

## Site-Specific Performance: The *Thirdspace* of Canadian Theatre<sup>1</sup>

By Andrew Houston

Today we can see the beginnings of a new way of thinking about the world – as sets of relationships rather than separated objects – which we call ecology... We belong to, are made up of, that world that surrounds us, and respond to it in ways beyond knowing.

– David Suzuki (198)

In Canada, 2006 began with a great deal of anxiety about the environment. In most parts of the country the temperatures were about 10 to 15 degrees warmer than they should be in January. The media, and it seemed a good deal of casual conversation, focused on questions concerning the apparently dire state of the planet and how we may address our problematic relationship with the world. Long before the current predicament, Canadian ecologist, David Suzuki had warned of environmental crisis and the need for those in the industrialized world to develop a more empathic and sensitive relationship to the planet. Suzuki's particular approach to ecology proposes that we carefully consider our relationship to our surroundings; in particular he asks: how do we know about our world? I begin this writing on site-specific performance in Canada with the perspective of our country's most prominent ecologist because the work of the practitioners I want to discuss is born of a similar concern about the relationship we have to the world, and the development of certain dramaturgical practices that better address the 'world that surrounds us' and are open to responding to this relationship 'in ways beyond knowing' – that is, beyond established conventions and representational strategies of understanding.

Suzuki proposes that our current environmental crisis is in part to do with the situation that most of what we know about the world, comes to us through various forms of representational knowledge, media, history, economics, politics or other discourses – even our own stories or anecdotal versions of events could be considered as such representational knowledge. Given that these forms of knowledge are predicated upon a stable relationship between the person trying to know and the object of understanding, the challenge, Suzuki suggests, is to avoid the obsessive need for recognition in our world; that is, in the moment of recognition the individual finds a tremendous comfort and reassurance in the self-sameness of identity or the familiarity of the object. Thus, the forms through which we perceive the world are a problem, whether we are discussing ecology or theatre, insofar as they are often designed to furnish a sense of security, the comfort of recognition, and a sense of self-sameness between an individual and the world. This is significant to theatre because our forms of creation, the forms by which we reflect the world, become the forms by which we know the world, and therefore we must examine whether or not these forms have become solely fashioned on the comfort of recognition and self-sameness. If we translate Suzuki's ecological perspective to theatre, we might address the problem of what happens when the forms of theatrical creation begin to tell us more about the forms themselves and less about the world they are meant to represent.

In every site-specific performance project, the artist must spend a lot of time walking around experiencing the site, engaging with the environment that will provide the resource for creation; trying to gain some insight into its inhabitants, its workings, its reality, but also trying to imagine how it might possess a life not yet realized. Michel de Certeau is a useful guide for this kind of work. He thinks of walking as a sort of articulation; that is, the space offers itself as a language (the *langue*) and our wandering around it, our working it out, our imagining and even our fears and desires of what it might be, becomes a kind of articulation of this language (the *parole*). In comparing pedestrian processes to linguistic formations, de Certeau states, "[t]o walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of the proper (de Certeau 103).

The creation of site-specific performance is akin to this act of enunciation, to be perpetually working between the absence of what we imagine the space to be and the material evidence of its proper

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of "Der Dritte Raum: Site-Specific Performances und ihre Fragen an uns und unsere Umwelt," published in *Theater der Zeit* Heft Nr. 9, eds. Gabrielle Naumann-Maerten and Christian Horn (September 2007), pp. 8-13.

and present uses. There are many reasons why site-specific practitioners have left purpose-built theatres and gallery spaces for the unpredictable experience of sites; while the contexts and approaches to creation may differ, the aspirations of these artists converge in at least two respects: first, in the way their work reminds us of the intrinsic spatial dimension of all performance; second, in the way performance becomes a medium for negotiating the many thresholds in the work and, in particular, the thresholds between illusion and the real, process and product and performer and spectator. Addressing performance as a vital, contemporary means of engaging with the world, David George says “performance reflects a new epistemology because it refocuses attention on the artist and the process rather than the artwork, exploding the falsely static quality of the product and its self-denying fixation out of time” (23). Performance is the best way to describe the emerging knowledge and practices of site-specific artists in Canada because their practices clearly return performer and public alike to the primacy of experience in an event, in the time and space of its happening, rather than in the reification of an object: the extant text. Of course text is still important to the artists examined below, but it is now a single element in an event that is more of an ‘ecology’ of experience, between site – its various levels of animation through text, music, action, film, and the spectator – who are witness to this meeting of the found and the fabricated, and therefore complete the event. This is an act of artistic representation, but it is perhaps equally an act of social geography: a way of being-in-the-world and bringing to bear a social, political and historical consciousness upon our navigations through and experiences of lived space.

In *Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination*, geographer Edward Soja encourages us to think about space and the many concepts that compose, comprise and infuse it with meaning; encouraging a reconsideration of familiar terms such as space, place, territory, city, region, location, and environment, Soja’s aim is not so much to discourage familiar ways of thinking about our environment but rather, similar to Suzuki and de Certeau, he wants to encourage a process of questioning that may “expand the critical scope and critical sensibility of one’s already established spatial or geographical imagination” (Soja 13). Soja’s perspective is particularly important to this introduction to the work of Canadian site-specific performance because similar to the practitioners and performance touched upon below, he understands the importance of the “spatial turn” in developing a more thorough understanding of the world. Without reducing the significance of the historical or the social, nor dimming the creative and critical imaginations that have developed around their practical and theoretical understanding, Soja’s “third critical perspective, associated with an explicitly spatial imagination,” has made an impact on the study of history and society in the same way that environmental and site-specific theatre approaches have broadened our perspective of spatial imagination in the theatre (Soja 14). The site-specific practices examined below have developed from an attempt to cultivate praxis, a transformation of knowledge into action, and from this venturing forth, a position of being-in-the-world, as described by Soja and posited by Suzuki as a potential way of developing a healthier more meaningful relationship with the world.

An enduring example of Canadian site-specific performance is Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s *Lesbian National Parks and Services*. This is a work that – once it was developed on-site – has toured around the world and manifest itself in many forms, including pamphlets, video, and two editions of a handbook. The performance was originally conceived for a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts (in the Canadian Rocky Mountains), and was part of a series of performances entitled “Private Investigators,” with an aim of investigating tourism in Banff National Park, in hopes of uncovering some of its hidden costs and assumptions. Dempsey and Millan were curious about the extreme heterosexual bias in all of the advertising and marketing for visitors to Banff; and, as they were both accustomed to working with a costume as a resource for creation, they were both attracted to the attire of the park ranger. As a performance, the *Lesbian National Parks and Services* consisted of, as Jennifer Fisher describes, Dempsey and Millan patrolling the park in uniform, “politely interacting in deadpan “ranger speak,” earnestly giving confused shoppers directions, or edifying tourists about the lesbian geography of the flora and the fauna of Banff” (196). These patrols would happen each day for approximately two weeks; essentially improvisational in style, Dempsey and Millan would set out each day with different tasks to fulfill in addressing the “ecological imbalance of lesbian wildlife in the park” and this would take the form of soft-sell recruitment drives, nature walks, and the creation of informative brochures indicating Banff’s historical and biological homosexual presence (Fisher 196). This work essentially provides the ground for a collision of a perceived notion of ‘lesbian’ as a deviant identity and ‘park ranger’ as a helpful, protective facilitator

of a park visitor's encounter with nature, as Fisher has noted:

This piece both normalizes (often invisible) lesbianism and points out the constructedness of nature. Repositioning recreation from a homosexual standpoint, the rangers suddenly found themselves part of an ever-unfolding, "parallel universe." Performance became something that happened not only between walls or within a video monitor, or between pages, or in a particular time frame. [...] The piece became a situational testing of the authority given to those in uniform. People did tend to give them a lot of respect, and felt entitled to interact, and thus enter into the performance. (196)

The performance's accompanying "Field Reports"<sup>ii</sup> and book-length *Field Guide to North America*<sup>ii</sup> clearly demonstrate just how much thought Dempsey and Millan have put into this juxtaposition of identities, and the questions it poses for their 'audience' about how nature is defined, about whether or not homosexuality is a part of the concept of nature, in a national park or otherwise, and about how certain stereotypes exist concerning popular culture's definition of who a lesbian is, and how she might look.

In the performance of the *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, Dempsey and Millan have developed a thirdspace of being-in-the-world, offering a distinctive way of looking at, interpreting, and acting to change the social spatiality in Banff National Park and in the various locations to which this performance has toured. According to Soja, the thirdspace is simultaneously a:

... distinctive way of looking at, interpreting, and acting to change the spatiality of human life (or, if you will, human geography today); [...] a strategic meeting place for fostering collective political action against all forms of human oppression; a starting point for new and different explorations that can move beyond the 'third term' in a constant search for other spaces; and still more to come (Soja 21-22).

*Lesbian National Parks and Services* establishes a strategic meeting place for fostering collective political action against human oppression. Indeed, drawing from the Field Reports and other texts generated from the performance, it is important to understand the significance of Dempsey and Millan's face-to-face encounter with their 'audience'. Most often this encounter implies an ethical demand in the public to accommodate the Other of lesbian subjectivity; the ethical dimension of this experience is what Soja hoped to encourage in the thirdspace. Moreover, this ethical demand is felt profoundly because the 'audience', in the case of these performances in Banff National Park, were mostly unaware that they were participating in a 'performance'. Finally, it's important to appreciate the tremendous humour and wit that accompanies Dempsey and Millan's attempts to clothe the sexualized lesbian body in the good-natured, knowledgeable and helpful discourse of the park ranger. Humour and sexuality are important elements in the way Dempsey and Millan transformed the social geography of Banff National Park.

Moving from a national park to a national historic site, and thereby from one Canadian landmark to another, we travel southeast to the historic Claybank brick factory in southern Saskatchewan, and Knowhere Production's *Crossfiring / Mama Wetotan*, a community based site-specific performance event that occurred from August 18 until September 2, 2006.<sup>iii</sup> *Crossfiring / Mama Wetotan* featured the work of a broad array of artists, from many disciplines, with the collective focus of investigating and interrogating the significance of the primary resource in this region: the remarkable clay deposit in the area, exposed to the Earth's surface at the end of the Ice Age, that now forms what is known as the Dirt Hills. For the Aboriginal communities who frequented the area, the clay was important for rituals and medicinal purposes; for the European settlers, who arrived later, the clay produced perhaps the most heat resilient refractory brick in North America, as well as some of the most attractive face brick found in the façade of many important buildings across the country. This site-specific event brought together dancers, singers, ceramists, performers, musicians, film, video, and sound artists, both aboriginal and non-aboriginal, from across Canada. The site posed interesting challenges to a number of sound artists because the buildings and landscape offered unique acoustical properties; from massive brick kilns with intensely live reverberation,

to hulking nineteenth century machinery in the factory, to the vast and wind-blown surrounding hills, Claybank provided many mediums for animation through sound.<sup>iv</sup>

*Crossfiring / Mama Wetotan* culminated in a twelve-hour performance event on September 2, 2006. The audience were free to experience various animations all around the brick plant and in the surrounding hills in whatever order they chose; the only governing dramaturgical structure came in the form of a “call back” – a multidisciplinary performance that occurred four times, once every hour in the morning and then again once in the afternoon, where audience were encouraged to gather in the clay barn, in the morning, and then in the brick barn, in the afternoon. The clay barn and brick barn are the two largest buildings on site; in terms of the brick-making process, the clay barn is located at the beginning of the process, and is where the raw material was stored, and the brick barn is at the end, where the finished bricks were stored for pick up by train. Both buildings possessed tremendous qualities for performance; the clay barn had mounds of dry clay and a high ceiling for excellent acoustics; the brick barn provided a long promenade space and the cracks in its decaying wood siding and roof allowed the sun to illuminate the dusty space in a way that subtly suggested the end of the long life this factory has enjoyed. Trevor Herriot, a Saskatchewan author, was commissioned to write poetic text depicting historical periods of the land and the brick plant; the resulting four call back pieces were performed by actors, musicians and dancers around the site under the titles “Industry and Geometry”, “Vision”, “Reclamation”, and “The Keepers.”

Perhaps the greatest insight that can be gained from the praxis of site-specific performances such as *Crossfiring / Mama Wetotan* is the vital role the audience plays in completing the event of each performance. Eugenio Barba has stated that “the theatre's raw material is not the actor, nor the space, nor the text, but the attention, the seeing, the hearing, the mind of the spectator. Theatre is the art of the spectator” (Barba 39). Indeed, site-specific theatre is the art of the spectator because it is the job of the spectator to piece together the found and the fabricated in his or her journey through the site, and ultimately it is the result of the seeing, the hearing, the touch, the attention – indeed, the experience – of the spectator that ensures a living archive of the work of the otherwise ephemeral performance. The deep-mapping and archiving proposed as a possible outcome of *Crossfiring / Mama Wetotan* is what Soja describes as an essential element of the thirdspace; that is, the most encompassing spatial perspective, comparable in scope to the richest forms of the historical and sociological imaginations.

The third and final example of recent, notable site-specific performance in Canada is Radix Theatre Society's *Half a Tank* (2004) an event that created an engaging paradox around the participation of spectators because we experienced the event from within our own automobiles. Described as part auto-circus, part drive-in theatre, this performance, set in a parking lot, was built around a central conceit – the breaking of the five-hundred-thousand-mile barrier on the odometer of a 1970s model car.<sup>v</sup> This (literal) milestone was achieved by the car's being driven the last few miles in circles while the audience watched from the comfort (and safety) of their own cars. The production effortlessly evoked the sense of a small-town, community event. In part, this was created by the on-air chatter of Bob Piston (Radix Artistic Director, Andrew Laurenson), the host of CKAR, who introduced the elements that made up the spectacle, which included an audience sing-along, a car symphony and a Darwinian Derby, where specifically chosen audience members were given remote control, toy cars, which they had to drive in the same space as the circling milestone-vehicle, and avoid being crushed by its comparably massive wheels. The driver (Sean Lang) also performed some impressive driving tricks – at one point hanging out the car window while driving with his feet. These carnivalesque spectacles were punctuated by phases with an almost Zen-like quality – the car simply driving in circles, racking up those miles.

The deliberately low-rent feel to the event simulated a country fair and gave the proceedings a sense of authenticity; that this really was a community celebrating the life of a milestone-vehicle (the history of which – including the fate of the original owner – was referred to throughout the show). But, from within this atmosphere of fair ground celebration, the performance played with a tension about the proceedings: between the isolation of being in cars and the community aspect of the show. As the performance progressed, the elements became progressively darker, matching the growing darkness of the night sky overhead. The community space – the space outside the cars – became less safe while the show itself became more recognizably theatrical. This second phase was dramatically ushered in by a ‘drive-by painting,’ when a 1950s hot rod entered the space and paintballers shot up the circling milestone-vehicle,

covering it in paint. By this point, the sun had set, and the audience was firmly placed within their cars. As the circling vehicle finally neared its milestone, a character was run over and unceremoniously thrown in the trunk. Unable to restart the engine, the driver was forced to push the milestone-vehicle the last few yards to achieve the 500,000-mile goal. The show, now fully theatrical, concluded with a dance piece: Creatures in black cloaks made their way through the performance area and took over the car, while Death rode around on a Segway (a two-wheeled person mover that itself now looked sadly dated). In the end, the milestone-vehicle was towed away and the space cleared, leaving a final image: a burning barrel of oil in the darkness of the parking lot, the only lights coming from those audience members brave enough to risk a flat battery to light up the show.

*Half a Tank* explores the tension Canadians feel about cars; the performance navigates the space between opposites – the joy of the car and the dramatic and negative impact it is having on our society and on our environment. This central tension in the performance matches the order of events in the show, from the undeniable fun and physical joy of the automobile through to the nightmarish conclusion that the oil is rapidly running out and the damage is done. *Half a Tank* explored not just the interior space of the car but also the bleak parking lot; when I saw the show in Toronto in April 2004, it was a rainy day. The impact was sublime: sitting in our car, my family and I were surrounded by a number of activities obviously celebrating the nostalgia and joy of car ownership, but all the while the environment, in the form of the rainy weather and the falling night, threatened and eventually succeeded in dampening (pun intended) the festivities. As audience, you are ultimately left with a feeling of entrapment in your own car, and a disturbing sense of only being able to look at the world through a car window. On this aspect of audience experience in *Half a Tank*, Andrew Templeton has said,

The interior space of the car – not just any car, but the car that audience members arrive in and use everyday – was an important element in the production. We were witnessing something from within a familiar, interior space. There was a tension between feeling that we were participating in a community event and the strange disengagement that happens when we watch events through our windscreen. This form of disengagement from our surroundings is something that happens whenever we drive. We are removed from the environment; it is something we drive through and, if we notice it at all, we do so from an emotional distance (Templeton 49).

Automobiles are loaded with unconscious images of speed and freedom, and anything that impedes that freedom frustrates us. *Half a Tank* illuminates a serious disconnect in most Canadian's relationship to their cars: we transport our vulnerable bodies at high speeds inside these containers made of metal, glass and plastic, rarely reflecting on the environment nor the lives, including our own, that we endanger in this process. *Half a Tank* cleverly opens up a space between the illusion of promise and the void of failure that is the real experience of an automobile. Templeton describes Radix's relationship to the locations they animate the following way: "For Radix, locations are not simple settings or thematic tools but are integral to decoding experience. Productions evolve directly out of the environment and they provide a vehicle for the audience to understand the environment in a new way" (49).

I have attempted to offer a brief glimpse of how the recent work of three different companies in Canada utilize performance to create a thirdspace of understanding as described by Edward Soja. All three use differing tactics and techniques to create live events that manifest Soja's vision of

a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations, investigate-able through its binarized oppositions but also where there is always "other" spaces, heterotologies, and paradoxical geographies to be explored. It can be mapped, but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but it obtains meaning only when practiced and fully *lived* (Soja 28).

And as we experience a thirdspace, perhaps we develop a greater sensitivity to the world around us,

perhaps we learn to perceive more carefully. As David Suzuki suggests, “the messages sent ceaselessly by our bodies and by the other forms of life that share the planet. The best conversations are still those that play on the variations on that great and ancient theme: “I’m here; Where are you?” (Suzuki 197). It is the space of such a dialogue that site-specific performance in Canada is working to open in all of us.

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Andrew Houston is the Views & Reviews Editor of the *Canadian Theatre Review* and a faculty member of the Department of Drama and Speech Communication at the University of Waterloo. In 2002, he and colleague Kathleen Irwin started *Knowhere Productions*, a performance company which had its debut with a multi-disciplinary, site-specific performance in a disused wing of the Saskatchewan Mental Hospital at Weyburn, entitled *The Weyburn Project* ([http://weyburn\\_project.uregina.ca](http://weyburn_project.uregina.ca)). His current research seeks to examine the interface between digital and live events in various environments, in particular how new forms of staging identity and place through virtual reality technologies meet with the same in live interaction. He is a participating artist-researcher in the transcontinental, multidisciplinary project entitled *Common Plants: Cross Pollinations in Hybrid Reality* ([www.yorku.ca/gardens](http://www.yorku.ca/gardens)), and has recently been awarded funding from S.S.H.R.C., the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, and the Ontario Innovation Trust to pursue this research.

<sup>i</sup> See Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, “Lesbian National Parks and Services: Field Reports,” *Private Investigators*. Banff: Banff Centre for the Arts Press, 1995 48-55.

<sup>ii</sup> Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Lesbian National Parks and Services Fieldguide to North America*. Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2002.

<sup>iii</sup> See [www.Crossfiring2006.ca](http://www.Crossfiring2006.ca)

<sup>iv</sup> See Ellen Moffat, “*Claybank Voices: The Specificity of (T)Here*” and Charlie Fox, “*Strata for Crossfiring: Immersive Interactivity with Sound*,” Canadian *Theatre Review* 129 (2006): 86-92.

<sup>v</sup> The car was a 1972 Dodge Diplomat in Vancouver, and in Toronto it was a 1978 Ford LTD.