind, but also *why*. He claims that “any act of critical thought finds its value through fulfilling one or both of two interrelated purposes:

- 1) to cause a change;
- 2) to understand how to understand (Goulish 44).

His metaphor for how performance may achieve this twofold purpose is a window; seen here not so much as an object in this world, but as an *opening* to another world, or at least to another perspective. He says, “[i]f we can articulate one window’s particular exhilaration, we may open a way to inspire change in ourselves, so that we may value and work from these recognitions” (45). I want to use Goulish’s metaphor of a window as a means of seeing and experiencing a problem in my discussion of a performance I created with a third-year undergraduate dramaturgy class at the University of Waterloo, over two terms in 2007 and 2008.²

The problem is a crisis that erupted over an aboriginal land claim in Caledonia, Ontario, in early 2006. Caledonia is a small town that is quickly becoming an upscale bedroom community for Hamilton, a city about a 15-minute drive away. Sitting on the edge of Six Nations, an aboriginal territory, the town became a flashpoint in a longstanding legal dispute over a tract of land that also includes the property of the

¹ This is the title of a book he would later co-edit with Stephen Bottoms (see Works Cited).

² The first production in February 2008 was developed over two terms; subsequent productions, at Kitchener’s Tapestry Festival in June 2008 and in May 2009 at Teatro Dell’Acquario, Cosenza, Calabria, Italy, required text development and approximately three weeks or rehearsal per production.

University of Waterloo and the land on which my house sits in Kitchener. Despite the proximity of my home, my place of work, and my students' place of education to one of the most prominent land claim disputes in the history of Canada, I was dismayed to see that there was little to no awareness of this dispute in my community, despite the fact that it had legal ramifications that actually implicated many of us in the dispute. This window was definitely closed – in fact it had been blocked off and covered over. John Ralston Saul describes this phenomenon in *A Fair Country*, wherein he makes the argument for how Canadians have become troublingly absent-minded about our various debts to the aboriginal peoples with who we share this continent's land, when he says:

Our challenge is to learn how to recognize what we have trained ourselves not to see. We must remove the imaginative and historical veils that we have been used to obscure [our] reality. That means trying to identify the elements that make this Aboriginal presence real to both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal... And this is not primarily about thanking or apologizing or admitting wrong or settling outstanding accounts. All of that needs to be done. What I am talking about is a quite different stage – one in which we learn how to see ourselves, to identify ourselves and, finally, to describe ourselves” (Saul 35-36).

At the start of creating a performance, it seemed like we had an important opportunity to awaken the community's perception of its too often unacknowledged relationship to aboriginal peoples; however, with time, as the process developed, something more pressing emerged. Once uncovered and opened, the blocked off window began to reveal a landscape of traumatic ruptures, a view of some of our nation's greatest failures, lies and deceptions. Clearly this window needed to be opened, the understanding of its perspective needed to be gained, but, perhaps not surprisingly, non-aboriginal people had become accustomed to this window being blocked, papered over, its existence covered in a decorative façade. I hadn't anticipated this level of denial, of knowledge foreclosed because, it seemed, the shame of it made it too hard to accept. At first I thought a performance might be entirely focused on helping to illuminate the problems at the core of the dispute, and perhaps even contributing to actually solving the land claim problem. But early in our process it became obvious that the only way for this to happen was for a profound change to occur within the people approaching the problem, the non-aboriginal students in my class.

The Problem – The History and Political Context

Six Nations protesters began their occupation of the Douglas Creek Estates in Caledonia on February 28, 2006. At the time, the Douglas Creek Estates was a partially built subdivision on the edge of the town; the developer, Henco Industries Ltd., purchased the land in 1992, and were given municipal and provincial government approval to build a subdivision in 2005. In 1995 Six Nations sued the federal and provincial governments over the land, and after a decade of inactivity in the courts as

well as the further threat of new development, Six Nations decided to occupy the land in protest; they strung “a large banner proclaiming ‘Six Nations Land’ between two lamp posts at the subdivision entrance ” as well as erecting tents, a teepee and a wooden building that was soon referred to as an embassy (Legall A07). Since this time, they have remained on the site, maintaining a constant presence to ensure that no further development takes place.

Douglas Creek is part of the Haldimand Tract, a stretch of land totaling approximately 975,000 acres, or six nautical miles on either side of the Grand River, from its source near Shelbourne to its mouth at Lake Erie near Dunnville (see CBC News *In Depth: Caledonia Historical Timeline*). In 1784, the British Crown gave the Haldimand Tract to Six Nations as compensation and reward for their loyalty during the American Revolution. Since then, the tract has been progressively reduced, and Six Nations currently find themselves in possession of only 45,000 of the original acres (Garratt 37). At stake for Six Nation protestors is the right to the land originally given to them in the Haldimand Proclamation. It is important to understand that the Six Nations protestors do not occupy developed land – they have no desire to force people out of their homes; only undeveloped or partially developed territory is reclaimed, and in most cases, Six Nations merely wants to be included in the planning process that happens on the disputed land. In the spring and summer of 2006, the situation in Caledonia intensified, and it became the source of national news coverage. Protests and counter protests caused clashes between a number of Six Nations people and Caledonians.

After seeing images of the dispute and the site, I wondered how this could happen. How could a burgeoning bedroom community become the battleground for a 200-year-old land claim dispute? Could it happen in other neighbourhoods? Or in *my* neighbourhood? Is the land under my home disputed? In our modern democracy, where differences are acknowledged and celebrated, how could this happen? These questions were where I began with my students in September of 2006.

A Pedagogical Approach: the Window of Drama 301

Drama 301 is a production dramaturgy class. It serves as an introduction to the work of a dramaturge for the second and third year undergraduate drama students in our liberal arts program. In addition to a new play dramaturgy workshop, a seminar discussion series of different approaches to the role of production dramaturgy in different contexts, each time I teach this course, I try to craft a research assignment around some problem or issue that I believe theatre should be addressing. The assignment creates a particular framework (a window) for approaching the problem, and the student is given about four weeks to research the problem and create a casebook of his or her findings. For the last three years of doing this assignment in Drama 301, with the help of a professional dramaturge and playwright, I have been able to develop the casebook material of my students into workshop productions that employ these same students as performers, often for pay (depending on my success with gathering producing money).

In the fall term of 2007, there were twenty-seven students in the class. None of

who were aboriginal. I had anticipated this situation, and in consultation with local First Nations counselors and Yvette Nolan, the Artistic Director of Toronto's Native Earth Performing Arts Company, I pondered the possibility of doing this project with an entirely non-aboriginal group of students. Yvette thought this was a great idea. Her justification for this answer was that the people of Six Nations know about the problem concerning the Haldimand Tract, as well as the other 29 land claims filed by the people of Six Nations that are currently making their way through the Canadian legal system. Jean Becker, then the First Nations Student Advisor at the University of Waterloo's St. Paul's College agreed with Nolan, she felt that non-aboriginal Canadians needed to work on this problem more than First Nations people, and to reinforce this point, she directed me to Tom Keifer's article, "The Politics of Solidarity: Six Nations, Leadership and the Settler Left."

Keifer discusses a prevalent problem of non-aboriginal activists attempting to work in solidarity with Six Nations protestors in Caledonia. He argues that non-aboriginal activists are preoccupied with "how to relate to the struggle at Six Nations" (Keifer 1). He would like to see settler activists work in solidarity with Six Nations protestors by adhering to the law of the Two Row Wampum: an agreement between Six Nations and settler populations which holds that "both the Six Nations community and the settler communities are to "steer their own boats" and not interfere with each other's internal affairs" (Keifer 5). He contends that misguided white activists have a tendency to "live vicariously through the radical struggle" (Keifer 6) of oppressed groups, while showing a reluctance to go into their own communities and interrogate structures of racism and oppression.

In creating the framework for the assignment, I wanted to demonstrate the struggle of most Canadians to come to terms with an issue the historical roots of which date back more than 200 years. On the one hand, I wanted to map a genealogy of racism and inequality that is frankly obvious in the historical research, but on the other had, I wanted to be careful about how we approach blame and shame in this situation, so I wanted a dramaturgical framework that would be relational and empathetic. By empathy, I don't mean passive empathy or any form of unengaged pity toward the lives of those researched, rather I wanted to facilitate a process of research that addresses a question posed by Megan Boler, who articulates a "semiotics of empathy," when she asks "who and what benefits from empathy?" And claims:

What is at stake is not only the ability to empathize with the very distant other, but to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront. What, then, distinguishes empathetic from testimonial reading? What might it mean for the reader to 'take action'? I suggest that unlike passive empathy, testimonial reading requires a self-reflective participation: an awareness first of myself as reader, positioned in a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance of reading. Second, I recognize that reading potentially involves a task.

This task is at minimum an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and worldviews (Boler 263).

The dramaturgical research in the class, as reflected by the casebooks created by the students, were in keeping with Boler's semiotics of empathy. As researchers, we attempted to create the kind of testimonial to our experiences of the land claim dispute that she calls for above. Over the month of research time, the class was visited by various authorities on the issue, and every effort was made to contextual the orientation of each speaker; that is to say, their approach to the conflict in Caledonia. Numerous research trips were taken to Caledonia, Six Nations territory, as well as other towns, settlements and cities within the Haldimand Tract.

Darren O'Donnell's book entitled *Social Acupuncture* was an important guide for the way the students went out to engage with people who might not have any public profile on the issue, but whose opinion was sought anyway. The students seemed empowered by the knowledge that they could conduct research in this way, and spent a significant amount of time staging and recording spontaneous interviews with members of their own communities, with people from Six Nations, with non-aboriginal homeowners in Caledonia, and with protestors on the Douglas Creek Estate. These conversations gave voice to those who do not necessarily get quoted on the news or in print. It also gave the students a chance to engage with people who came from recognizably different walks of life. Some of what the students witnessed and heard was shocking, but it was undeniably real, and integral to their project.³

A Dramaturgical Approach: the window of performance in *Differ/End: The Caledonia Project*

These dramaturgical approaches open windows onto the conflict that prompt critical ethical questions. As O'Donnell states, "any old conversation is not enough to introduce democracy; we have to interrogate who is conversing, who isn't and what we're talking about" (O'Donnell 33). The performance was based on a script written by Gil Garratt, a professional playwright, who created this text in the last few months of 2007, based on the dramaturgical casebooks of the students, as well as photographs, video and audio recordings of interviews with various people effected by the dispute, and finally his own experiences of traveling to the disputed site. Garratt's text was for the seventeen students from Drama 301, who decided they wanted to complete their dramaturgical experience of the conflict by participating in its performance. In 2008, *Differ/End: The Caledonia Project* was mounted twice, once in February, after a period of just over a month to workshop the script and put it on its feet, and the second in June at part of the Tapestry Multicultural Festival in Kitchener. The first staging occurred in a small black box style theatre, while the second happened at the Kitchener City Hall, in a

³ O'Donnell's work is inspired by the writings on relational aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud and Grant Kester, among others. In Kester's more recent work, this "dialogic aesthetic" or what he terms "littoral art" is a "discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience" (Kester).

large public gathering space called the Rotunda. It has since been re-mounted in 2009, with a significantly different text, in a political theatre exchange with various institutions in Calabria, Italy, but for the purposes of this presentation, I want to focus on the two production in 2008.

Differ/End is made up of interconnected segments, which together form a composite portrayal of the dramaturgy class coming-to-awareness of the dispute, as well as an awareness of themselves in relation to a genealogy of Canada's relationship with First Nations peoples. Simply put, *Differ/End* presents a group of students performing their research.

Briefly, I want to focus on a few particular dramaturgical strategies in the text and staging that foregrounds the approach we took toward understanding the conflict, our approach to the conflict, and how this in turn became a particular kind of experience for the audience, where they were placed in a similar relationship to the problem as that of the students; that is, co-creators of the situation. These strategies can be broken down to three types: Map-Making, History-Making, and Pie-Making; respectively these strategies relate to the political, cultural, historical and economic layers uncovered in the research, both in the conflict and in ourselves in relation to the conflict.

Map-Making: For one student, traveling to the site became a meditation on how consumerist society has been careless with land and resources that arguably do not belong to us. For her, a nightmarish scene about the Baconator (hamburger from Wendy's with aggressive marketing) was created:

The BACONATOR. I-I can't stop thinking about it, the BACONATOR. And it's not about the burger, I mean, I'm vegetarian. But it's there, and we're driving down to Caledonia, the site of this huge uprising, the site of this spiraling conflict that just seems so unresolvable, the site of such incredible racism and hate and oppression, a place where we Canadians, who love to blow the horn of diplomacy into everyone's faces can't even sort it out. Where we have to call in the United Nations to step in to sort things out, and I can't but feel, stupid as it may seem, that the BACONATOR is this horrific metaphor of it all (Garratt 21).

The Baconator lament is part of a number of mapping strategies activated during the performance. In order to reflect the continual interaction with maps and the delineation of space in culturally different ways discovered in the research, in various parts of the performance, the students drew various maps of the Haldimand Tract on the floor of the performing space; these maps would sometimes contain unusual coordinates, including representations of their own unique experiences of particular places being mapped (e.g.: the Baconator), and gradually the map began to reflect the outline of their own narratives, hopes, disappointments and even the outline of their bodies. Finally, in the February production, which happened in a black box theatre space, the floor literally resembled a blackboard, a tool for teaching and thus an affiliation with the University of Waterloo, an institution situated on the disputed land, as a place of learning about this problem.

During his writing process, Gil Garratt asked each student in the project to respond to certain questions he posed that might offer a description of each student's idea of an ideal home, a dream home. In our journeys to and from Caledonia, we had many conversations about the differences in appearances between homes on the Six Nation Territory and homes in Caledonia or in other settlements on the Haldimand Tract. In the performance, there were two scenes that offered a meditation upon the material differences between housing in First Nations territories as compared with housing in Canada. The differences are vast, yet we all dream of the perfect home, don't we? These scenes in the performance, entitled Dream Home: Part A and Dream Home: Part B, pose important questions about dreams and aspirations of the increasingly consumerist non-aboriginal populations putting pressure on First Nations leadership to develop disputed land. Here is a brief example of the students' dreams:

11: I could survive with 2 bedrooms. 1.5 baths. As long as it was away from the pollution and traffic.

12: A small town, but definitely South Western Ontario, in the country. Kids toys in the spacious, fenced yard. A huge backyard, with a big patio—slash—deck for entertaining, a built in BBQ. A heated shop for my future hubby and his tools, and definitely an ensuite off the master bedroom with two shower heads. There are green, apple scented candles burning.

13: A Gym, studio space, one of those home movie theatres, but with the projector –

14: Waterfront. Wildlife, but to look at, not to get in your garbage.

1: Huge windows, I love the sunlight in the morning.

2: A pond. Swans. Or if they're too high maintenance, I'd settle for ducks.

3: I need a copse of trees beside a running stream (Garratt 23-24).

The student-performers give voice to their dreams while they do various household chores: dusting, sweeping, mopping and scrubbing the floor of the performance space. At this point in the performance, the floor is covered with various mapping coordinates; everything in the Haldimand Tract is located alongside the markings of each students' journey of research on this landscape of conflict. While the student-performers are dreaming of the ideal home, they wipe the floor clean, literally altering the landscape with their dream homes.

History-Making: the Power and the Game:

In addition to clearly marking the performance space as a place of maps, we incorporated a number of scenes and situations that reminded our spectators that they were in a place of theatre, of play, and that they would be expected to play along. We played Musical Landclaim with our audience, complete with contestants holding signs representing each of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee confederacy. The host of this game tells participants from the audience that this game is much like musical chairs, “but instead of being out, you just have to stay in the game and sit on the remaining chairs anyway, all of you, together” (Garratt 25).

We played television quiz show styled games that tested our audience’s knowledge of aboriginal history and the history of the land claim dispute in Caledonia. In rehearsal we quickly realized that few of us knew the answers to these questions, despite studying the issue for several months. The historical facts concerning exactly how much land had been taken away from Six Nations, through various transactions, from bureaucratic slight-of-hand to outright theft reminded one student a party game, a gamble, that goes horribly wrong. She suggested that inviting your neighbour to play a game (say, Westminster style politics) and then taking advantage of your neighbour’s ignorance and other vulnerabilities, in order to take as much from them as possible, was a bit like being invited to a friend’s party, where the friend plays games with you, drugs you or gets you really drunk (as part of the game, of course) and then strips you of your clothing and dignity.

After playing quiz games with our audience, the Host of the evening (who can be described as part trickster, part politician) turns the game on the rest of the cast. The questions focus on the details of the history of the Caledonia land claim dispute. One student is singled out as the smartest. She gets these questions wrong (as most Canadians would) and gradually clothing is taken from her. As if in a game of strip poker or spin the bottle that doesn’t go well, she ends up in her underwear. Nearly naked, exposed and feeling ignorant, the Host asks her if she is cold. The student nods, so he brings her a Canadian flag to wrap herself in; wrapped in the flag, the student recounts what was at the time the most recent violent act perpetuated against Six Nations: the burning of a makeshift building known as the Haudenosaunee Embassy, a meeting place for all with questions and concerns about the land claim dispute, a building dedicated to the memory of First Nation’s people who lost their lives fighting for Canada in World War I and II.

Pie-Making and Testimonial-Empathy: Finally, the performance features the creation of four pies. Throughout the performance, four chorus members labour on the creation of four pies, which are served to the audience at the end of the show, during a question and answer period. Their efforts reflect one of the most striking interviews of our research, with Karen Douglas, a woman whose house was right beside the ‘ground zero’ of the conflict zone. For 52 days she could watch the worst imaginable behaviour on both sides of the blockade, from her kitchen window; at its worst, when she was at her wit’s end – instead of being angry or afraid, she had a moment of insight to bake pies, which she did, and took them to people on both sides of the blockade.

When we interviewed Karen and her husband, and heard this story, it was a

moment of real discovery for us. She emulated an important kind of activism, when a subject stops being a voyeur, watching through the window and walks out into the world to make a change. In terms of testimonial reading, Boler would characterize it as a moment when “the reader recognizes herself as a ‘battleground for forces raging... to which [she] must pay attention... to properly carry out [her] task” (Boler 265). Boler develops the role of testimony in relation to pedagogy wherein she draws on two key areas to characterize testimonial reading: first, “our political climate of *crisis*, requires new representations of ‘truth’ which are not static and fixed, but allow us to communicate trauma’s ‘excess’. Second, in response to crisis the reader accepts *responsibility* as a co-producer of ‘truth’ (Boler 263).

“Testimony responds to the crisis of truth by ‘exceeding the facts’. In the legal context, testimony is called for ‘when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question” (Boler 263). Karen’s pie-making was a way of moving past the window on conflict, for a moment, past the facts; it is a relational strategy, as in the midst of the stalemate of this complicated conflict, she did something that was initially not related, something that creates a kind of parallax to the problem, and then offers an approach to the problem from this place of refreshment.

Conclusion

This kind of testimonial approach to theatre creation is important for a time when crisis is the norm. Two key characteristics to this way of framing the crisis seem important to me. First, a climate of crisis requires new approaches to discovering ‘truth’, which is not a static or fixed entity, and such an approach must allow us to communicate trauma’s ‘excess’. Second, in response to crisis the artist and audience accept *responsibility* as co-producers of ‘truth’. This responsibility requires a committed interrogation of our response to how we view others through our conceptual windows. To turn away, to refuse to engage, to deny complicity – each of these responses correlates with a passive empathy and risks not moving past the window-gazing that has historically divided us.

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