

Theatrical Nationhood in Radical Mobility

The *Farm Show* Futures and the Banner/Ground Zero Collaborations

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“The theatre, a sagging intestine, empties. ...”

(Brecht, “The Play is Over.”)

The ghosts of *The Farm Show* haunt Canadian theatre still, more than three decades after it established a template for collectively created intervention theatre by moving into a rural township, recording their meetings with local farmers and their families on audiotape, and turning those exchanges into a reflexive theatrical report that “bounces along one way or another and then it *stops*” (Theatre Passe Muraille, 19). Most recently and famously, the making of *The Farm Show* provides the narrative platform for Michael Healey’s wildly successful play *The Drawer Boy*, which since its premier in 1999 has won the Governor General’s Award for Drama and has been produced in theatres across Canada, the United States, Great Britain and New Zealand. *The Drawer Boy* testifies to the formative impact of *The Farm Show* as a critical point in which our present idea of “Canadian theatre” emerged as a cultural practice. The line between the two plays tells a story of cultural growth, of radical youth constructing a theatre method that has since developed into a professional system capable of exporting its history in plays like *The Drawer Boy*. But there is another line that traces into the present from *The Farm Show*, which offers a more radical narrative. Following that line, we can see how one signal historical moment can produce two radically different theatrical futures, which speak to opposing understandings of the relationship of theatre culture and

national presence.

I was one of the many millions of Canadians who never actually saw *The Farm Show* (in fact, fewer people saw that play than watch a single episode of *Trailer Park Boys*). But this local, almost inadvertent, performance has come to occupy a defining place in our narrative of Canadian theatre. Numerous critics and historians have identified it as the critical juncture in which what has been called “the alternative theatre movement” (which was neither alternative nor a movement) began the process of recentering the emergent industry of Canadian theatre by establishing a new sense of theatre practice in which actor-generated texts, collective dramaturgy, local voices and transactional audiences opened a new sense of the Canadian nation at play. The last line *The Farm Show* echoes this, with its plea, “Y’know, how else do you *build a nation?*”(102).

Although in the decades since, *The Farm Show* vision of Canadian nationhood as an aggregate of regional cultures may have lost purchase, insofar as no one local culture can be metonymic of the nation as a whole, the most important point about the show is that it was the first of many similar community-based interventions. Not all defined the nation in terms of rural Ontario: they could be found in the Arctic, on reserves, in urban neighbourhoods and remote mining towns. *The Farm Show* demonstrated to aspirant theatre artists that they could bypass the narrow tracks of the theatre profession and its self-selecting, value-seeking audiences. A theatre career didn’t require a diploma, an agent and an audition at Stratford. Nor did it need a playhouse. All it needed was what Archibald Key has envisioned in the 1930s when he 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” (7). It didn’t even need playwrights; they would come in their time, in their hundreds, but it was the fact of inventing

theatre work by connecting to local audiences, more than the stories told, that mattered.

Most of the commentary on *The Farm Show* has focused on issues of collective dramaturgy, cultural nationalism and acting technique. But if the show was a critical juncture, it was not because it was a genealogical moment of origin. *The Farm Show* was critical because it secured a professional entry for a vision of theatre as a cultural practice reciprocally generated by artists and particularized audiences. That vision was not in itself new; the workers theatres of the previous generation, and George Luscombe's struggles to build an audience-centered theatre with Toronto Workshop Productions, had previously worked towards a reciprocity of performance and audience. But the workers theatres were bound by a political program that was subject to changes in left-wing political discourse, and Luscombe was caught in the mechanisms of the emergent professional theatre system, for which the audience was the sufficient condition, not the object, of performance.

Theatrical Mobility

In *The Farm Show* we see the first successful attempt to mount a sustaining theatre culture based on principles of cultural intervention and theatrical mobility. Impelled by a sentimental Maoist-derived notion of "taking" theatre to the people, the Passe Muraille actors quickly found that "the people" have names and histories. In this, they broke through the ideological dead-end that had defeated the political theatre movements of the 1930s.

That defeat was defined most vividly in the bitter epilogue to Erwin Piscator's attempts to build a professional revolutionary theatre in Berlin the 1920s. 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” (321). For Piscator, a radical theater that modeled history from within required a politicized audience that could absorb this experience critically and apply it. 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, Piscator had concluded that the mobile agitprops that had been the principle technique of the revolutionary theatre were incapable addressing the audience as an historical force. 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 Walter Gropius bears a startling similarity to a modern high-tech football stadium. But 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). (The proletariat didn’t come, but Hitler did, and Piscator went to New York to teach Marlon Brando how to act.)

Not surprisingly, the twin thrusts of engaged 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. 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.

Space becomes audience, audience becomes dramaturgy, dramaturgy becomes space.

Consider this as a triangle in which any two sides define the third, homologous to the triangular relationship of geographic location, audience demographic and repertoire that defines the fields of possibility for most professional theatres. For Piscator, every unsold seat was a failure. But was it a failure of the audience? The problem for his political theatre movement was that the cultural location of its public audience was defined only in terms of the statist model of communist class analysis, in which the audience modeled the counter-nation that was poised to command the state.

In the theatre the problem remained fundamentally simple: either the audience was only the people in the house, or it was larger: it was all the people who passed through the doors in a run and perhaps the people they talked to and the people who read the reviews and heard the chat. Either the audience was a community produced by the event, or it was the communication flow as it circulated in the public sphere.

The mobile revolutionary agitprop that Piscator had rejected as incapable of addressing the audience as an historical force played this latter concept of audience, not as community, whether local, mass or metonymic, but as vector, and 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 the 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. After all, is this not what Deadhead culture was all about?)

The Piscatorian tradition produced local successes, just as Luscombe did at TWP, working with similar principles. But neither Piscator nor Luscombe could transform the theatre

profession, the entire structure of the theatre estate, into a radical theatrical nation. Enclosed by the profession they struggled to turn upside down, they found themselves marginalized by it.

The Farm Show, and dozens of productions like it in Canada and elsewhere, offered a vision of a theatre culture based on mobility rather than enclosure, and discovered the means to sustain 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. In the Canadian context, *The Farm Show* offers a pivotal moment when these choices emerged in clarity.

Purging Radical History

The failed radicalisms of the past survive in the present as narratives of naivete, as histories of lost opportunities, misguided choices and political errors. But of course the radicalisms of the past also live on in the radicalisms of the present. In the gap between these two perceptions, we can see the past not as a fixed moment but as a point in which possible futures emerge. The first future of *The Farm Show* is one in which it is relegated to cultural memory as a precursor in a generational narrative that climaxes in the remarkable international success of *The Drawer Boy*. Michael Healey, an actor and playwright who had not seen *The Farm Show* but had worked closely with the people who made it, wrote his play about a young actor who arrives at a farmhouse in southern Ontario in 1972 to interview two old farmers, “to get your history and give it back to you” (31). *The Drawer Boy* is modeled closely on *The Farm Show*, and the original production was directed by Miles Potter, the actor whose experience it borrows for the character of “Miles,” and starred another *Farm Show* veteran,

David Fox, as the farmer whose story drives the narrative.

Despite the web of intertexts and in-jokes, *The Drawer Boy* is independent of *The Farm Show*. As a play, it is a clever and very funny story about a naïve actor whose documentary performance inadvertently cures one of the farmers of the short-term memory loss he has suffered since the Second World War. As the actor replays a moment between the two farmers, the transfer of identity brings about a kind of psychodramatic crisis. Healey's point would seem to be the naivete of the actor is the precondition of the cure: the actor acknowledges ethical boundaries but subverts them: he takes the story and uses it for his purposes. But in violating the ethical contract he functions as the psychodramatic auxiliary ego who brings about the cure through the crisis of reenactment – and becomes part of the story.

In *The Drawer Boy* we see a clever, witty fable about art, and a rather fond but dismissive satire about the pretensions of young radical artists. It offers a reflective history of a signal moment, endorsed by the collaboration of veterans of that moment. In a sense, *The Drawer Boy* is *The Farm Show* as remembered by its alumni, looking back at their radical youth from the pinnacle of careers spent in the theatre profession that their younger selves had refused. It is a remembrance in which *The Farm Show* is purged of its radical project, and invested instead as a precondition for plays like *The Drawer Boy*.

Radical Mobility

But there was another future for *The Farm Show*, through which it came to define a radical rupture in our theatre culture that continues to produce new understandings of theatre practice, and new aesthetic conventions. In this narrative, the most important contribution of *The Farm Show* was its repudiation of the conventions of professional theatre and the dramaturgical contract that builds a playhouse to enclose the containment form of the dramatic

fable, and as a consequence reduces the audience to a condition, as opposed to the object, of performance. Brecht called it a “poisoned” audience:

And no wonder

They like to sit in the dark that hides them. (Brecht, (Theatre of Emotions.”)

In our book *Workers Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement Since 1970*, David Watt and I began our study of labour activist theatre with the suggestion that the work we examined could best be understood as strategies rather than structures. Two of the examples we discussed, Banner Theatre in Birmingham, England, and Ground Zero Productions in Edmonton, Alberta, have worked under the radar of critical reception for decades and have managed to turn the precariousness of project-based work to their advantage, working as what we called “strategic ventures” rather than theatre “companies,” able to shift between a number of constituencies and work in a broad range of artistic modes, some of which seem to violate the unspoken rules of theatre. Brought into contact in the research collaboration, Banner and Ground Zero began working together on a series of joint projects that has in effect established a transnational theatre operation.

Since 1982, Ground Zero has operated as a hybrid of fringe theatre and small business providing services to client groups, and initiating its own artistic projects when arts council funding permits. 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 the popular theatre model, in which radical performance the marks of the political networks that have been activated in the process of production.

Banner is an even older venture than Ground Zero, having emerged in 1974 following the success of what accidentally became their first production, *Collier Laddie*, a stage adaptation of Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger's 'radio ballad', *The Big Hewer*, pulled together by Parker, Rhoma Bowdler and an amateur group from the Grey Cock Folk Club in Birmingham for a one-night stand to fill a gap in the folk club program. The ten Radio Ballads produced by Parker for the BBC between 1958 and 1964 were made out of audiotaped interviews with particular subject communities. These tapes were edited and spliced into songs, occasionally traditional but mostly written in the folk idiom by MacColl and Seeger, to create documentary collages. Their influence at the time was immense, most notably on the pioneering documentary theatre work of Peter Cheeseman at Stoke-on-Trent, but also, as Derek Paget has pointed out, on the emergence of what he has called "verbatim theatre" in the 1970s and 80s, and that influence has spread to Canada and Australia as well. As David Watt has described at length, Parker was sufficiently taken with the possibilities of the form to set about a series of experiments in multi-media documentary theatre with amateur groups in Birmingham (Watt). It is out of this work that Banner emerged.

In the fall of 1997, Bouzek traveled to England and met Dave Rogers, Banner's director, and began a series of conversations that culminated last year when Rogers spent time in Edmonton workshopping a show on Alberta labour history and the Canadian end of the *Migrant Voices* project (2002-2003), focusing on Iranian and Kurdish refugees in Britain. The collaboration continued with Bouzek working as a director on Banner's miner's strike anniversary show, *Burning Issues* (2004), commissioned by the National Union of Minerworkers, and it and the latest chapter of its ongoing "Local Stories/Global Times" project, a video ballad on migrant workers in the globalized economy entitled *Wild Geese*

(2005), which brought Banner performers to Canada.

In their cultural exchange, Ground Zero brings to Banner a social process of cultural communication. This is theatre as a social application of network-building, and it builds on the Canadian experience of negotiating cultural difference in one of the world's most multicultural and plural societies. In turn, Banner has provided Ground Zero with a working method that resystematizes its performance vocabularies and reterritorializes aesthetics.

Banner's history in the ballad form provides Ground Zero with a new set of artistic protocols that have repositioned the aesthetic traditions of Canadian popular theatre, and which have provided new avenues of release from the disciplinary frame of the theatre profession. As a director, Bouzek has always been most interested in the performative relationship of human actors and artifacts: puppets, objects, screens, cameras, etc. With the video ballads, Bouzek produced a hybrid form that derives from Canadian storytelling, early 20th century Chautauqua and working class concert, reconsidered in terms of Banner's experience in adapting the radio ballad form to digital video.

An example of the Video Ballad dramaturgy can be extracted from the script of *Troublemakers*, a show about working class history in Alberta, produced by Ground Zero with songs written and performed by Edmonton singer-songwriter Maria Dunn. In performance, Maria and her fiddler accompanist stand before and to the side of a projection screen that dominates the stage, close to the audience. Although it seems like a concert, her performance has none of the adlibs and asides that respond to the concert audience. It is austere and rehearsed, so that her songs establish a dialogue with the digital images and voiceovers. (In this case, because of the historical material, the voiceovers were recorded by actors.)

TITLE: 1922

NEWS ITEM (*voice-over*): Coal Miners in the Drumheller Valley yesterday walked off their jobs in defiance of their own union. They claim the union betrayed them by negotiating a contract which reduced their rate of pay. The miners voted to instruct their representative Arthur Evans to use their dues money as strike pay.

Slim Evans (*voice-over*): The United Mine Workers accused me of stealing their dues money. I was arrested for 'fraudulently converting' union funds to feed the starving, instead of sending it to a bunch of business agents in Indianapolis. I was brought up for trial in Calgary. They sentenced me to three years in the Prince Albert penitentiary.

Song:

Drumheller Valley in 1922

And still it's hard, hard times

'Cause that Yankee union chokes off our dues

And leaves us to struggle in the mines

They say One Big Union was one big mistake

We never should have made that choice

But when it comes to righting a wrong

We'll still be raising one big voice.

A capella

Yes I know Slim Evans

Friend of the working miner

And yes I'll sign my name to petition his release

It's the least that I can do for

The man who put the money

Where our hungry mouths were and damn their union fees. (Dunn)

This is the basic theatrical vocabulary: actor-musicians, digital video projection and audio recordings creating a montage of recorded actuality and performed commentary. The mix of live music, digital video, documentary collage and news item voiceovers disrupts normative patterns of theatrical reception. It isn't theatre, but neither is it video, or concert. It is the performance of hybridity, as forms migrate and reterritorialize, across disciplinary, cultural and national borders. The collaboration with Banner has relegitimized Ground Zero's cultural hybridity, by offering another set of protocols and a genealogical structure of reception and critical discourse. Banner and Ground Zero have legitimized each other in a history of common form that in each case was delegitimized as theatre work – but now together have produced a new historical procedure: their collaboration is also a merger of histories and the implementation of new genealogies that are independent of the theatre estate.

With the Ground Zero/Banner collaboration, we see an exposure of the nation as practice, and the possibility of the transnational in an active disruption of the solidity of national culture as export commodity. What seems new here is the way in which the transnational is understood and activated: not as a structure, as it was understood in the 1930s, when the notion of the international superseded the national in theory but was captured by statism in practice, but as a rhizomorphic activation of the local in the process of reproduction through transference.

The transnational and global flow of information, of capital, finance, futures and commodities is an economy of information, and is adaptable to the cultural and political forces that oppose it. Digital media is both the means and the form of the 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: it disturbs the narrative structures of national culture that produces discourses of centrality and alterity. The refusal of the institutionalized theatre is a refusal of the nations enacted in that institution. This refusal models the nation not as an organic structure but as a rhizome, an expanding, always changing, network of interconnected localities, in which theatre culture is one of many strata

Thirty years earlier, Theatre Passe Muraille had signaled a refusal of theatrical federalism with *The Farm Show*, envisioning instead a desystematized theatre culture that produces its own disciplinaries and aesthetic values in the reciprocal moment of contact with the audience. The ghosts of *The Farm Show* play the reiterative stages of *The Drawer Boy*, but its futures, in the Banner/Ground Zero collaboration (which evokes memories of the brief collaboration twenty years ago between Theatre Passe Muraille and 7:84) and countless others, are practicing the transnational, at the edge that pushes back, *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.

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