

The Documentary Body: From Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre

Alan Filewod, University of Guelph

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Ewan went to the factory floor to write his songs and plays
He took his pen to the wastelands, where traveling people stay
To the people with no property, the people with no choice
He used his craft and learning to give them a louder voice
He left us with a thousand songs.

Dave Rogers, "Ewan's Song" (Rogers 84)

i. Banner Theatre's One Night Stand

The George Luscombe Theatre, University of Guelph, May 5, 2005: I am watching the reformation of British documentary theatre in a performance that dissolves theatricality, erases its national frames, and refutes the disciplinarity of theatre craft. The performance is almost lacking in affect. Banner Theatre consists of (tonight) three musicians who play a song cycle in dialogue with digital projections of actuality: testimonial interviews and filmscapes. They call their performances "video ballads," gesturing directly to Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker's BBC Radio Ballads, from which they derive (Watt). Dave Rogers, Banner's director and preeminent songwriter, began his career with Parker and MacColl, and his long history with Banner refutes Raphael Samuel's conclusion that the workers theatre tradition had lost its historical continuity in Britain¹. The theatre they are performing in is another manifestation of that living, embodied and material continuity. It commemorates a Canadian director who had

joined Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl's Theatre Workshop just before it moved to Stratford East, and who subsequently returned to Toronto to spend his life building on the theatrical techniques that Littlewood and MacColl had developed for twenty years.

Tonight, two vectors of continuity from Theatre Workshop converge in this space.

Banner has never heard of George Luscombe, and Luscombe never knew of Banner, but they were deeply connected through history, affiliation and culture. Their convergence in a small Canadian university town provides an opportunity to consider the historical movement of actor-centered documentary theatre, and the crisis in performance ethics it produces.

In 30 years of work in and around Birmingham, the various members of Banner Theatre – of whom Dave Rogers has been the constant presence, as founder, director, songwriter and performer – have moved from front-line agitprops and the blends of documentary and clowning that were common idiom in the 1960s, to more formalized, theatrically reduced shows, now often developed in collaboration with Ground Zero Productions in Edmonton, Alberta, and its director Don Bouzek. In a sequence of video ballads under the group title of *Local Stories/ GlobalTimes* Banner produced shows focusing on issues of social justice, migrancy, forced dislocation and refuge seekers in an embracing political analysis that traces the actual human cost of corporate globalization and militarized imperium. The series began in 2001 with *Migrant Voices*, based on the experience of Kurdish and Iraqi refugees in Britain, followed by *Burning Issues*, commissioned by the National Union of Mineworkers to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the miners' strike in 2004 and *Wild Geese*, about exile and forced migration of workers from Ireland, the Caribbean, the Mid-East and Asia, in 2005.

Although I had written about Banner and have followed their work closely, I had never actually seen them perform live until the spring of 2005, when I was able to bring *Wild Geese* to Guelph². Having written about Banner and Luscombe in different contexts, having known Rogers and Luscombe personally, and having brought Banner to this convergence, I have placed myself in my own frame of analysis. Consequently, I find myself examining own experience of seeing that show in order to extrapolate the crisis that I suggest Banner exposes in contemporary documentary theatre, and beyond that, in our practice of theatre-going.

Banner challenges ideologically constituted modes of spectatorship by displacing our expectation of spectatorial pleasure. Perhaps the best way to describe the video ballad is to describe what I saw, and my ambivalent delight and discomfort in the deregimented presentation. In the spring of 2005, Bouzek was arranging a tour of *Wild Geese* in Alberta and Ontario; Banner came to Guelph because I have been for many years a member of the board for Ground Zero, and I had access to a university theatre. In contrast to peak disciplinary companies like Theatre du Soleil (a comparison that occasioned by the international celebrity of Mnouchkine's documentary play on refuges and migrancy, *Le Dernier Caravansérail*), which tour into the facilities that embody the performance of the state, Ground Zero tours into facilities that embody living in the state. With patchwork funding from various councils and unions, Bouzek was able to set up a tour by selling performances for cost-recovery. That means he phoned me and asked if I could sponsor a performance in Guelph. I contacted activist friends in labour and student political circles and they agreed we could sell 200 tickets. At \$10 each, that could mean a surplus to donate to a cause.

This is a familiar story but it begs a pause to think about it. The performance I brought to Guelph was actually a double bill, because Don was also touring a video ballad by Ground Zero with folksinger Maria Dunn, built on a song cycle of songs about Alberta's working class history. (Two performances for a \$1000. Five musicians, two techies and a director, traveling by van, sleeping in my friends' houses. Political intervention theatre like Banner operates literally on the level of household economies for most people, where \$1000 may mean meeting the mortgage or not. When compared to the astronomical cost of installing, *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, into the Lincoln Centre, we have reason to ask how economies of scale affect the ethics of performance).

Arriving in Guelph without celebrity and cultural capital, Banner pulled an audience of about 40 people. It was a hard sell. The local activist music store wouldn't promote it because it was 'theatre'; the public library wouldn't display a poster because it was 'political'. The tour was partially sponsored by the Canadian Union of Public Employees but the CUPE office on campus (which organizes part-time instructors and postgraduate teaching assistants) wouldn't promote it because it was sponsored by a tenured faculty member. The Steelworkers didn't answer my calls. And so on: the litany is familiar to anyone working in popular theatre in Canada.

So it was with some awkwardness and shame that I sat down to see the show, which began not with a theatrical flourish but with a casual entrance by the musicians to check equipment, and a brief introduction by Bouzek, who explained the genesis of the project in a detheatricalizing prologue that served to offset our expectations of theatre decorum in the performance to follow. Enter Maria Dunn and her fiddler accompanist, standing firmly in place side by side in front of the large projection screen that dominated

the space. Their performance of *Troublemakers* was disconcerting. The music, with Dunn's blend of celtic folk and country & western was catchy, and her voice carried passionate anger. Behind her Bouzek's image sequences and voice-overs provided context and argument. Although it seems like a concert, her performance has none of the adlibs and asides that respond to the concert audience. It was austere and rehearsed, so that her songs established a dialogue with the digital images and voiceovers.

The narrative technique of testimony and theatricalized response is conventional to the community documentary form that was so widespread in Canada, the UK and Australia in the last decades of the 20th century, but the performance method derives as much as from high formalism as it does from popular culture. The basic theatrical vocabulary at work here is not unlike – and is some ways is related to – the typifying formalism of the New York avant-garde: actor-musicians, digital video projection and audio recordings creating a montage of recorded actuality and performed commentary³. The mix of live music, digital video, documentary collage and news item voiceovers disrupts normative patterns of theatrical reception. It isn't theatre (insofar as it does not acknowledge theatrical desire) but neither is it video, or concert. It is the performance of hybridity, as forms migrate and reterritorialize, across disciplinary, cultural and national borders.

In *Wild Geese*, which followed *Troublemakers* after a brief intermission, all of these elements were present but amplified. The film sequences were more elaborate, combining direct address interview sequences, agitprop graphics and animation. The cast of three musicians, played in the cultural fusions commonly referred to as “world” music: Dave Rogers carried vocal in an idiom that traces directly to Ewan MacColl, Jila

Bakhshayesh moved between Iranian and klezmer styles, and Fred Wisdom triangulated them with a strong reggae beat.

Like Brecht and Weill's *Mahagonny* songspeil in 1930, the performance of theatrical songs against projections is sustained in the conventions of theatre aesthetics: rigorously rehearsed, constituted in spectatorship, driven by narrative and argument, but it denies the theatrical desire for sensation and spectacle. I was fascinated by the *presence* of the musician-actors in performance. Unlike concert musicians –especially in the popular modes they perform – they do not interact with the audience. Their onstage interaction is improvisational but not improvised. They move about in relation to each other within delineated conventions. Rogers for instance, might wander over and watch Wisdom during a guitar riff; a moment of song might establish eye contact and gesture. Like musicians, they play with each other; like actors they play off each other. And at important moment, they watch the digital video with us.

Because their gestural range is narrow and un-affective, my emotional response was redirected from the presence of the actor to the powerful, media-savvy projections. In this way, the theatrical apparatus is collapsed in the low-affect presence of the performer and the projection screen. This is not a refusal of the cultural technology of mise-en-scene and dramaturgical fable, but a compression in which theatrical processes are reduced to barest essentials.

Sitting in the George Luscombe Theatre with a small audience, I felt that I was watching a performance and a demonstration of a performance, and I recognized that this was a function of the coded decorum of the theatre space, as opposed to a club or union hall, and a consequence of a small audience, that was much less likely to hoot and holler.

But at the same time, this was the actual fact of theatrical migrancy: shoestring touring to small audiences in unsuitable places. All performances are contingent. Banner's presence at Guelph was a product of a long chain of events and conditions but the most significant was the ability of digital media to bring bodies together – literally in the case of Banner and Ground Zero -- and for bodies to join together to respond to digital media. Migrant bodies and migrating cultural practices: my ambivalence in the end was not one of performance conventions, but a recognition that this community in performance would connect and move on. The migrant passes through.

The reduced affect and theatrical refusal in Banner's performance was unsettling, especially for me in the particular space of the George Luscombe Theatre. George Luscombe's work had a formative effect on theatrical culture in Canada, although it was not well known elsewhere. For 25 years, his company, Toronto Workshop Productions, continued the actor-centered, left-wing ensemble theatrical method that Littlewood had developed. His plays were socially engaged, frequently drawn from actuality and documentary sources, and exuberantly theatrical. Like MacColl and Littlewood, Luscombe came to theatre from a working-class family, and brought a culture of craft discipline, artisanry and work regime to the rehearsal room. From his Theatre Workshop days, he built a creative ensemble method grounded in rigorous training in Laban's "efforts" and Stanislavskian analysis. Luscombe was famously fierce in his demand that the stage must be respected with severe attention. "No-one eats, drinks, reads newspapers or plays pinochle in my theatre," he once said (Filewod 55). The stage was a workspace, to be treated with respect.

For Luscombe, theatre required intensive craftwork, physical discipline, spatial imagination and textual passion. Banner Theatre seemingly presents as the complete opposite: acting has disappeared, space is reduced to utility, and text becomes lyric. And yet these two modes are inextricably connected, historically as well as theatrically. Historically, they derive from the same time and place; theatrically they both result from the crisis of the actor's body and bodywork in documentary theatre.

The dominant historical model of documentary theatre argues that the theatre is a form of local communication that critiques and humanizes the information flow of mass communication. Derek Paget offers two fundamental modes: the *recording* documentary that "believes that the effacement of the subjective creator(s) of cultural production will produce an "objective" account" (39), and a "radical/revolutionary reporting" (40) mode that exposes context and builds critical argument through montage. For Paget, documentary theatre is a "coherent (and self-defining) signifying practice," located in the specific tradition of Meyerhold, Brecht and Piscator. The recording mode, he argues, uses finely honed naturalistic acting techniques to present a "supercharged reality" (42). In contrast, the Piscatorian tradition inserts "radical critiques of dominant ideologies into stage performance." Paget characterises this radical documentary tradition, which he sees working through Littlewood, and Peter Cheeseman, by five key performance principles, noting that documentary may use projections of actualities; may quote from printed doc sources: slides, placards, spoken; may address audience directly; may utilize music and song as critique; and may use a "cool acting style" and plural roles (60). The subjunctive definition draws our attention to the narrative and political uses to which these techniques are deployed. Hence for Paget, documentary is a mode rather than a form.

In this, Paget draws on and revises the earlier theorizing of Peter Weiss, whose 1968 essay, “Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre” articulated the principles of arguments, montage and critical examination he attempted to achieve with his “oratorio” documentary of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, *The Investigation*. Very briefly paraphrased, his fourteen propositions argue that in order to explain reality “in minute detail”, documentary theatre offers an analytical model of reality that places the audience in a tribunal. As such it must be partisan and grounded in political formation, but must shun invention as it submits facts for appraisal (139-143).

In both of these models, the actor stands the stage as an information expert whose mastery of performance vocabularies exposes the subtexts and connections of actuality. In this sense, the actor is not a surrogate but a mediator whose command of artistic vocabulary embodies a critical attitude to the actuality it presents. This is of course Brechtian acting theory, and it works very well, until it comes to the juncture that Brecht himself came to very early: why not bypass the factuality of the documentary to create invented models that show the critical problem more efficiently, more intelligently and artistically? Why not complete the act of surrogation by releasing the ethical obligation to actuality source material? On one hand, Peter Weiss’s propositions advance a powerful argument for a pure form of verbatim theatre, but in this model, the regime of actuality is ultimately less important than what Patrice Pavis has called “combative montage” (110). Robert Cohen has made the point that Weiss’s *The Investigation*, perhaps the most famous verbatim documentary in an increasingly crowded field, is “in its obsession with the destruction of the human body [...] a surrealist text. It is organized according to a topography of atrocity whose aesthetic is hallucinatory and oneiric rather than factual.”

More recently, responding to the popularity of forensic and verbatim documentaries at a time when the circulation of digital information reorders political, cultural and disciplinary boundaries, critics have questioned the textual politics of documentary modes. Carol Martin questions the representational strategies of documentary efforts, and identifies six “functions” of the form: “to reopen trials,” “to create additional historical accounts,” “to reconstruct an event,” “to intermingle autobiography with history,” “to critique the operations of documentary and fiction”, and “to elaborate the oral culture of theatre” (12). She argues that “The paradox of a theatre of facts that uses representation to enact a relationship with the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable theatre” (13).

As many critics have noted, the foundational fact established and critiqued in theatrical documentaries is most commonly the social production of the performance itself.⁴ In this line of thought, the “content” of documentary theatre is not the textual topic of contestation or engagement, or the rhetorics of forensic argument, but the very paradox that Martin identifies. The subject of documentary theatre, in this reasoning, is the actor, and more specifically, the actor’s *work*. Discursively documentary theatre is one particular application or subset of a larger domain of performance in which the work of the actor – the work procedure of the actor – becomes extratheatrical, in that it produces work product – knowledge and feelings -- that circulate in the world outside the theatre.

From the earliest points of theorized practice, the presence of the actor has been a problem for documentary. The history of documentary theatre is neither a coherent narrative nor a genealogical throughline but an assembly of experiments and local practices that produce mutually informing connectivities. It has generated numerous

forms that continue to adapt and proliferate, along with a baggage train of theories, manifestos and reactions. All of those forms have been attempts to reconcile the theatrical variables of space, audience, actors and textual actuality into a transformative aesthetic machine that can manipulate the real world. All of these have as their object the collapsing of the distance between performance and actuality, but they are suspended in the crisis of the mediating presence of the actor.

The actor embodies the actual, but the actual is perceived only through the effort of the actor's body. The actuality so perceived in the surrogative moment also erases that which the actor does not embody, so that "reality" collapses into the presence of the actor who stands before us as subject and object, document and documenter, whose authority derives simultaneously from the representation and the erasure of actuality. The documentary process seeks typifying figures and moments, a selectively particularized construction of the real, and embodies it as a totality. The phenomenal presence of the enacted typification becomes the actual as we experience, somatically and sensationally, in the theatrical moment. But the more we experience the performance as the phenomenal reality, the wider the gap between the subject and object. Performance threatens to become more "real" than the actuality it enacts. Consequently, it is not unusual for documentary theatre to offset this by resorting to the endorsement of the informing actuality – which the performance has particularized as the experienced *totality* of the actuality.

If we examine the history of documentary theatre as a rhizomorphic archive of procedures and perceptions rather than a genealogy of forms, we can discern a history that solidifies around the problem of the working actor. Relocating our understanding of

documentary from form to practice enables us to see a way through the gaps that fracture the modernist narrative – through the interstices of gender, colonialism, racializations and the cultural narratives that seek continuity through imperial canonicity. It enables us to draw historically separated phenomena into the same frame, and to suggest that the local and obscure may be more historically typical than the metropolitan and canonical (so that for instance, the condition of contemporary political theatre in the United Kingdom might be more accurately perceived in a small Ontario city than on the South Bank).

This approach suggests that “documentary theatre” as a category gestures to a fluid cluster of practices that share a concern with strategies of performance effort, working class culture, and work as ethical and political procedure. If work represents work in the theatre, what is the nature, location and value of theatrical work? Who owns it and its products? In Britain the development of worker-centered documentary theatre has followed the trajectory of labour culture in the 20th century, with a shifting emphasis away from aesthetics towards the political processes of cultural production. One result of this has been the total refusal of specular aesthetics, as manifest in Banner Theatre, and the transnational migration of documentary processes in which the actor’s body reformulates actuality to express socially contingent and local knowledges. This has led to the apparent paradox that, through one vector of emergence at least, the documentary theatre continues in work that does not at first glance seem theatrical in the one instance, or documentary in the other.

ii. Documentary Theatre as Work Procedure

He formed a workers’ theatre, the street became a stage

Poetry had taken sides, “We demand a living wage”

He studied Marx and Shakespeare, read the plays of Brecht
Drama joined the battle lines beside the dispossessed
He left us with a thousand songs.

Dave Rogers, "Ewan's Song" (Rogers 84)

Reporting to an American readership in *Theatre Arts Monthly* in 1931, Maurice Brown drew attention to the formalist stagings that combined European and American modernities at Dartington. He was particularly moved by the aesthetic figuration of the social processes of industrial work:

At one moment there were six or eight slender and impersonal female figures, "clad in white samite, mystic, wonderful," presenting the song of the morning stars as Blake might have seen it; at another the surge, rush tragedy and comedy of a factory, with chattering workgirls, hands beating complicated rhythms, human beings as time-clocks, as levers, as the pulse and rhythm of great engines (867)

On one level, this is a familiar moment in early 20th century staging. The iconic representation of labour was to be found in political pageantry, in expressionist and futurist mise-en-scenes, and in the radical dance movements of the 1920s and 30s. From this two directions of emergence can be traced. In one the representation of work infuses new textualities, as the representation of work becomes the representation of the worker. The formal investigations in dramaturgy spawned from this problematizes fundamental precepts of narrative technique as they explored the relationship of dramaturgy and spectatorship. This would be one of the tributaries of 20th century dramatic theory, as the questions exposed by the class positioning of representation and

audience widened to question the complex of hegemonic practices inscribed in dramatic technique and critical reception. It is however the second direction that is at play in this discussion, as the representation of work exposes the question of its own working process. Maurice Brown was enthralled with the lyrical beauty of the dance-mime, but like the classical ballet, it concealed its own effort.

It was through the radical vector of modern dance that theatre artists found the exposed aesthetics of work that could position the actor as a worker in performances that returned the gaze of the (subjunctive) worker-spectator. In the theatre, Stanislavsky had initiated physical regimes to train actors to control their creative states, and Mayakovsky had explored Taylorist ideas in his biomechanics. But while in these exercises actors took on the responsibility of training their bodies in regimes of work, the work they produced served the *mise-en-scène*. Cloaked in a narrative of industrial modernity, the actor stood the stage as part of the scenographic machine.

The idea of *mise-en-scène* as machine had powerful resonance in the decades between the world wars, not least because it provided the illusion of a trans-national class-based aesthetic accessible to all workers, and which therefore performed as evidence of an international cultural location. The most extreme example of this was the mechanical and mechanized performances at the Bauhaus, and the highly choreographed, tempo-driven mass chants of the German agitprop troupes. Exported to the United States by John Bonn and the Prolet-bühne, the drilled “flashlight” staging (Bonn) and “ringing, galvanic forcefulness” (Buchwald) of the German agitprop style modeled the actor as machine –part (until refuted as “left sectarianism” in the return to humanist dramaturgies and national cultures in the move to the Popular Front), no less than in an army squad. In

these regimes, systematized body procedures and repetitive drill carried another equate with industrial work, by depersonalizing the actor. Synchronized muscular effort may entail a loss of autonomy but at the same time it has the capacity to stimulate pleasure and endurance.⁵

As a representation of work, biomechanics and drilled agitprop were capable of powerful impacts, but with the work of the actor contained and masked by the work product – the textualized *mise-en-scène* which reinforced the governance of the director-creator. Seen in this light, the reconciliation of agitprop and narrative drama in the genre of the living newspaper (which was never as uniform as the name suggests) had the effect of not only engaging theatre in topical actuality, but constituting the work of the actor in the industrial systems of journalism and newspaper production.

The ethical paradox inherent in this position – that the actor's work is to conceal the actor's work in the representation of work -- seems to have tugged at the young Jimmy Miller as he walked his path to becoming Ewan MacColl. Looking back in his autobiography to his early attempts at agitprop in Salford, he wrote, "The agitprop sketches in our repertoire made no demands on us as actors and this was the real cause of our dissatisfaction. We were clumsy, didn't know how to move properly, and knew nothing about developing our voices" (208). In her own memoir, Littlewood has Miller saying to her when they met, "Only the best is good enough for the workers. Agitprop is crude in the age of Appia. Don't discount beauty"(91).

For MacColl and Littlewood, the hierarchal distinctions of creative control were to be resisted and reformulated. Their anti-authoritarianism chafed at agitprop but thrilled at its theatrical power. They sought a craft disciplinarity that could train actors as creative

artists rather than scenographic elements, that would honour their own cultural traditions of artisanship and work, and which could be used in the widest possible spread of theatrical styles and textualities. Littlewood and MacColl sought discipline and regime but they also sought the individuated aesthetics that fused craftwork and art, so that disciplinarity was imposed by the artistic task, and regime developed by the creative self. They found their solution in their conjunction of Stanislavsky and Rudolf Laban.

From Stanislavsky, they took – and taught themselves -- techniques of rigorous dramaturgical analysis that gave actors agency as creative analysts, and gave them clear procedures for improvisational scene building. This was Stanislavsky as he was appreciated and taught on radical left, not as a architect of depth psychology in the performance of dramatic character but as the originator of disciplined procedures for entering and controlling creative states and to analyze and embody subtext. Nor was it the Stanislavsky modeled by the institutional left of the Popular Front, particularly Unity Theatre, where the focus was on thematic analysis in scene study.⁶ The circulation of Stanislavkian techniques in left theatre culture had always operated as an ideological barometer. In the radical agitprop phase of the militant “Third Period” of class struggle, the emphasis was on the actor’s creative imagination, the physical exercises devised to control it, and the microanalysis of text in terms of action objectives. In the Popular Front years, Stanislavsky’s work became a regulating script that proved the necessity of unity as a thematic and aesthetic condition, and as such became one of the critical means of justification in the theory of socialist realism. For Littlewood and MacColl, socialist realism was an anti-theatrical retreat to bourgeois aesthetics. Having been expelled from the Communist Party (in part over this very issue), and thereby released from doctrinal

authority, and rebellious by nature, they found a Stanislavsky that favoured the actor as investigator of process rather than student of the text.

And they were already dancing. In modern dance, fascination with mechanics as social text and method had led to an appreciation of the performer's muscular effort as a creative process that expanded the endurance and reach of the body. As Theatre Union came together, Littlewood and MacColl integrated classes in ballet and mime into their training sessions. Goorney offers a fascinating anecdote that suggests one source for this early integration of dance, in Ernst Toller's production of his play *Draw The Fires* at Manchester Repertory Theatre in 1935. As Goorney explains it, Toller

needed actors to play stokers, stripped to the waist, shoveling coal into boilers.

The actors in the Company were totally unconvincing. Toller was in despair, and Joan suggested he use Ewan and his friends, who were quite used to handling a shovel and making themselves heard over the noise of machinery (7).

MacColl's performance was an early expression of what would become a signature fact of Theatre Workshop: the working body of the working-class actor, the body that works to demonstrate its own ability to work, that transforms muscularity into performance. Littlewood referred to the new form as "dance theatre," and the new form of documentary exemplified by *Johnny Noble* and *Uranium 235* – plays that established a template for the collectively created documentary agitprops that typified the radical counterculture in the 1960s and 80s – were built out of movement and mime sequences.

Littlewood and MacColl had been using Laban technique well before they actually met Laban and trained with him in person (and in MacColl's case, married his assistant). The encounter with Laban offered a secularization of modern dance that

relocated the aesthetics of dance into the muscular effort of the actor-worker. Laban speaks of “the human body engine”, and his “efforts” became well known only after they were directed towards educational and instructional ends (8). Looking back in her memoir, Littlewood sees this as a cause for regret, because more than a series of techniques, Laban gave the Theatre Workshop ensemble the systematic yet playful movement discipline of dance. Like Meyerhold, Laban studied the body as a machine, but rather than looking at the mechanics of body movement and articulation – the body as instrument – he studied the “human engine” in terms of the work it produced. The result of his workshops with Littlewood’s ensemble was a team of actors who were trained to exercise creative exploration, who could work in unison, and whose muscular work on stage served to authenticate the material they performed.

This was the actor who could develop documentary theatre beyond its agitprop origins. Theatre Workshop was not the only group playing with actuality theatre in the 1940s, but its emphasis on the creative ensemble suggests a significant divergence between the documentary process, which became increasingly reliant on actuality as it focused more on the authenticity of the actor’s creative work in performance, and the living newspapers of Unity Theatre, which subordinated the actor to the textualization of actuality. Littlewood herself became more focused on using the actor’s creativity in classical and dramatic texts. The fragmentation of the ensemble in 1955 may have been related to this shift in direction.

A major consequence of that split was George Luscombe’s return to Canada and his commitment to continuing the ensemble workshop method in Toronto. (Later in his life he claimed that Littlewood herself had acknowledged that he was the only director

who continued her work.) In his 28 years of directing in Toronto, Luscombe -- like Littlewood -- returned to touchstone productions over the years to remake them. His theatre specialized in the performance of non-dramatic materials, all using the same workshop method. But unlike Littlewood, Luscombe showed little interest in the classics or the emergent dramatic literature of the theatrical revolution of the '60s and '70s. He kept his black-box theatre small (it was famous for its uncomfortable bench seating) and simple, and he demanded rigorous ensemble training even when it ran into opposition from an emergent anti-authoritarian theatre culture.

Like Littlewood, Luscombe developed a theatre in which the boundaries of documentary and invention were blurred in the larger project of actor-centered non-dramatic performances. The 'document' might be a transcription of oral history, but it might just as well be speech from Shakespeare, or a book by Dickens. In one of his most celebrated plays, *Chicago '70*, the ensemble improvised scenes from phoned-in reports from the notorious Chicago conspiracy trial, performing them in a parodic frame drawn from *Alice in Wonderland*. For Luscombe, the real work of documentary theatre was the working actor bringing disciplinary craft to bear on political issues. Actuality and fiction were equally real in the working body of the actor.

In the end however, Luscombe and Littlewood were caught in the deeper paradox of documentary theatre, which is not a paradox of representation and actuality, but of audience reception and sensation. The more affective the performances were, the more they drew exuberant theatrical energy from the mastery of the actors, the more popular they were. For both this seems to have created a pressure to sustain a measure of theatrical excitement which gave them less and less room to explore. In Luscombe's case,

every production that failed to meet the astounding theatrical and popular success of his most famous show (*Ten Lost Years*, in 1974) was cited as evidence of his artistic decline and obsolescence. As Littlewood found at Stratford East (and as MacColl may have predicted when he opposed the move to a London theatre), so too did Luscombe find that an ensemble workshop framed in a theatre economy can easily be captured by the demands of arts council accountability and audience statistics. Like Theatre Workshop, Toronto Workshop Productions fought a long and losing battle with arts councils that chipped away at their funding base. In this, Littlewood and Luscombe both came to the same crisis that Erwin Piscator had met in Berlin a half-century earlier.

iii Surrogation and Mobility

In 1929, looking back at what he considered to be his failed attempts at developing a self-sustaining political theatre, Piscator wrote that, “like a red thread running through this book, though the history of my undertakings runs the realization that the proletariat, whatever the reason may be, is too weak to support a theatre of its own” (324). For Piscator, an epic documentary theatre that modeled and explained the history from within required a politicized audience that could absorb this experience critically and apply it. The authority of the theatre derives from its critical analysis. Piscator himself made the point that, “That we could not stop fascism with our theatre was abundantly clear to us all from the outset. What our theatre was supposed to do was communicate critical responses, which, translated into practical politics, might possibly have stopped fascism” (vi). In an age of mass political movements, this led him to the conclusion that an audience of the masses must be a mass audience, and this in turn drove him to seek increasingly larger stages and venues. His unrealized vision for a “total

theatre” as sketched by Gropius bears a startling similarity to a modern high-tech football stadium. The modernist assumption of cultural access – if you build it, they will come – failed. The masses didn’t come. “We had gone as far as financially possible to enable the proletariat to come to the theatre. Are we to blame if they failed to make better use of the opportunity?” he asked. (308). For Piscator, the political effect of the documentary theatre was an equation of audience, communication and distribution. If the documentary play is, like Tricycle’s verbatim plays today, a counter-discursive medium, it produces change by affecting its audience in a transformative encounter with the actuality it examines, or as Weiss would have it, *explains*. A theory of documentary theatre must necessarily be a theory of the audience, and it needs to ask whether audiences are local communities in formation, legitimizing communities summoned by the performance, or metonymic agents. In any case, we need to ask, who is in the audience, and why? What is their relationship to the vastly greater number who are not in the audience? And we need to ask if the audience is itself a surrogative simulation of the public sphere that fulfils the theatre’s need for a community of response. Far too often, the audience is present in documentary theatre only as the sufficient condition generated by performance.

In the Piscatorian tradition, the documentary play models actuality for an audience that models society. Not surprisingly, the twin thrusts of political theatre since then have been to expand the audience on the one hand by leaving the confines of the playhouse stage, and to shrink the audience on the other, to a specifically localized community defined by their relationship to the subject matter of the play. In the expansive mode we see agitprop, processional and site-specific shows, and the carnivalesque; in the localist mode we find popular theatre, that is, issue-defined activist,

community theatre, and the Boal models of Theatre of the Oppressed. Both of these modes have had huge success in generating oppositional and radical theatre work, but in the same manner they have for the most treated documentary material as only one of a number of performance strategies, as a component rather than a condition of performance. And both of these modes have had to challenge the grip of disciplinarity, and in the end refuse the theatre as an artistic regime, so that they sit as the radical edge of a normative theatre culture that reproduces the theatre economy of playhouse, dramatic text, rehearsed reproduction and self-selected, value-seeking audience.

As communist politics calmed the revolutionary rhetoric to begin the process of political bridge-building that was the Popular Front, the agitprop troupes gradually moved indoors and surrendered to the disciplinary standards of the stationary theatre that it had rejected as bourgeois. Locked in a room, confined to a stage, this mobile agitprop was immobilized by the theatrical conventions of the equally enclosed audience. What had been bourgeois was now understood to be national; what had been understood as international in its cultural location was now understood to be left-wing extremism. Unity Theatre, forged to penetrate the art theatre economy, published a pamphlet on forming left theatre groups, which stated clearly that mass recitations can be good to train novice actors in the “simplest elements of theatrical technique”, but advised that a group’s major task (after forming a committee) should be “the acquisition of its own theatre” (6). The accepted rule of thumb in the era of the Popular Front was that theatre is an ancient art with highly developed artistic principles which could only be attained in a properly equipped playhouse, with, by corollary, the audience it captures.

And we have come full circle for Piscator, for whom every unsold seat was a failure. But of the audience? The problem for the workers theatre movement was that the cultural location of its public audience was defined only in terms of the statist model of communist class analysis. Agitprop was the expression of the industrial working man – it was militantly masculinist – and as industrial work was understood to be (then, not now) it was international rather than locally specific. It proposed a transnational working class culture, but even before the rise of the Popular Front forced a return to the ideas of national culture, the radicals of the 1930s were unable to theorize a cultural location for the idea of the international.

The mobile agitprops foreshadowed a concept of audience, not as community, whether local or metonymic, but as vector. Mobile agitprop offered a concept of performance as cultural mapping. The essence of mobile performance is not the moment of performance but the journeys in between: the arrivals and departures; load-ins and strikes. The movement-between established somatic, lived, relationships between audiences understood not as discrete communities but as nodes in an expanding relational network. A rhizome, in fact, in which all of the audiences connected by the performances were one, large, distributed audience. Perhaps a parallel can be seen with a touring concert of a rock band. This in fact is by what Deadhead culture was all about. And it was what was envisioned by a Canadian writer in 1933 who foresaw “Canada’s National Theatre in the form of a little red schoolhouse, a Ford Sedan with trailer, a few drapes, props and an elementary lighting set” (Key).

As many issue-defined groups working in the social justice/community theatre sector have found, this cultural mapping was often the real work of the popular theatre

process, more so than the actual content of the show or the impact on the specific audience, because it functioned as a tool of local mobilization around the issue. A typical example for me is a 1985 tour of a Canadian play about women and pharmaceuticals, commissioned by an international development agency. It played to some 5,000 people in thirty communities in eight provinces. That is a very small number – equivalent to two performances of *The Lion King*, or what Piscator would have liked to pack into a single performance. On the level of audience effect, the money spent on the project might have been more effectively put to a video or a pile of leaflets. But a more useful measure of the effect of the process is the number of community organizations the audiences brought into networked contact, and which took local action to sponsor the performances. In this case, these included several dozen groups ranging from local health care unions, Oxfam branches, treatment centers, shelters, churches, schools, and women's action committees. The relatively small audiences expand in significance when considered in these terms. The actual performances can be understood as ceremonial enactments of the networking and community-building around the issue that brought the play to town. The audience then wasn't simply the people who saw the show, but the much larger, distributed field activated by the circulation of the show.

Coda: Out There

Back in the George Luscombe Theatre, Banner is finishing *Wild Geese*. At first glance, the traces of ensemble workshop discipline are not easily discerned in Banner's shows. These are, after all, musicians, not trained actors. Luscombe would not have considered them actors at all. But these are the performers who continue the work in an historical line that derives unbroken from the young Ewan MacColl lending his worker's

body to bring actuality to Ernst Toller's play. The traces are there, in the rigorous discipline of their musicianship, in the masterful command of the stage, in the composed theatrical physicality of their playing, and most acutely, in the deep, concentrated attention they give each other in performance. *Wild Geese* may seem like a concert, but it is shaped by body and breath as much as any of Luscombe's productions.

The small audience in the George Luscombe Theatre enjoys the show, but the applause seems hollow in the mostly empty house. After the show, gear is struck and stowed in the vans, and the performers disperse to their billets. They have an early morning call for the seven-hour drive to their next performance in Ottawa.

The work of Banner and Ground Zero takes the cultural roadbuilding of interventionist documentary theatre into the digital world and the disciplinarity of new forms of work. Digital communication has been the means and the form of their collaboration and their reconstitution of activist theatre. It disrupts and relocates cultural genealogies, reterritorializes artistic traditions, produces new structures. In this, digitalization is the enabling condition of new theatricalities, and it disturbs the narrative structures of national culture that produces discourses of centrality and alterity. And although digital culture is commonly seen as the antithesis of live performance, it can also produce liveness, to use Philip Auslander's term; it produces embodied authenticities and lived encounters. The Ground Zero/Banner collaboration is activated by digital communication, though the web and email (which may be the one thing that makes it possible), and with the theatricality of performance with digital video. In the phase space of contemporary theatre work, Ground Zero and Banner have always been closer to each other than they have been to the professional repertory theatres around the corner in their

home cities. Digitalization has literally embodied that nearness, producing live performance work that uses digital media not to “represent” actuality, but to relocate it.

Theatrical mobility that puts the work of the theatre back onto the wagons and out of the house is a refusal of the theatre economy and its aesthetic values; the refusal of enclosed space is a refusal of the enclosed audience in favour of an activated network. The refusal of the enclosed audience is the refusal of dramaturgy, of reality modeling and simulated problems. That may leave us with theatres without theatres, without plays, without actors. Some will argue that at this point we are abandoning the stabilizing normative principles of theatre. But most theatre work will happen in theatres, with actors and playtexts, the professional discipline will continue to adapt and respond to political events, and the discipline will always be reformed by work that transgresses boundary norms. That is where Banner and Ground Zero play, *out there*, with insurgent street agitprop, radical clown armies, internet vaudeville, flash mobs, on the edge where work defines form, audiences define space, and performance maps the connections between them.

Notes

1. Surveying the history of the workers theatre movement in Britain, Raphael Samuel wrote in 1985, “Sadly, I have concluded that there are no traditions, except those which have been broken or lost[...]”(Samuel *et al*, xi).
2. For information on Banner Theatre and Ground Zero productions, see Filewod, Alan and David Watt, *Workers’ Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement since 1970*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2001. The collaboration between the two companies began when Don Bouzek and Dave Rogers during the course of our research for the book.

3. In its theatre work, Ground Zero has focused on inexpensive, mobile performances developed in consultation with client and target groups, mainly labour unions and activist coalitions. Its theatrical idioms include site installations, processional events at demonstrations, puppet work and agitprop. All of it is grounded in what in Canada is known as the popular theatre model. Canadian political intervention theatre is closely related in history and methodology to the theatre and development models implemented in Africa and the Caribbean, deeply formed by Frierean theory. In this model, radical performance is the culminating moment of the political engagements that have been activated in the process of production. Bouzek's theatrical style, which tends towards theatrical minimalism, direct address and object manipulation, was influenced by the New York formalist staging, particularly by Richard Foreman and Mabou Mines.

4. See for example, Robert Nunn, "The Meeting of Theatricality and Actuality in *The Farm Show*" in which he argues that in this seminal Canadian documentary play (which became the template for a new dramaturgical movement in Canada), the play is itself the event it documents. For the history of the Canadian documentary theatre movement, see Filewod, Alan, *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*.

5. In his study of dance and drill through history, William McNeill examines the social biology of rhythmic movement in group formations, arguing that formation movement in dance and close order drill induces physiological "boundary loss" (10). McNeill argues that

The primary seat of bodily response to rhythmic movement is apparently situated in the sympathetic and para-sympathetic nervous systems. These nerve complexes are involved in all emotions; but exact paths of emotional excitation by the

sympathetic nervous system and of compensatory restoration of bodily homeostasis by the para-sympathetic nervous system are not understood. Various hormones excreted by the pituitary gland and by other organs of the body play a role; so do the hypothalamus, the amygdala, and the right side of the cerebral cortex. Only after filtering through these levels of the brain does excitation derived from rhythmic muscular movement and voicing reach the left side of the brain, where our verbal skills are situated. With such a pathway of response to rhythmic muscular movement, it is no wonder that our words fumble when seeking to describe what happens within us when we dance or march. (6)

6. As described by Colin Chambers, the focus of Unity's training in 1945 was "a working-class realism and the method was to be based on Stanislavsky's teachings with lengthy group and individual analysis of the plays and their characters during rehearsal" (268).

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