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Eco-Theatre: Celebrating Our Connection to the More-
Than-Human World

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Trumpeter

BRAD DAVIS: I remember playing for hours in the wildness of a local creek surrounded by suburbs. I remember fishing, watching bears at the dump, and outhouses. I remember reading light years of "SciFi". I remember my anger and sadness in returning home from university to find the creek clearcut and straightened. In playing the role of a priest I began to understand the relationship of power between educator and learner. I remember paddling my boat between "emerald isles on an azure sea" of la mer douce. I remember how no child went without love in the Nigerian village where I lived and taught science for three years. I remember living on the ice immersed in stars between the mainland and the island where I was teaching grades 3/4. I remember my first canoe lean turn in my first season of ten at the Bark Lake Leadership Centre. I have had a dragonfly land on my finger. I remember sitting in my magic spot on the living world of a big cedar stump, while helping someone set up an Earthkeeper program. As a worm in a play, I have spoken for the forest. I have learned to sing in community unashamed of my ability to remember the words or keep a tone. I remember my anger at seeing the corpulent lifestyle of North Americans when I returned from our Filipino popular theatre project. I no longer have a television. I have three sets of letters bsc/bed/med somewhere in a box. I want to paddle the Bow River which defines my bioregion. I discovered improvisational space within the box of theatre. I live with a partner who can feel the earth when she walks. I still like portaging a canoe.

I have found it interesting that as soon as I mention theatre as an approach to transformational learning, fear comes into peoples' eyes, and they immediately protest, "I can't do that!" Yet, as popular theatre facilitator David Diamond (1993, p.24) reasons, "theatre used to be ordinary people singing, dancing, and telling stories. It used to be the way that individuals in the community expressed their fears, hopes and desires." Our society has put theatre into a box of specialization and institutionalization, where only the artistic, creative, intuitive or wild can participate. Ironically, it is exactly those attributes that we can use to reconnect with the more-than-human world,¹ and offer it a voice within our society. Within the box of theatre lies a process which weaves together different ways of both knowing the world and acting on that knowledge, providing a way to spiral into a deeper understanding of oneself, into creating a healthier human community and into a recognition of, and reconnection with, the more-than-human world.

The Box of Theatre

...as I walked into the circle, my heart was pounding. I concentrated on clearing my mind to approach the "nothing moment" of improvisational being. NOTHINGNESS... ...fear...Then, I "thought-felt-acted" to become a tree in the growing sculpture of linked frozen human participants illustrating their vision of sustainable community. I allowed myself/my roots to feel anchored to the earth listening to the babble of human voices. Afterwards, as we discussed our images I saw that most people had become sculptures representing human elements or relationships. I was alone in representing the more-than-human-world.

My experience in becoming a tree illustrates the physicalization of learning that is both so intimidating and yet so enlightening in theatre. Drama instructor Dorothy Heathcote (Wagner,1979: 165) states that, "movement gets at what you cannot state verbally. It produces what all humans hold in common. It also produces all the rituals of a culture." Augusto Boal (1979) expands this belief into transformative practice with his contention that we must first "demechanize" the body from the habitual and mechanical patterns that shape our movement and sensing of the world, in order to create an improvisational space for transformational learning. This demechnization includes providing a space for nonverbal learning and communication that forces us into a different way of knowing the world. This valuing of nonverbal learning can also make it safer for risk taking, and freer in the creative process where language may act as a barrier. The use of learning through movement and physical image in the theatre process provides a new way to gather and interpret information, and to act upon it.

Passion and emotion are considered essential components of the theatre process. This valuing of emotions expands the learning in theatre in a number of ways. It allows the crafting of a safe emotional environment that supports risk taking in the creative process. Secondly, it permits the inclusion of emotions themselves as a valid source of knowledge, as supported by Feminist Pedagogy (Weiler, 1994). Emotion, risk taking, and the physicalization of learning are all further supported by the encouragement of play that is so much a part of theatre process. Play can create an openness to new learning, engage and connect with parts of ourselves which are usually dormant, inaccessible, or well-defended and may encourage or provide the space for creativity (Melamed, 1987). These strands of emotional and physical learning are key to both balancing, and deepening our learning through reason in the theatre process, and in life.

Yet, we continued to use our sense of reason in analysis of the complex issues we encountered and our relationship to them. As I worked through the research and creation phases of my popular theatre group's different projects, I found myself encountering experiences that forced me to question my assumptions and beliefs. What is the cause of deforestation? Loggers, transnationals like Mitsubishi,² overpopulation, or my own society's consumer habits? I was mov-

ing into what Jack Mezirow (1990: 14) calls Perspective Transformation - "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrated perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings." As we researched, and synthesized and created image and dialogue I found myself weaving connections between consumerism, deforestation, and my lifestyle. This has resulted in action such as getting rid of my television and pursuing a more intentionally simple lifestyle.

The strands of physical and emotional learning, and the tension caused by questioning one's perspective of reality all seemed to contribute to shaping a creative improvisational space. It was a place where concepts and feelings flowed, linked and transformed. I found in this place what Virginia Griffin (1988:121) describes as her "spiritual string of learning." "Spirituality is an awareness, wonder, a deep sense of awe of the present, the potential, of persons or nature. It is an awareness and awe of connectedness of what is and what could be. It includes your vision of what could be for yourself - your purpose in life - for others, for nature." At times, it was a place of fear and exultation, of both nothingness and oneness. I found in these moments, within the improvisational space woven by the theatre process, a catalyst to change, in both awareness and intention in my life.

In opening the box of theatre I have found inside a process that through its valuing and weaving of different ways of learning into an improvisational space facilitates a deep process of critical reflection and action upon that knowledge. This movement is further enhanced and broadened through the formation of a learning community focused on creation and transformation. Furthermore, I realized that while the theatre process has trained me to better move into this place of improvisational being. It also showed me that this is a place that could be reached in my life through other existing pathways. Finally, I found in this box a potential way to recognize and connect with the more-than-human world on both a spiritual and community level with the more-than-human world.

The Bridge of Popular Theatre

As the Filipino, mythological dracula-like character Aswan bit slowly into the Newfoundland fisherman's neck his wife Nettie cried out, "the Aswan is killing my husband in the same way that overfishing by big business is sucking the life out of small fishing communities. How can we save him?," she asks the audience. The audience slowly begins to shout back answers. "Enforce the 7 mile limit"Aswan reels back in pain. "Tell the politicians"... Aswan grins and leans in towards the neck! "Encourage community control of the reefs" ...The Aswan slumps backwards in impending defeat. Footprints

Project3

My theatre group, the Show and Tell Popular Theatre Collective, does popular theatre. It is an approach to theatre which bridges the walls of the boxes of traditional theatre, therapy, community development and adult education. The aim of popular theatre is to encourage social and personal transformation by promoting "analysis, discussion, and eventually, action in the world - both individual and collective" (Spry in Schutzman, 1994:224). This includes providing a voice for those who are not being heard, or are oppressed in a society. In Canada, these aims have been influenced historically by the development of political theatre to provide a voice for a growing "national theatre" for small communities within the nation and finally, by the infusion of ideas from Africa, the Caribbean and South America (Filewood, 1990). The Canadian context has been further shaped by a societal analysis that includes external and internalized oppression due to class, race, sexuality and gender and their interlocking effects. Thus, Canadian popular theatre deals mainly with issues of social justice involving marginalized groups in Canada such as women, indigenous people, workers, people of color and immigrants, and occasionally with environmental issues.

Popular theatre is further defined by an increased level of community or audience participation. A higher level of involvement in a project increases the potential for transformation. (Mda 1993) Transformation will occur through a process of praxis - the combination of critical reflection, upon personal and societal assumptions, beliefs and metaphors, and action upon that knowledge. As in most transformational learning, popular theatre projects are facilitated by an external change agent who in Canada tend to be theatre professionals, theatre companies, or like our group, development educators or community activists. In popular theatre the potential for praxis begins with the initiation of a project based on a community's stories, and their inclusion in the research process. Listening to a community's stories provides the important space for their voice to be heard and valued. After this research process our group has taken the information into an internal creation process, to work towards creating a performance that contains these stories. The aesthetics of a performance are usually simple, and reflective of the experience and consciousness of the audience.

Popular theatre performances will often have some type of participatory component. As the audience names, or acts out, possible solutions during the performance such as dealing with the Aswan, it essentially rehearses for action. In Boal's Forum Theatre, audience members are invited up on stage to act out possible solutions to a community problem. In our projects we have at least attempted to involve the audience by including a discussion period after the play. However, popular theatre projects that include the community in the creation process and performance are still thought to provide the greatest potential for transformation (Mda, 1993; Boal, 1995). In Canada, this kind of involvement

is rare although there is a growing community play movement where community members, with the aid of a team of theatre facilitators, write and perform a play based on issues within their own community. Finally, while our group has only experimented with this level of community participation, we have seen the evidence in support of this theory for increased transformation potential with increased community involvement with our own theatre group members' transformation.

Wendell Berry (1986:19) argues that we have abdicated our power, "to specialists of various competencies and responsibilities that were once personal and universal," which is often the case with theatre, and its connection to creativity in our society. While this does not mean that we should eliminate those who have trained in the rigor of theatre to act as provocateur and connectors to the creativity of our species, we do need to bring theatre back into our communities from those boxes of specialization and institutionalization. Boal (1979) sees popular theatre as a way for people to use the theatre process to metamorphose from being spectators in their lives to becoming spect-actors, capable of shaping their lives.

The Creation of Eco-Theatre

...as I /river spoke to the others in the circle I could feel the flow and pulsation of moving, wearing down, slowing in eddies, feeling temporarily blocked by dams, yet patient. I could feel anger? ...at the poisons I carried, unable to dilute, causing death to those who depended on me. Through my mask, words gush forth, of pain, and anger and patience. I see around me the nodding of masks, wearing human figures, of dolphin and douglas fir and squirrel. Afterwards I...human...Brad...felt closer to the more than human world that surrounded us that evening. I could feel the residual sadness and anger generated by the council, yet also the hope that was at times expressed. Was this a real feeling? ...Or simply a projection of my human interpretation. Does it matter? For a time, I felt connected, I understood.. I spoke. Council of All Beings Reflection.

Popular theatre is generally used to address issues of the human community in Canada, and around the world. However, more and more the vision is being offered that our disconnection from the more than human world is a root cause for our social injustice, and that we must acknowledge our oppression of this community (Shiva 1989; Hall and O' Sullivan, 1994). This has resulted in the growth of popular theatre groups who see themselves as providing a voice for the more-than-human world in their performances such as Precipice Theatre Society (All performances including Footprints), Headlines Theatre (Mamu), and our group Show and Tell (Worms' World Too, Footprints). In these projects, environmentally rooted problems have been the seeds of the stories researched.

These projects were characterized by a research process that includes both human and more-than-human worlds. In their research for *Nature Bats Last*, a performance that looked at the plight of the songbirds who migrate between Boreal and Tropical Forests, the Precipice troupe spent time immersed in Alberta's boreal forest with both human and more-than-human communities, who subsequently became the basis for characters in the performance. Providing a space in the research and performance for the more-than-human world is a key element of these projects. These groups have attempted to use theatre to provide the more than human world with a voice - the voice of an oppressed community.

Others, such as John Seed and Joanna Macy(1988), have focused on weaving theatre process and ritual together to allow participants to deeply experience their connection with the more-than-human world in heart and body. Through a series of activities, including guided imagery, critical reflection, meditation and ritual creation, participants are guided through a process of grieving for the pain of the Earth, connecting with an entity in the more-than-human community, making a mask of that entity and using it to bring its voice to a Council of All Beings. My experience within the Council, related at the beginning of this section, took me into a place of deep rational and emotional analysis, and improvisation through speaking with mask in the council, where I felt somehow part of something larger than my isolated human self.

Gary Snyder (1995) proposes an interesting variation called a Village Council of All Beings which combines community theatre and the council. The Village Council would be grounded in the place of the participants, who would be from both the human and, through mask, the more than human world. A kind of Village Council can be seen in the use of ritual theatre by groups enacting traditional Earth-based spiritual practices, such as Paganism (Crowley, 1996). In their outdoor gatherings, there has been a return to ritual processions including, through mask work, dance, music, drumming and connection to place, human and more than human participants.

These Eco-theatre approaches have been generated by a Western culture attempting to reconnect with the land, their spirituality and themselves. In support of their growth we can look to the parallel rise in the recognition, understanding and valuing of traditional and contemporary indigenous knowledge. The weave of theatre, healing, ritual and connection to the land is an important part of the wellness of their communities. An example of this are the Spirit dancers of the Salish who, using mask, music and dance, represent the entities of the more-than-human world in a participative and healing, community celebration (Jilek, 1982). Their example demonstrates how theatre has provided a voice for the healing and celebration of human and more than human communities.

The theatre process provides us, as individuals and community, with a way to enrich our learning and of demechanizing our movements and thinking habits. It encourages the growth of the improvisational self that exists in all of us to

some degree. Popular theatre attempts to bring theatre back into the sphere of community from its confined specialization and institutionalization. Facilitated by popular theatre practitioners, educators or creators of ritual, it becomes a process of reconnection to the more-than-human world, and provides it with a voice in our society. Perhaps for many of us, hope for reconnection with theatre might come "in the capacity to look past old theories that may obscure understanding and even promise" (Griffin, 1996: 63). As Anderson (1993:11) reminds us, "Theatre is part of what it is to be human in community. By recognizing theatre's roots in ritual - in community celebration - we re-establish connection with things larger than ourselves."

Notes

1. I have chosen to use David Abram's phrase "more than human" world from his book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) instead of "nature" or the "environment".
2. ALPAC (Alberta Pacific), the world's largest Kraft pulp mill, located in Athabasca, Alberta is owned and operated by Mitsubishi.
3. A full description of our Footprints project can be found in Keough, Carmona and Grandinetti, *Convergence Journal*, 1995, XXVIII (4), p. 5-15.

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