

PERFORMANCE ON THE CANADIAN PERIPHERY - AN AESTHETICS OF TRANSGRESSION¹

by Andrew Houston

I lived in Edmonton, Alberta from 1989 to 1992. During my time there as a student, critic, and practitioner of theatre, dance, and popular theatre, I experienced a variety of performance which, though it came to me in many different forms, had a similar effect upon me. The Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines 'effect' as a "result or consequence of an action." I stress this because my experience of this work has prompted me to consider it more fully than an explanation of what it 'means'; rather, I am compelled to express what this work 'does'. Its effect encourages experience rather than knowledge of the world it presents, and thereby offers an ontological challenge. This is the challenge of postmodern performance; it is constituted by an emphasis on the 'event' of knowing over the fact of knowledge.²

The problem arises of how to legitimize or judge an 'event'. This is a postmodern predicament. Jean Francois Lyotard defines an 'event' in communication as the fact or case that something happens, after which nothing will ever be the same again. The event disrupts any pre-existing referential frame within which it might be represented or understood.³ Given this, it is my intention here to offer a performative analysis of the eventhood of a given performance. I want to apply Lyotard's conception of communication to a dramaturgical analysis of performance. In a process of exploring the 'eventhood' of performance I shall attempt to devise a postmodern dramaturgy.

Performance practitioner Eugenio Barba, founder of the International School of Theatre Anthropology, has likened performance dramaturgy to an analysis of actions at work. He explains:

The word text, before referring to a written or spoken, printed or manuscripted text, meant 'a weaving together'. In this sense, there is no performance which does not have 'text'.

That which concerns the text (the weave) of the performance can be defined as 'dramaturgy', that is *drama-ergon*, the 'work of the actions' in the performance.⁴

Given a dramaturgical analysis that takes into account the work of actions via, and upon, the body, and as they relate to an ontological awareness of self, I would like to propose that the work of actions in postmodern performance extends to the spectator, implicating them in a process of 'work', or action, as well. As the spectator becomes a "spect-actor"⁵ - to borrow a term from Augusto Boal - he/she experiences an exposure, defencelessness, and vulnerability which lead to a process of inquiry and interaction integral to what Thomas Docherty has described as "the necessity of sociality."⁶ Postmodern performance becomes a model for an active inquiry into a relation with that which is not ourself, but the Other. He states:

We must behave justly towards the face of the Other; but we cannot do that according to a predetermined system of justice, a predetermined political theory. The Other is itself always other than itself: it is not simply a displaced Identity in which we may

¹ This is a copy of the article published in *Arts Dialogue*, No. 30, Maastricht, The Netherlands (Dec. 1994), pp. 11-14.

² Thomas Docherty, ed., "Introduction," *Postmodernism - A Reader* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 25.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G. Van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1st edn., 1983) 79.

⁴ Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *The Secret Art of the Performer* (London: Routledge, 1991) 68.

⁵ Augusto Boal, *Games For Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992) xxi.

⁶ Docherty 26.

once more recognise and reconstitute ourself. The demand is for a just relating to alterity, and for a cognition of the event of heterogeneity. In short, therefore, we must discover - produce - justice. It is here that the real political burden and trajectory of the postmodern is to be found: the search for a just politics, or the search for just a politics.⁷

It is this process of discovery in the immediate, spontaneous moment of relating to alterity - the Other - within one's own being and the being of other people that is the 'effect' of postmodern performance. Postmodern performance dramaturgy is an attempt to explore action as it facilitates such discovery - between performers and between performer and spectator - giving rise to the 'event of performance'. As postmodern performance disrupts representational criteria, it is seen to generate an aesthetics of transgression which moves beyond the limited and positivistic world it inscribes.

Edmonton, Alberta

Before I left Toronto, the city I grew up in, I knew just a few things about Edmonton. Most Canadians know about its hockey team thanks to Wayne Gretzky, who spent his best years there. I had read about the West Edmonton Mall because at one time it was the largest in the world. And finally, as weather is a common topic of conversation among Canadians, most people told me of the bitterly cold winters I would encounter there; after all, Edmonton is "*The Gateway To The Arctic*." It is true that Edmonton is Canada's most northern metropolis, the only city of considerable size (population approximately 900,000) north of the 53rd parallel. But it does experience a wonderful summer season, with a crowded calendar of festivals, including some of Canada's best for jazz, folk music, and fringe theatre. Many of its citizens have a penchant for hockey, although not an obsession as I had heard. Some of them like to hang out at the mall, although the mall is mostly a tourist attraction. In retrospect, I now realize that the more I learned about Edmonton from Torontonians, the more the information was less accurate about Edmonton and more accurate about Toronto's relationship to Edmonton. From the heart of Toronto, Edmonton is the definition of periphery; the frontier, little known and of that only by hearsay of the weird or unusual. In this respect, Edmonton is the Other.

In her essay entitled "Postmodernism and Periphery", Nelly Richard claims modernity conceives of the province or periphery as being out of step or backward. Consequently, this situation has to be overcome by means of absorption into the rationality of expansion proposed by the metropolis.⁸ Her argument is an extension of that put forward by Lyotard, who, in The Postmodern Condition argues that such centralist thinking is a result of Enlightenment reason and its legacy of metanarratives that have shaped modern, western societies. Lyotard questions the coercive and normative quality of this thinking, claiming that such a drive to totality cannot respect the historical specificities of the genuinely heterogeneous.⁹

Fortunately, and perhaps ironically, in terms of cultural identity, regionalism has had a positive effect in determining Canadian identity. In Edmonton, the result of modernist regionalization can be linked to a postmodern desire to define a local, indigenous culture. Regionalism is important in understanding the development of performance in Edmonton, be it dance, theatre, popular theatre, or performance art. In Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada, Alan Filewod outlines a convincing theory of how regionalism has affected the development of theatre in Canada since the late 1960s. He states:

As social motivating force and thematic subject alike, regionalism in Canadian theatre is related to an ideology of political populism. Although regionalism has

⁷ Docherty 26-27.

⁸ Nelly Richard, "Postmodernism and Periphery," Postmodernism - A Reader (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 464.

⁹ J.F. Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, trans. Bennington and Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979; trans. 1984) xxiv.

become critical orthodoxy in Canada, there have been few attempts to define its exact meaning when applied to culture...[R]egional drama draws its strength from the audience interest it thereby generates...[R]egional identity in Canadian theatre [can be ascribed] to the determining influences of geography and colonial settlement in Canadian history.¹⁰

In this analysis, regionalism is a manifestation of a post-colonial sentiment. Filewod takes exception to Northrop Frye's distinction between regionalism, which he defines as 'a decentralizing movement,' and what he dismisses as 'mere localism.' Filewod argues that 'localism in its contemporary theatrical forms is a demonstrably important phase in the establishment of a mature, decentralized culture.'¹¹

Filewod's analysis of localism as a post-colonial impulse does much to explain why regionalism in recent Canadian theatre tends to express itself in grass-roots populism. As the following example of performance in Edmonton will demonstrate, this tendency lays the ground for a postmodern aesthetic to emerge. This aesthetic expresses a search for a new identity - in transgression of the outmoded - and affirms the positive value of confusion, uncertainty, questioning, and questing for another place; a place more local than the nation, more personally and communally experienced. A location not circumscribed by abstract statues or boundaries.

Locations

In September 1992 The Brian Webb Dance Company, in association with Latitude 53 Society of Artists, presented *Locations*. The event provided a unique and provocative experience of art in which the audience travelled in an Edmonton Transit bus to witness four diverse conceptualizations of location. In experiencing this journey we ceased being an audience and became participants in the event. Once one has taken the initial step of leaving the building behind, be it a theatre or gallery space, there is a remarkable feeling of excitement mixed with uncertainty. Suddenly one's 'horizon of expectation' concerning the event vanishes and possibilities arise.

The first location of the event was entitled (*I wanted to know*) *The Exact Dimensions of Heaven*. The buses brought us to an open stretch of land on the construction site of the monolithic new campus of Grant MacEwan College. Against the orange setting sun and Edmonton's modern cityscape this essentially 'vacant lot' was adorned with an installation created by Blair Brennan. It consisted of a 15' cement cube, about 20 steel barrels, one flaming, and a semi-circle of 20 pick-up trucks with their owner's at the wheel. This setting was further enhanced by a kind of eerie-electronic-locust-storm sound coming from large speakers on either side of the cube. As we walked from the buses, the trucks started driving in circular formations around us, lights shining and horns honking. The trucks were intimidating, we were being corralled like sheep in the direction of the cube. Eventually we found ourselves congregated there, while a peculiar figure walked in determined circles around the cube and barrels. This red-cloaked, white fluffy-winged, Christopher Robin-like character (aka Brian Webb) carried a long, wobbly cross made of steel rods -- as though he were leading an absurd invisible procession. While said character pounded around the site, the drivers parked their trucks in a circular formation around us, headlights glaring, got out and began lighting fires in all the barrels.

The 'stage' seemed set; now that the trucks had stopped, spectators roamed more freely around the space. Webb stood precariously amongst the flaming barrels. The wind was strong and I wondered if his wings might catch fire. They didn't. Suddenly from outside the circle a native man (Lyle Trottier) emerged from a truck. For a very still moment, he looked at us with a neutral expression; then he began a native dance and song -- a Cree Grass Dance which in this context seemed like a

¹⁰ Alan Filewod, *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 21.

¹¹ Filewod, 21.

lonely lament lasting a painfully long time for the performer. The dance was inadvertently intensified by the sympathetic howls of a dog in one of the pick-up trucks. Meanwhile, Webb planted his cross in one of the barrels, removed his coat and shirt, approached Trotter, fell to his knees, grabbed handfuls of dirt and wiped it over his face and chest. Just as the dance ended Webb stood up. The native man and white man faced each other in silence. The expectant moment was abruptly ended when Trotter turned from Webb, got in his truck and drove through the surrounding crowd (off into the sunset), leaving Webb looking dejected in his naked, dirty vulnerability.

Webb, then, retreated to the barrels and cube. On the far side of the cube Blair Brennan was positioned in the basket of a 'cherry picker' crane. He too was wearing a red coat, signifying his affiliation with Webb's character. Webb got in the cherry picker and Brennan launched them to a position directly over the open top of the cube. The spectators jockeyed for space around the cube. Brennan had created the structure with latticed concrete bricks, so the you could peek inside it if you went up close. Appearing as a defiant pope, Webb lowered four steel, cross-shaped boxes on chains into the cube and then went down himself on a rope ladder. As we crowded around the outside walls we could see Webb inside performing a ritual of laying out the crosses, opening them up to reveal daggers, chopping up the earth with the daggers and then encircling his confined space yelling "I want out!". Webb climbed the rope ladder again; the escape was comical in its clumsiness as Brennan had to haul him into the basket by the seat of his trousers. The two lowered themselves to the ground, causing spectators to instinctively move back. The piece came to its witty conclusion with Webb and Brennan running a few laps around the cube and then jumping into a nearby pick-up and driving off the field, onto the road and away (into the sunset). Gradually we made our way back to the buses. On my way I noticed a number of cars had pulled over on the nearby expressway to watch what was going on.

In discussing a postmodern dramaturgical analysis of this performance, I want to draw from Scott Lash's conceptualization of postmodern culture in his book the Sociology of Postmodernism. For Lash postmodernism is a cultural paradigm, and his analysis offers a thesis of cultural change. Briefly, modernization is a process of cultural differentiation while *postmodernization* is a process of cultural '*de-differentiation*'.¹² Lash cites specific cultural components in order to operationalize this thesis. He argues that if modernization presupposed differentiation of these components, then postmodernization witnesses de-differentiation. Two of these components are relevant to (*I wanted to know*) *The Exact Dimensions of Heaven*, demonstrating a process of cultural de-differentiation. They are

- i. 'cultural economy', whose elements in turn are conditions of production and consumption, the institutions of culture, mode of circulation, and the cultural product or good itself; and
- ii. the mode of signification: i.e. relations among signifier, signified, and referent.¹³

In Webb's performance, the cultural economy becomes de-differentiated in the following manner: on the production side, there is a merging of the 'author' into the cultural product. Webb conceives, choreographs, and performs in this, and all his works. In this instance, his collaborators, Blair Brennan and Lyle Trotter, also performed in the work they had devised. Their collaboration, a hybrid of dance, theatre, sculpture and music, signifies a disintegration of the 'author' so to speak, and thereby a further de-differentiation of the elements of cultural economy.

On the consumption side, de-differentiation occurs in that the audience become participants in the experience; they become a part of the cultural product. Each is capable of having a unique interaction with the work based upon choices made in a physically open relationship to the performance. The experience is somewhat akin to Lyotard's solution to the limits of contemporary

¹² Scott Lash, Sociology of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1990) ix.

¹³ Lash 11.

painting; where he entreats us, to "explode this limit and take art out of the museums, even out of inhabited places; to paint walls, mountains, bodies, the sand."¹⁴ As the audience becomes a participant in the performance process, their role should be to "transform the energies which the (performers) put into play," not into a theoretical dispositive, "but into a sort of liquification, a sort of aleatory production."¹⁵ Thus, the theoretical question of performance may be dissolved, and the 'reality' of the experience addressed.

Consideration of the 'real' in this performance brings us to the *mode* of representation itself. Modernism, as noted above, had clearly differentiated and autonomized the roles of signifier, signified, and referent. Postmodernization, on the contrary, *problematizes* these distinctions, and especially the status and relationship of signifier and referent, or, put another way, representation and reality. In this performance we witness, first, an increasing proportion of signification taking place through images and not words. There are only three words spoken throughout the entire piece. This is postmodern de-differentiation in that images resemble referents to a greater degree than words.¹⁶

According to Lash, "modernism conceives of representations as being problematic whereas postmodernism problematizes reality."¹⁷ Reality is problematized in many respects during this performance. Considering the way in which the work is created, Webb has told me that for this piece he enlisted volunteers, not formally trained, to be 'themselves' in the performance (i.e.: men wearing cowboy hats, driving pick-up trucks). The sight of a man in a cowboy hat, driving a pick up truck is commonplace in Edmonton. These trucks belong to these 'performers', who wore their own clothing, and often brought wives, girlfriends and dogs with them to the performance. They were instructed in the tasks they were expected to carry out, in what order, and in what relation to other action in the performance, but otherwise it was up to each performer how these tasks were accomplished. The result for the spectator is to experience these 'real' activities as they are accomplished: driving a truck, parking the truck, lighting a fire, etc..

Looking to Blair Brennan's installation - the cube, the music, the cross-shaped boxes - the components are reminiscent of modernist art. One is drawn to them as signifiers, their medium, their design and placement; as though, as signifiers, they were problematic. However, alongside cowboys in pick-up trucks, Brennan's installation and Webb's performance are clearly out of place. The juxtapositioning of these realities, clearly out of place with one another, and out of context with their ground, problematize reality. The problematization of the real comes from a society whose very surface, whose empirical reality, is largely made up of representations. Postmodernism thus can be seen as a problem-solving pursuit - that is, as a search for a working out of the permutations and implications of how our reality is transformed and indeed made flimsy through penetration by images.¹⁸

Looking to the encounter between Webb's character and Lyle Trottier,¹⁹ a more specific analysis of interaction between juxtaposed realities can be seen, and thus the eventhood of this performance recognized. It is important to note that the details of their confrontation were entirely unplanned. Each artist prepared a performance without prior knowledge of what the other had done; the only element set beforehand was that they would 'meet' at sometime during the process. Borrowing from Lyotard's writings on politics and ethics, we may view the encounter between Webb and Trottier as marking a differend. Bill Readings offers a concise definition of Lyotard's concept as

¹⁴ J.-F. Lyotard, "La peinture comme dispositif libidinal," *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*, 2nd edn, (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1988) 266.

¹⁵ Lyotard, "La peinture," :234.

¹⁶ Lash 12.

¹⁷ Lash 13.

¹⁸ Lash 14.

¹⁹ I should note here that in this performance Trottier essentially played himself, a practitioner of native dance.

a point of difference where...two sides speak radically different languages, where the dispute cannot be phrased in either language without, by its very phrasing, prejudice the issue for one side.²⁰

Lyotard contends that between two language games, two little narratives, there is always a differend which must be encountered. As such, the differend marks a point of incommensurability, of dispute or difference where no criteria exists for judgment. The differend marks a point where existing representational frameworks are unable to deal with difference without repressing or reducing it.

Trottier and Webb had both prepared a physical score for this performance. Webb's was to march around the site, in costume, with a makeshift cross; Trottier's was to perform a grass dance. The details of each is not our concern here, let it suffice to say that both work from vastly different aesthetic and cultural tradition; approaches specific to traditions into which each performer is acculturated. Each performers' physical score presented in this performance is like Lyotard's concept of 'phrase', or, the elemental unit of interaction offered in communication between parties.

In The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, Lyotard explores ways in which linkages may be made between phrases, and ways of determining these linkages, which he calls *genres*, but for our purposes here it is important to recognize that while many linkages are called forth by a phrase only one is chosen. And the importance of this necessity of suppressing other linkages is that the dispute involved is a *differend* rather than litigation.²¹ The difference between differend and litigation is crucial to Lyotard's concept of justice in politics, and to the dramaturgy of (*I wanted to know*) *The Exact Dimensions of Heaven*. Litigation is a dispute that takes place according to a single and determinant rule of judgment. A differend, on the other hand, is a dispute between at least two radically heterogeneous or incommensurable language games, where no one rule can be invoked to pass judgment, because that rule will necessarily belong to one language or the other. In litigation, the accuser and the accused speak the 'same language' as it were, recognize the same law. In a differend, they speak two radically different 'idiolects' (idiom/dialects).²² Lyotard claims that the linking of one phrase to another is problematic, but that the challenge of justice is to avoid finding a determinant criteria by which to resolve differends. Rather, it is our responsibility to detect and mark differends and, in so doing, finding the idiom for phrasing them."²³ Lyotard contends that this is what a philosopher does, and, in this performance, this is what Webb and Trottier oblige the spectator to do.

Trottier's phrase (the grass dance) is met with Webb's stripping half naked and covering his upper body with dirt; this phrase is then met with Trottier's exit - silence. Given the context of this interaction, the vacant lot of a yet to be built institute of higher education, upon land that once belonged to Trottier's people - in terms of predetermined criteria - it is not difficult to identify with this response. However, looking at the eventhood of Trottier's action - in its radical singularity of happening - we witness a break in a highly organised, acculturated, physical score (the grass dance), and a discovery of the body-as-revolt in its relating to present circumstances (the opposition/obstacle of Webb's phrase). Trottier's spontaneous action is an attempt to do justice to a differend between he and Webb, which assumes nothing in advance as to what the nature of that justice might be. But, in so doing he shapes a way of revolt from a stable sign system which shapes identity through its own language. The space is filled with various trappings of white dominant culture, that lay claim to possession of native land, native people: the objects - full of Christian imagery - which make up the set, other performers, audience, the beginnings of the college's new buildings, and Edmonton's cityscape just beyond the periphery of this lot. Trottier, the performer who has emerged from outside this environment, to lay claim to this space through dance, is part of a culture historically denied identity. A "damage accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage,"²⁴ because the laws of

²⁰ Bill Readings, Introducing Lyotard - Art and Politics (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) xxx.

²¹ Readings 114.

²² Readings 114-115.

²³ Lyotard, The Differend 142.

²⁴ J.-F. Lyotard, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, trans G. Van den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 5.

the dominant culture litigate the 'language' of native land claims. His absence serves to demonstrate the injustice of the hegemony accorded to a representable law, the insistence that justice can be justified, that law can become the referent of description, an object of cognition. His revolt demands that we think of justice as not a repetition of procedures, but a linking of phrases that may evoke "the threat of the differend",²⁵ as a struggle over what the next phrase will be.

An aesthetics of transgression in this performance marks something which is trying to be said, but cannot be said. It is the action of the silenced and the unspeakable in, and against, discourse. Not an ambiguity but a heterogeneity, a differend: something which cannot be phrased. And yet this phrase must be linked onto. There must be another phrase, even if it is silence. An aesthetic of transgression raises the problem of justice: finding the linkage which will testify to the differend, but which will not wrong the differend, silencing it forever through prejudice.

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²⁵ Lyotard, The Differend 138.