

**RADICAL STORYTELLING:
PERFORMING PROCESS IN CANADIAN POPULAR THEATRE**

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Cet article explore la possibilité de recourir au «conte radical» au sein du théâtre populaire canadien contemporain, s'intéressant principalement aux rapports entre les prestations des conteurs, mais s'étendant aussi aux processus historiques et matériaux plus vastes à l'intérieur desquels ces histoires sont produites. Alimenter la discussion de ce qui constitue, définit ou mine le «récit radical» dans le théâtre populaire au Canada, c'est s'intéresser à la façon dont les théâtres populaires au Canada (Kalevala, PUENTE Theatre et Ground Zero, par exemple) cherchent à se servir de récits pour contester les idées reçues sur la canadienité; c'est aussi voir comment certaines représentations du théâtre populaire peuvent reproduire à leur insu les récits hégémoniques canadiens. En minant le lien entre les histoires que nous racontons et les récits-mâtres qui encadrent inévitablement «nos histoires,» les théâtres populaires peuvent en fait décontextualiser la différence – mettant en scène «nos histoires» comme si elles constituaient des expressions détachées, autonomes, produites par des «oprimés» qui isolent plutôt que déstabilisent les discours dominants sur la canadienité.

The concerns of Le Theatre Sans Detour centre on developing an awareness of the problems of our times. Through our theatre, we present themes which intend to better our society. In this way we hope to participate in its transformation.

Le Theatre Sans Detour

Straight Stitches [...] was created to develop and produce entertaining, high quality theatre productions based on the experiences and stories of people whose lives are often not reflected in the theatre.

Straight Stitches

Popular Theatre [...] is about alternatives [...] is always rooted in contemporary social issues and is usually linked to larger change efforts in a particular community. Good theatre for change.

Ruth Smilie

We do theatre for, with and by specific communities who have not been given access to resources in our society [...] The cultural and aesthetic standards manifest in our work are shaped by those of the intended audience(s).

Don Bouzek

From the work of the Mummies Troupe in Newfoundland, which began in the 1970s, to the more recent ventures of Ground Zero Productions in Alberta, Canadian popular theatre projects have used theatre to map out possible parameters for social change by enacting the untold stories of subjugated peoples. As the above quotations indicate, a

number of Canadian popular theatre projects aim to challenge the injustices and omissions in hegemonic articulations of power and knowledge (varying, for example, from broad concerns with the heavily exploitative edge of late capitalism or with the racism of Canadian immigration policy, to more localized concerns with provincial health care systems or employment equity) by using strategies that encourage spectator involvement in the theatre space and that rely on the stories of disenfranchised peoples as the basis for performance. While this generalization certainly does not do justice to the variety and intensity of Canadian theatre that claims to be “for, of, and by the people,” it *does* direct our attention to what is most important to my discussion here: namely, the ways in which many Canadian popular theatre projects use the “true” stories or perspectives of “the oppressed” to challenge and re-write dominant notions of “Canadianness.”

Arundhati Roy foregrounds the ways in which “telling our own stories” is a vital component in critiquing dominant articulations of power and knowledge. She states, “Our strategy should be not only to confront the empire but to mock it [...] with our art[...] our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness and our ability to tell our own stories, stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe” (n.p.). Roy not only emphasizes the need to reclaim and retell our own stories, but also ties this kind of necessary storytelling to a critique of empire – to a critique of hegemonic structures that work to produce, discipline, and manage Otherness. That is, Roy gestures toward not just the act of storytelling itself, but to the very relationship between acts of telling and the hegemonic institutions of injustice that try to determine what stories we can and cannot tell.

I want to explore the potential, within Canadian popular theatre spaces, for the kind of “radical storytelling” to which Roy alludes, focusing on the complex relationship between storytelling acts and the broader historical and material processes within which these acts are produced. Fueling my discussion of what constitutes, defines, or undermines “radical storytelling” in Canadian popular theatre is not only an interest in how popular theatres in Canada aim to use stories to challenge received notions of Canadianness, but also a concern with the ways in which particular popular theatre performances may unwittingly *reproduce* hegemonic Canadian narratives. I suggest that in undermining the link that Roy stresses, between the stories we tell and those Masternarratives that inevitably frame “our stories,” popular theatres may, in effect, de-contextualize difference – thereby producing “our stories” as unmoored, stand-alone expressions of “the oppressed” that insulate rather than destabilize dominant discourses of Canadianness. Thus, by first tracing the ways in which postmodern thinking and late capitalism pose challenges to some aspects of Canadian popular theatre, I hope to highlight the importance of a historically rooted popular theatre language that does not merely repeat but radically *rewrites* oppressive dominant fictions.

I. RE-ENACTING THE DOMINANT?

Along with the variety of other historical and ideological processes that have produced and shaped activist theatres in Canada¹, Augusto Boal's "poetics of the oppressed" has provided an important methodological backbone for many Canadian popular theatre groups, and his constantly shifting workshop techniques are used regularly throughout the country. Boal's theoretical popular theatre framework, outlined initially in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), clearly established a "different" kind of theatre (though sharing similarities with the work of Brecht and Grotowski) that challenged realist or naturalist approaches to theatre; it was a theatre, in the words of Boal, "that attempts to influence reality and not merely reflect it, even if correctly" (168). The activist theatre that Boal envisioned early in his career was a grass-roots, revolutionary theatre, or, as he qualifies, "perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!" (155). However, in spite of the revolutionary mandate outlined by Boal, various processes seem to be imposing limits on, and adding complexity to, the radical vocabulary of current interventionist theatre projects.

In his essay, "Naming the Movement: Recapitalizing Popular Theatre," Alan Filewod has examined the increasing corporatization of the popular theatre practice. He explains how "Boal's practice of authorizing 'centres' empowered to teach his models in his name effectively disenfranchised the caucus of free-lance popular theatre workers and gave the weight of legitimacy to two companies, Headlines Theatre in Vancouver, and Mixed Company in Toronto" (9). He goes on to argue that the ways in which popular theatre projects "reproduce the economic systems in which they operate," has led to

the emergence of a corporatized popular theatre profession [that] may be a result of, and response to, the rapid developments of transnational capital that have dismantled many of the structures of social democracy and have normalized the rhetoric of business in the metaphor of the "marketplace." (9)

Because popular theatre companies in Canada require financial support to pursue their various projects, they currently rely on increasingly corporatized structures, which in turn limit the ways in which these companies can engage in overt systemic challenges.

In addition to the recognizable limits imposed on popular theatres by the economic structures within which they operate, other less definable, though arguably related, processes have been shifting dominant understandings of the popular theatre process. What, indeed, happens to our understandings of "political" grassroots theatre within post-structuralist theorizations of power and knowledge? In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault problematized normative understandings of power: "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors' [...]. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth"(204-05). More specific to performance, Baz Kershaw argues that after what he calls the "post-modern theoretical explosion," "the 'political' has been applied to a widening range of phenomena [. . . and it] becomes no longer credible to box off 'political theatre' as a separate category" (63). He goes on to state, "in one way or another all performance and theatre can be seen to be involved in discourses of power, to

be in some sense engaged with the political” (63). In light of Foucault’s discussion of power, and in view of the biases that are embedded within any narrative, the dialectical materialism – oppressor/oppressed mentality – expressed in Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* re-surfaces as an inevitably exclusionary binary. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon argues, “the contradictions that characterize postmodernism reject any neat binary opposition that might conceal a secret hierarchy of values” (305).

On the one hand, by de-centering master narratives and destabilizing Truth, theorists such as Jean François Lyotard or Foucault have emphasized the necessarily biased ways in which any discourse is produced and have pointed to the ways in which subjects are products of conflicting and biased scripts of reality – are products of power. On the other hand, the postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of unified subjectivity, centered histories, and transcendent human “truths” pose considerable problems to a “political” theatre practice founded on graspable variables of oppression, and on a belief in the inherent truth of the personal experiences of subjugated peoples. The counter-cultural stance outlined by Boal in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, summarized nicely in his definition of popular theatre as a “rehearsal of revolution,” clearly loses its footing within recognitions of de-centred narratives and within more nuanced discussions of power. In fact, in his more recent work, *The Rainbow of Desire: the Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, Boal has had to re-work the explicitly oppositional framework of *Theatre of the Oppressed* in terms of less visible and less polarized expressions of oppression. Adrian Jackson observes,

Boal’s transplantation to the West brought him into contact, particularly in his workshops, with people who found it less easy than peasant and worker groups he had worked with in Brazil and other Latin American countries, to synthesize their experience of the world into the sort of Manichaean equation suggested by the terms ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’; this confrontation – and the resulting proposition by groups of ‘emptiness’, ‘fear’ and the like as fit ‘oppressions’ to treat with this work – led directly to the invention of [...] the Rainbow of Desire techniques. (xix)

More and more, popular theatre projects in Canada are recoiling from the explicitly polarized, political agenda that Boal presented in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, replacing Boal’s emphasis on oppression and revolution with phrases such as “Theatre for the Living” (Diamond, *Headlines Theatre Web*), “promoting justice at internal levels” (Sokil 126), or “rehearsals for healing” (Schutzman 138).

Beyond Boal, the fear of re-enforcing dominant narratives in attempted acts of subversion is a growing concern among people engaging in “political” performance. Kershaw writes, “The key political problem then becomes: how can performance, in being always already implicated in the dominant, avoid replicating the values of the dominant?” (70). Various popular theatre workers in Canada, such as Julie Salverson, explore the kinds of questions that “post-modern thinking” (to use Kershaw’s sweeping category) poses to popular theatre practices. Julie Salverson points to an emerging uneasiness with the lack of attention to process among popular theatre workers: “Recently a concern has risen amongst me and my colleagues about how little we understand of what actually happens inside the process of telling and listening” (“The Art of Witness” 36). By sharing and

staging the true stories of the disenfranchised without focusing on how and in what context the stories are being told and without recognizing the intricate relationships of power that operate within the popular theatre space, popular theatre practitioners may be reproducing, as Salverson says, “a form of cultural colonialism” (“Performing Emergency” 182) rather than creating representations that challenge the various mechanisms of injustice in our lives. While dominant notions of Canadianness are in some senses challenged through telling and staging the stories of disenfranchised people, popular theatre processes also run the risk of re-inscribing “Othered” bodies within fixed narratives of oppression, providing the necessary shadows for dominant notions of Canadianness to retain their “real” substance.

PUENTE Theatre: multicultural myth making

Since 1988, PUENTE Theatre, a company based in Victoria, B.C., has explored the “issue” of Canadian immigrant and refugee experience, approaching the topic from a variety of angles and with a broad spectrum of techniques for intervention. While on the one hand, PUENTE Theatre’s work to valorize the experiences of immigrant women and men provides a space for difficult and uncomfortable stories of “immigrantness” to emerge, I want to examine how PUENTE Theatre’s first project, *I Wasn’t Born Here* ², on the other hand, perhaps reinforces rather than challenges dominant assumptions about ethnicity in Canada. Even though PUENTE’s work offers an important alternative to “mainstream” theatre practices that more explicitly overwrite the voices of marginalized and disenfranchised peoples, at the same time it is important, I think, to foreground the ways in which PUENTE’s performance of “untold” stories does not, in and of itself, necessarily “confront” and “mock” empire (to echo Arundhati Roy’s formulation). In fact, “our stories” can continue to produce, and be produced by, gendered and raced discourses that animate various forms of cultural colonialism in North America. In spite of PUENTE Theatre’s desire to participate in struggles for social justice through staging true stories of Latina immigrants in *I Wasn’t Born Here*, PUENTE Theatre’s focus in this performance on personal injury and healing perhaps reframes systemic issues of racism and economic oppression in Canada in terms of individualized and historically unmoored expressions of hardship.

Mady Schutzman explores how a trend toward focusing on self-growth and personal healing in some popular theatre projects “forfeits its potentially subversive edge and is reduced to a technique for coping rather than changing – adapting oneself to the so-called ‘demands’ an affluent and privileged society makes upon a consumption-minded Capitalist individuality” (138). By learning “coping” strategies rather than exploring strategies for change, the discussions in current Canadian popular theatre spaces can continue to perpetuate the individualistic hegemonic vocabulary of learning to “feel good” about yourself, learning to “cope” with, for example, “immigrantness,” with no need to challenge the historical processes and discursive limitations that make “coping” and “overcoming barriers” necessary in the first place. I want to consider this popular theatre “trend” toward “coping rather than changing” (to borrow Schutzman’s phrase), with reference to *I Wasn’t Born Here*, paying special attention to the ways in which the

dominant discourses sustaining Canadian multiculturalism – reproduced in PUENTE’s performance – work, in effect, to “manage” ethnic diversity.

I Wasn’t Born Here was performed various times in 1988 and was based on several “true” stories of Latin American women (who, in a number of cases, performed their stories themselves) who immigrated to Canada – stories that are woven together in a series of inter-connected vignettes. The staged stories that emerged out of PUENTE Theatre’s collective creation process are stories about survival, about overcoming alienation, and about hurdling language barriers. In Lina de Guevara’s words (the founder of PUENTE Theatre), *I Wasn’t Born Here* was about “finding the inner strength to cope with being an immigrant” (*Creating Bridges*). Mapping a trajectory from frustration to celebration, *I Wasn’t Born Here* begins with a number of difficult stories that highlight the “barriers” facing the Latina immigrants whose stories are told in performance. In several initial scenes, different immigrant women are depicted as being oppressed by their inability to speak English. In one, for example, a woman doctor from Chile gets a job in a laboratory, and while she is competent at her job, she eventually quits because she is so embarrassed at her inability to speak English. In another early scene, a woman expresses her frustration at needing to rely on her Canadian-born daughter to translate for her. *I Wasn’t Born Here* also posits less tangible oppressions, such as lacking strength and inner confidence, as major “issues” for many of the immigrant women. One vignette involves a veiled woman suffering from depression who wonders if suicide is perhaps the only possible solution to her severe home-sickness. Somber music and dark lighting are used to emphasize the woman’s deep despair.

These stories of frustration eventually give way to more positive stories that focus on Latina immigrants gaining inner confidence, overcoming language barriers, and learning how to connect with English speaking Canadians. Guevara comments on the success of the project in *Creating Bridges*, a documentary on *I Wasn’t Born Here*, saying “when [the performers] meet English speaking people now there is a real opportunity of a coming together.” Thus, the apparatus of *I Wasn’t Born Here* seems to hinge on a dual purpose: getting the women involved in the project to work on “personal transformation” – that is, finding strategies to “cope” with the difficulties of being immigrants; and “building bridges” with so-called majority Canadians (PUENTE means “bridge” in Spanish).

For example, one of the final scenes depicts a husband and wife conflict in which the wife tells her husband to leave. When the husband raises his fist, the woman announces, “[A]nd don’t try to beat me because I’ll call the police,” adding “and I learned how to do that in English.” The “solution” to the oppression faced by the woman in the scene emerges out of her combined ability to find the inner strength to confront her husband *and* to make inroads into learning English. Armed with these new tools the woman is able to “cope” with a difficult situation by calling upon the ultimate justice of Canada. Therefore, while this and other scenes clearly grapple with difficult and uncomfortable questions regarding becoming an immigrant in Canada, the performance simultaneously positions “immigrantness” as a problem, as a barrier for these women to surmount, structuring the stories of a number of Latina immigrants in terms of their individual

efforts to “cope” rather than in terms of, for example, the systemic issues of racism and sexism that continue to mark and position “immigrant” bodies in particular ways.

Even in the scenes in *I Wasn't Born Here* where racism is explicitly foregrounded, it is nevertheless marked as an individual rather than systemic issue, and the “solution” to the problem is again found by appealing to the supposed justice offered *within* the Canadian system. In one scene a group of immigrant women are depicted as being exploited by a factory owner who every day asks them to work harder. The women become increasingly upset, and in the scene’s culminating moment in which the women confront the factory owner about their unfair treatment, one of the women denounces their boss’s behaviour by stating, “This is Canada, we have rights.” Thus, while targeting the factory owner, the women simultaneously let “Canada” off the hook. Speaking more broadly, the hardships faced by the immigrant women are construed in terms of their own inabilities – around learning English, or around overcoming home-sickness and despair – and Canada remains the hospitable, neutral learning ground within which these immigrant women will supposedly flourish once properly equipped to tap into both their own and Canada’s resources.

Most strikingly, perhaps, the performance itself is framed by the visible “success” stories of the women on stage, who are capably performing in English. Commenting on PUENTE’s decision to use English, Guevara explains, “We agreed that our intention was to tell our experiences to the majority of Canadians and that we didn’t want to remain isolated in a Spanish speaking ghetto” (PUENTE web page, n.p.). Further, PUENTE’s mandate, posted on the PUENTE Theatre website, is “to support and mentor the activities of immigrant theatre people [. . .] in order to facilitate their inclusion in Canadian artistic life, [. . .] to waken interest in [other cultures] and to enrich the Canadian Theatrical mosaic” (n.p.). Taken together, these quotations make clear that “wakening interest in other cultures” is directed at the “invisible” center of Canadian multiculturalism – that is, white(ned), English-speaking Canadians.

In other words, PUENTE’s decision to perform in English and desire to work for the inclusion of immigrants in “Canadian artistic life” (rather than to challenge their exclusion) position dominant-settlers in Canada as the enabling agents, as the ones who mark the boundaries between the included and the excluded, between the “we” and the “they.” One woman interviewed after watching the performance foregrounds this clear division between “we”(English speaking Canadians) and “they”(immigrants) when she says, “[W]e have all this racist feeling about immigrants and we don’t want immigrants to come. We don’t realize how difficult it is for the poor immigrants who do come and I think we’ve got to help them a whole lot more.” In this way it is the “white,” English-speaking bodies who are constructed as the agents in the immigrants plight – it is only through building bridges, and receiving the support and aid of dominant-settlers that (in the words of the audience member) “the poor immigrants” will be *permitted* “to enrich the Canadian Theatrical mosaic.” The women in *I Wasn't Born Here*, telling their stories on stage to an audience of so-called “majority Canadians,” thus become immigrant success stories, innocuous examples of how to overcome language barriers and difficult journeys both to and within Canada, in order to perform Otherness on a Canadian stage.

In a sense, while *I Wasn't Born Here* was designed as a way for a group of immigrant women, in the words of Guevara, “to celebrate their lives” (“Telling Stories” 91) by celebrating immigrant “success” stories, PUENTE perhaps deferred the opportunity for a serious critique of hegemonic Canadianness and instead participated in making “diversity” palatable for dominant Canadians. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, Smaro Kamboureli argues, “recognizes [...] cultural diversity [...] by practicing a sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them” (82). According to Kamboureli’s reading, multicultural policy manages diversity by implying that immigrantness is something to “cope” with, by “present[ing] immigrant experience as an obstacle to be overcome”(87), and by constructing ethnic “minorities” as a dehistoricized and universalized Other to the rest of Canada. Thus, by courting the gaze of so-called “majority Canadians,” PUENTE perhaps unwittingly participated in marketing and showcasing ethnic diversity, “training immigrants” to enact the Canadian national imaginary. The end of the play gestures toward PUENTE’s embrace of the happy plurality of Canada when three of the actors invite audience members to join them in a “multicultural” meal on stage with an enthusiastic, “[D]on’t you think it’s nice to live in a country with so many cultures?”. PUENTE thus works to heal what Guevara refers to as the “break in the continuity of [immigrant] histories” (“Sisters/Strangers” 29) by embracing the “sameness” offered by the friendly diversity of Canada.

How then do we resist transforming stories such as those shared in PUENTE’s *I Wasn't Born Here* into narratives about “coping” with immigrantness – narratives that perhaps participate in disciplining diversity? How is it possible for popular theatre participants to radically engage with, and speak to, the risky implications of such stories? Within the disorientation of post-modernity, the potential “diversity management” emerging from Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, the corporatization of the arts, and the feel-good therapy of some recent performance practices, popular theatre projects in Canada are struggling to maintain what Schutzman calls a “subversive edge.” This leads me to ask whether storytelling *can* be used for historically nuanced, strategically effective challenges to injustice, especially when our visions for change are hugely disparate and deeply embedded in dominant discourses of power and knowledge. Therefore, before exploring the ways in which popular theatres can and are facing this challenge, I think it may be useful to take a step back and give attention to some of the problematic assumptions that are embedded in the process of “storytelling for social change” itself.

II. RADICAL STORYTELLING: EXPLORING A LANGUAGE

We have to emphasize that hegemony is not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified [...]. We have to think again about the sources of that which is not corporate; of those practices, experiences, meanings, values which are not part of the effective dominant culture.

(Williams 38-40)

Giving space to “the oppressed” to tell their own stories as a way to challenge dominant discourses is an important aspect of popular education, a pedagogical philosophy most notably linked to the work of Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire focuses on language’s transformative possibility, suggesting that engaging in social change requires re-naming the world – telling stories – from the vantage point of the “oppressed”: an act, Freire suggests, that has the power to transform reality. However, as many popular theatre and popular education practitioners point out, there are numerous difficulties with using “our own stories,” the stories of the so-called oppressed, as a way to challenge injustice. In the context of theatre, as I indicated in my discussion of PUENTE, the counter-narratives of particular communities can become de-historicized when the staged stories become personalized and dehistoricized signifiers of “the oppressed” (of “immigrantness”) rather than being sites to foreground systemic issues such as racism and capitalist exploitation. On another level, the “real-life” dimension of the stories in popular theatre may cause these plays to slip into “reflecting the real” as vigorously as both Boal and Brecht challenged this same phenomenon, relying on, in the words of Filewod, “the authority of factual evidence” (*Collective Encounters* 5) to confront oppression. Catherine Graham, speaking about a mimetically-inclined popular theatre group in Vancouver, argues that “a weakness in Headlines’s documentation method [is that] it assumes a transparent form and so tends to privilege homogeneous groups that tell stories in similar ways” (104), which also serves to conceal that popular theatre “group-building and information-gathering exercises” carry their own biases (102-103). Thus, Graham highlights the dangerous exclusions that can emerge from assuming that popular theatre stories do accurately reflect the real, going on to emphasize the importance of foregrounding rather than erasing the processes through which and from which these stories very *un-transparently* emerge.

To work and think through some of the methodological and pedagogical difficulties with the process of “storytelling for social change” (Razack 36), Sherene Razack and Julie Salverson have both stressed the importance of engaging with personal stories through a carefully considered critical or conceptual framework. In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Razack acknowledges the “complexities of working with the stories of outsiders to resist domination”(43). Razack explains that “when we depend on storytelling, either to reach each other across differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it”(36). She goes on to suggest that in order to provide sustained critiques of dominant discourses through storytelling, there needs to be a critical language to speak about stories, to analyze them, rather than expecting them simply to speak for themselves (37). Salverson concurs in “Change on Whose Terms?” when she too emphasizes the necessity of finding a “conceptual language [. . .] that brings together questions of ethics, mimesis, and testimony”(120) so that popular theatre’s underlying concern with educating and envisioning change is not obscured by merely re-inscribing “the oppressed” within narratives of victimization and Otherness.

Where, however, does the responsibility lie for finding the conceptual language to which both Salverson and Razack allude? How do we avoid becoming lost in the complexity of self-location or discouraged by the ways in which the stories we tell, like the ones shared in PUENTE’s *I Wasn’t Born Here*, may become symptoms indicating our participation in

societal dis-ease, rather than being indicators of the vital processes through which social transformation can happen? That is, how can popular theatre practitioners, performers, and audience members engage with personal histories, not as the damning “evidence” of oppression, but as part of a process to negotiate alternatives? It almost becomes easier to be skeptical of all practices that want to “do good” or engage in social change, especially when many of these projects, theatrical and otherwise, are just as implicated in perpetuating scripts of domination and exploitation; but do we need to find another reason to invalidate theatres that already lack currency within dominant economies of power?

Instead of theorizing an answer to these questions, I want to look at some specific popular theatre groups that seem to gain critical momentum from the intersection of personal histories and the stage, groups that disrupt a seamless telling of one fixed “story of the oppressed” by contextualizing “their stories” both in terms of the processes of storytelling and story-listening, as well as in terms of broader historical and political concerns. For example, Voltaire de Leon, founder of the Canadian theatre company Diwata, illustrates that it is possible to tell counter-narratives to dominant discourses of Canadianness in ways that value the truth of particular experiences while simultaneously destabilizing hegemonic definitions of identity. He writes,

Our theatre workshop deals with the Filipino community and it’s like a community meeting. People come because ‘Hey – this is a Filipino thing. I can see my life on stage.’ But the subversive thing about what we do is that we contradict their expectations. We go against the icons that supposedly make them Filipino. For us, if we get people to ask questions, then that’s what’s valuable about theatre. (4)

De Leon’s statement foregrounds the ways in which the popular theatre process can both enact and undercut particular versions of identity or community, emphasizing how seeing and telling “our” stories does not have to be about accurately reflecting reality, but rather can be about creating historically resonant alternatives. In addition, other popular theatre practitioners, such as Aida Jordao of The Company of Sirens, highlight the necessity of emphasizing in performance those points of transition where personal histories meet the stage. In a recent article, Jordao describes the rehearsal process for a performance called *Working People’s Picture Show* at a point where non-actors were being incorporated into the performance process:

In creating a piece set in a Bingo Hall we decided that the woman who was our main resource had to be in the play. Since this woman was unfamiliar with the process of rehearsing script, we did without a prior written text. Starting with storytelling and moving into improvs, we created our scene. The performance was significantly different from the rehearsed version, and it seemed ‘unpolished.’ At first, we ‘professionals’ were frustrated by this, but the scene was very successful – the audience loved it – and the important step of incorporating nonactors into the play had begun. (64)

The “unpolished” nature of The Company of Sirens’s production made apparent the many seams and voices involved in constructing the popular theatre piece. Additionally, by allowing “nonactors” to participate in the enactment of their own true stories, the

Working People's Picture Show troubled the boundaries between “actor” and “non-actor,” between the “is” of current unjust realities and the “not yet” of more just alternatives. Thus, more broadly, it is important that the “before-performance” processes of compiling and adapting stories emerge as integral and visible layers in the performances themselves. In this way, stages and workshop rooms – instead of being spaces that uphold and affirm illusions – can become sites for exposing and scrutinizing the ways in which iniquitous illusions come to be constructed in the first place.

Kalevala: staging the process

A more detailed example than those offered by De Leon and Jordao can be found in Kalevala, a popular theatre group based in Vancouver. Kadi Purru, in Jan Selman and Tim Prentki's *Popular Theatre in Political Culture: Britain and Canada in Focus*, documents the discussions and deliberations of the Estonian-Canadian members of Kalevala which eventually led to a “work-in-progress” performance entitled *The Journeys . . . from Home to Foreign Land*. Therefore, my discussion of Kalevala is more a negotiation of Purru's observations than an examination of the actual performance itself, as Purru's “text” is a good example of the ways in which popular theatre groups may be able to tell the stories of the disenfranchised in disruptive, radically historicized and de-essentializing ways. *The Journeys . . . from Home to Foreign Land* took place in an Estonian Church in April 1999 where members of Kalevala “share[d] the stories of the group members with the wider public” (100). Therefore, *The Journeys*, rather than being an explicit staging of the personal stories of Estonian-Canadians, was more a performance of the storytelling process itself.

By explicitly contextualizing the personal storytelling of the Estonian-Canadians within broader societal narratives, and by foregrounding the power produced in the performance space, Kalevala aimed to disrupt an essentialized telling of “one” Estonian-Canadian story. Purru writes,

We organised the event in discussion format since the theatrical shape of these stories had not yet emerged. However, we tried to get rid of intimidating and distancing conference staging by placing the audience seats in semicircle and using several smaller tables i.e. multiple ‘sites of enunciation.’ (100)

Because of what Purru calls the lack of “theatrical shape,” *The Journeys* became a performance of process; Purru's description of the “staging” of the event, her careful attention to the arrangement of the space to intuit discussion and to acknowledge “multiple ‘sites of enunciation,’” foregrounds the necessarily dialogic ways in which stories are shared, and emphasizes the power produced within any performance space. Instead of staging a presentation in which the systems and processes out of which the presentation emerged are made invisible, Kalevala used the stage to break the assumption that “performance” means providing a polished product that is a heightened representation of life (rather than a process itself, and a contributing part in shaping and producing meaning). In her book *Unmaking Mimesis*, Elin Diamond argues that “[p]erformance [...] is the site in which performativity materializes in concentrated form,

where the ‘concealed or dissimulated conventions’ of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimagined” (47). Kalevala seems to take on Diamond’s challenge to go beyond merely repeating oppressive mechanisms and processes, by also scrutinizing and “reimagining” the societal conventions that are inevitably modeled in the performance space.

To negotiate a storytelling process through which oppressive mechanisms and processes could be re-envisioned, Kalevala “used music, slides, quotations from history books not only to explore the expressive scope of diverse media, but also to inquire into how personal memory and subjective account of the events interact with the generalised objectivity of history books” (100). By using a fragmented presentational style, splicing personal memory with the “authority” of history books and with other presentational mediums such as slides and music, Kalevala was able to value other ways of knowing while simultaneously exposing the biases within the so-called “official” interpretations of reality. In *Theatres of Memory*, Raphael Samuel challenges the teleological and authoritative claims of historical narratives by re-inscribing the link between history and memory. He argues

that memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; that it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers – and that it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative other to it. (x)

Samuel focuses on the collective, necessarily dialogic and subjectshaping dimension of memory, a dynamic *The Journey* explores. Within totalizing, “objective” representations of history, the active, capricious edge of the past is made invisible; in contrast, Kalevala’s presentation uses a fragmented style of performance as a visible manifestation of the complex, dynamic ways in which our histories are shaped and remembered.

The structure of Purru’s written discussion of Kalevala, “From Theatre to Community: Dilemmas of an Estonian theatre community in Vancouver,” similar to the storytelling event itself, also serves to dispel notions that one objective history or single interpretation of “reality” is possible. Purru juxtaposes her reflections on the work of Kalevala with an excerpt from Karl Aun’s *The Political Refugees: A History of the Estonians in Canada*, and with a detailed “script” of dialogue between herself and other members of Kalevala which combines elements of both story-telling and story-interpreting. In the dialogue section, Kadi tells her friends, “I know it is much easier to have a dramatic text and work with it. This is what we have always done. But can’t we create the play OURSELVES addressing OUR ISSUES?” (87). Kalevala’s telling of “their” stories, though, does not become about telling a unified story of Estonian-Canadianness. In her discussion, Purru inserts a detailed background “story” about each of the women and men who participate in the dialogue, showing their complex and varied histories. One woman, Marje, comments, “the stories are different. There are stories about Estonians who although in Canada, live like in Estonia” (87). In contrast to those who still “live like in Estonia,” another woman, Helle, does not see herself as truly belonging to either culture: “Living in between cultures is very confusing; I am living at the same time in both places in Estonia

and in Canada, but I do not feel like belonging to either of them. I haven't learned to speak English with absolute fluency, and now my Estonian has become pretty rusty" (90). The apparent similarity of situation for the members of Kalevala makes their divergent expressions particularly insightful. Kalevala's discussions, both in *The Journeys* and in Kadi Purru's account, represent, to borrow from Kamboureli, "a will to carry on with the negotiation of diversities, not with the aspiration of reaching consensus, but with the resolve to address diversity without (re)fashioning it according to similar paradigms" (130). The stories of Kalevala's members are mixed with historicizing details, both "official" and anecdotal, contributing to fragmented, though nevertheless vital, expressions of non-essentialized "Estonian-Canadianness."

Purru's write-up of Kalevala's experience blurs the boundaries between "truth" and "non-truth" because it is not clear whether the "text" itself that Purru provides, a text that could easily have been the basis for performance, was actually what grew out of the collective storytelling of Kalevala, or whether the dialogues she "documents" were invented conversations. However, the "realness" of Purru's discussion becomes irrelevant in the face of the multiple "truths" that surface in her prose. Marjorie Beaucage writes, "It is the variety of meanings and interpretations that make life truthful. There isn't an 'only,' just as there isn't a beginning as such" (214). Purru thus provides multiple perspectives, in what emerges as a kind of enabling dissonance, that challenge the boundaries separating the valued from the silenced and that reconsider the boundaries between what is considered "true" and what is dismissed as fiction. Both Kalevala's performance and Purru's subsequent discussion operate together to counter hegemonic narratives of either Estonianness or Canadianness (a binary that becomes impossible among subjects who are both and neither), and to mobilize Kalevala as a particular community around particular (and disparate) issues and concerns. Most importantly, Purru writes, "In the process of telling each other our stories we came to understand that there is not a universal model but endless stories of 'Canadian Estonianness' each of which is an intriguing journey worthy of theatrical exploration" (98).

Ground Zero: countering immigrant fairytales

Turning from process to performance, the last popular theatre group that I will give attention to, Ground Zero Productions, was a one-time Ontario-based group that now operates out of Edmonton. While PUENTE and Kalevala focus mostly on issues emerging from the concerns of immigrants to Canada, Ground Zero constantly shifts issues, doing, for example, Forum Theatre concerned with employment equity (*Fair is Fair* 1992-93), exploring the concerns of health care workers in Ontario (*Where's the Care* 1990), or challenging traditional healing methodologies with cancer patients (*The Psyche Project* 1998). As Filewod has explored, Ground Zero has been able to avoid becoming ideologically entrenched or involved in perpetuating essentialist communities and identities. Instead, Ground Zero predominantly tells and performs carefully historicized "true" stories to counter dominant fictions, while leaving space to scrutinize and subvert the power-produced dynamics of performance.

Ground Zero's constantly shifting network of supports (both artistic and financial) and founder Don Bouzek's ability to adapt the company's performances to a variety of styles and methodologies allow this particular "strategic venture" (Filewod and Watt 1) to continue criticizing mechanisms of injustice even as economic, social, and political paradigms shift. Filewod explains that Bouzek "has focused on localized, project-based collaborations with community partners, creating a model of self-sufficient theatre with instrumental ends and developing a unique artistic method that calls attention to issues rather than to its own processes and forms" (165). Additionally, Bouzek writes, "We have always worked with different methodologies and communities. It's the fluidity of moving from video to theatre, from [...] 'Contemporary Performance' to Boal, that gives us a lot of stability to survive as the conditions change" (qtd. in Filewod, *Workers' Playtime* 166). For example, Bouzek recounts how Ground Zero's *The Psyche Project* was met with evident surprise: "A local performer (who has done a number of popular theatre projects) told me afterwards that she was really surprised by the piece. It didn't look like any popular theatre she'd seen. I realized she was looking at the work as a theatrical style" ("The Psyche Project" 102). Bouzek's resistance to viewing popular theatre as a fixed "style" allows Ground Zero to transgress the boundaries of not only traditional theatre practices, but also the structures, or stylistic assumptions, that, in many cases, rigidly define other political theatre projects in Canada.

Ground Zero's *Hijos del Maiz / People of the Corn*, performed various times between 1992 and 1995, was a popular theatre production that told the story of three Salvadoran refugees. Unlike the play *Sister/Stranger*, which focused on a much broader articulation of immigrant or refugee experiences, *Hijos del Maiz* explores specific political, economic, and social issues in both El Salvador and Canada through the story of three Salvadoran refugees who confront the deeply systemic racism of Canada's immigration policy. The carefully crafted performance of *Hijos*, dissimilar to the visibly fragmented, unfinished storytelling process of *Kalevala*, nevertheless disrupts racial stereotypes through historicizing the articulations of Salvadoran "refugee" identity and linking the refugee stories to broader social and political concerns. In the program for *Hijos's* 1994 run, Bouzek writes "Several years ago I began working on the concept of tracing the elements of a 'cup of coffee, regular.' As we worked on each show, our creative process led us away from a literal depiction. So the coffee show, *Hijos del Maiz / People of the Corn*, evolved into a depiction of refugees from El Salvador." Rather than using the broad focus of "refugee experience," Ground Zero uses coffee as both a real and symbolic departure point for a performance that foregrounds "our" (dominant settlers') complicity in complex and deeply interconnected forms of oppression.

Hijos, with its blending of various styles and its reliance on "official" historical details to contrast the "unofficial," fictionalized histories of the El Salvadoran refugees, provided a space where the real could both be envisioned and deconstructed. The primary narrative thread of *Hijos* involves the story of Roberto Rodriguez, who in the first moments of the play has arrived in Canada from El Salvador after traveling illegally through the United States. The basic story of Maria, Miguel, and Roberto's departure from El Salvador and arrival in Canada unfolds through the framework of Miguel and Maria's interview with a Canadian immigration official. The story of the three refugees is carefully historicized in ways that nevertheless undermine the "reality effect" through an exaggerated and

stylized re-telling of El Salvadoran history that interrupts Maria and Miguel's interview with immigration at various points in the performance. Using dance, mime, puppets, and slides, Ground Zero enacts Mayan myths, depicts the Spanish conquest of El Salvador in 1524, exposes the brutality of the coffee trade (which began in 1879), sketches out the armed revolt led by Farabundo Marti in 1932, and shows the economic, political, and social unrest facing El Salvador in the 1980s and 1990s.

Further, the use of puppets and slides helps the performers to break realist inflections, which was of heightened importance since the story of Miguel and Roberto was an interpretation of the actors', Jorge and Carlos Barahona's, own story. Peggy Phelan stresses that realist representations provide spectators with few options; a spectator must either "reject the representation as 'not about me['] or worse [...] valorize the representation which fails to reflect her likeness, as one with 'universal appeal' or 'transcendent power'" (11). Thus, Jorge and Carlos Barahona's occasional use of puppets, as deliberately parodic, "unreal" representations of themselves, provides a gap in the representation that both foregrounds the apparatus of the play and provides a space for audience members to engage more fully with the representation.

Most importantly, *Hijos* carefully links the re-told "history" of El Salvador to Roberto, Maria, and Miguel's encounters with Canada, foregrounding the reality that exploitation does not just happen in isolation in "other" countries. In a particularly striking moment in the performance, during the enactment of the appalling effects of coffee cultivation in El Salvador, the grotesquely masked performer labeled "coffee" dances around with a Max mug in his hand, jeering at the audience, clearly indicating "our" complicity. Ground Zero punctuates various other moments of the performance with the reminder that none of us is neutral. The doors shutting to Miguel as he tries to find work in Canada, and Roberto being sent back to his death in El Salvador as a result of increasing restrictions on immigrants to Canada, are moments that show the violence with which the Other continues to threaten dominant notions of Canadianness. Even when Miguel and Maria do encounter work, they perform menial jobs such as cleaning and mopping. *Hijos* counters the kinds of narratives that offer, in Kamboureli's words, "unshakeable proof that Canada is hospitable to immigrants; this social mobility, like the universal settings of myths and fairy tales, fulfils its promise that the immigrants' toil will yield a happy ending" (87).

In this way, the Canadian "fairy tale" (as in hegemonic narrative) perpetuated in PUENTE's *I Wasn't Born Here*, that inscribes the refugee body inside a narrative of fled horror and subsequent embrace in a safe, hospitable country, is firmly discredited and rewritten in this popular theatre story about Miguel, Maria, and Roberto. Jorge Barahona, one of the actors in *Hijos*, stated in an interview for *The Sudbury Star* during the 1992 run of the production, "We are trying to say [. . .] that not everyone is allowed into Canada. The country discriminates in its selection. Many get sent back, and are killed because immigration did not believe them." Interestingly, the journalist attempts to absolve Canada of Barahona's criticism by directing attention to political turbulence in El Salvador and then stressing, "Canada is a part of the UN peacekeeping effort in the country." However, the pointedness of Ground Zero's critique is not so easily diffused. Referring to a 1995 production of *Hijos*, Bouzek comments in "Zero Rises," a

promotional piece about Ground Zero in *Now Magazine*, “With the talk of new immigrant legislation, *Hijos* has a poignant immediacy. A fictionalized version of Jorge’s own experience when he and his brother came from El Salvador, the play counters the media tales that we’re being invaded by refugees” (qtd. in Kaplan). Through *Hijos del Maiz / People of the Corn*, Ground Zero radically performed a fictionalized truth – Jorge and Carlos Barahona play their “selves,” foregrounding these personal roles while simultaneously challenging the fixed scripts of Otherness dominantly enacted in Canada – in a layered, direct, and carefully historicized way.

Thus, in *The Journeys . . . from Home to Foreign Land* and in *Hijos del Maiz / People of the Corn*, Kalevala and Ground Zero created spaces where uneasy and contradictory histories could emerge while simultaneously exemplifying how staging these contradictions did not have to be disabling. *The Journeys* and *Hijos* represent two effective radical storytelling ventures that – without perpetuating stereotypes of the Other, and without attempting to enact the “definitive” experience of the oppressed – were able to foreground and scrutinize the very real material effects of racist policies and historical omissions on bodies that are marked as Other within dominant discourses of Canadianness.

In conclusion, I have been asking how popular theatre projects can combine “true” stories of the disenfranchised with performances of process to provide strategically effective critiques of injustice. That is, because popular theatre emerges out of a desire to tell counter-narratives through which marginalized subjectivities can be more adequately understood, it is hugely important that these narratives be used doubly: to *create* and negotiate particular truths while simultaneously giving attention to the very real material effects of destructive hegemonic fictions. I do not mean to imply that the particular Canadian popular theatre projects that I have addressed here somehow collectively represent *the* definitive way to harness the radical potential of the popular theatre process. Instead, in the various storytelling processes of groups such as The Company of Sirens or Diwata, in Kalevala’s retelling of “shared” histories through a variety of different voices and perspectives, and in Ground Zero’s directed interrogation of Canadian immigration policy, we encounter dissonant and profoundly enabling *attitudes* (in Foucault’s use of the word)³ rather than prescriptive approaches toward staging counter-narratives to dominant and exploitative discourses of Canadianness. In this way, by performing the histories of disenfranchised peoples, popular theatre projects can construct fictionalized truths that scrutinize and engage with oppressive realities, making it possible not just to *rehearse* revolution but to engage in the unpredictable, risky process of social change itself.

NOTES

1. See Alan Filewod's "The Ideological Formation of Political Theatre in Canada."

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2. I should emphasize that my discussion of PUENTE's first project, *I Wasn't Born Here*, is an analysis that has emerged primarily through my engagement both with interviews and critical discussions by and about PUENTE theatre, and with the video about *I Wasn't Born Here* entitled *Creating Bridges*. *Creating Bridges* is a video that includes interviews with the women involved in the project, as well as footage from the actual performance. My analysis of PUENTE is thus of this video "text" rather than of the "live" performance itself.

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3. In "What is Enlightenment?", Foucault writes, "The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (50).

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