

The Ground Zero/ Banner Collaborations

Alan Filewod and David Watt

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In our book *Workers Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement Since 1970* (Sydney: Currency, 2001), we began our study of labour activist theatre with the suggestion that the work we examined could best be understood as strategies rather than structures. In particular we paid close attention to the strategies developed by Banner Theatre in Birmingham and Ground Zero Productions, formerly based in Toronto and now in Edmonton, Alberta. Both of these groups 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. We closed our book with the suggestion that the strategic ventures we examined had achieved some success “in consolidating the communities of interest with which they [had] chosen to work,” and in the hope that “the tactical abilities of theatreworkers to create sites for the necessary dialogues” between these coalitions of resistance “either within the event of performance or through the processes of its generation.” We ended with the suggestion that radical theatre work requires the refusal of the fiction of the professional theatre.

Ground Zero: background

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 effect, Ground Zero is an office studio operated by director Don Bouzek and whatever office help he can score a grant to hire.

Like the labour movement with which it often works, Ground Zero can accommodate dominant ideology even as it challenges it. This ability to function as a service-providing agency has enabled Ground Zero to legitimise its presence in the labour and other social justice movements and operate in a network of alliances and coalitions that focus on tactical issues. Don Bouzek explains that:

We have always worked with different methodologies and communities. It's the fluidity of moving from video to theatre, from what the Australians call 'Contemporary Performance' to Boal, that gives us a lot of the stability to survive as the conditions change [Bouzek 1997.1].

In order to manage this fluidity, Bouzek developed an administrative structure for an artist-controlled theatre to operate on an ongoing professional basis within a partially-subsidised theatre system that marginalised political theatres. For Bouzek, this meant renegotiating the 'charity model' of theatrical organisation in Canada with its volunteer boards:

who are ideally people with 'clout' ie. well-heeled enough to fund raise. I have great problems with this model, preventing as it does, artists from controlling their own organisations, and re-inforcing a cult of volunteerism in Canada's social policy [Bouzek 1986].

Bouzek here refers to the fact that to be eligible for subsidies through the Canadian public arts councils), cultural organisations must be incorporated as public not-for-profit corporations governed by a volunteer board of directors—even though public subsidies rarely amount to more than a fraction of a company's total revenues. Time and again Canadian arts organisations have seen self-replicating boards exercising creative control by purging the founding artistic creators of the company. The cult of volunteerism that Bouzek deplores has a long history of disenfranchising artists.

As an independent production house rather than a repertoire company, Ground Zero developed a hybrid model with a volunteer board but preserving the artist's 'right to manage' (to expropriate a current phrase from anti-labour government). It has done this by breaking the cycle of dependency on public funding. Its fundamental administrative principle, reiterated annually in grant applications, is that the company does not undertake work on a given project until all financing for it is secured. While it applies for and receives grants, they are earmarked for specific, non-revenue generating projects or for infrastructural support while the bulk of the work is undertaken as commissions from sponsoring organisations in the labour and social justice movements. Ground Zero is an anomaly in Canadian theatre because, in a system which virtually forces arts

organisations to engage in deficit financing and boards penalise artists for so doing, it has never run a deficit.

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. There are numerous definitions of this process: this one comes from le Theatre Parminou, a popular theatre cooperative in Quebec:

We define popular theatre practice in terms of a participatory creation process involving the artists with the community so as to develop with each specific population a process of analysis and criticism that happens during the creative process as well as in performance. (www.Parminou.com)

In this model, radical performance is the ceremonial marker of the political engagements that have been activated in the process of production.

Banner: background

Banner is an even older venture than Ground Zero, and is presently planning a conference as a celebration of its 30th anniversary. It 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. It established the template for most of what the venture has been engaged with ever since and, for those of you who haven't read the book, it may be useful to quickly recap on a couple of its basic features.

1. the Radio Ballads – there were 10 of these made for the BBC between 1958 and 1964. Two, which Parker made with Birmingham folk performer Ian Campbell,

have unfortunately sunk without trace, but 6 have been re-released on Topic CDs, which also released the other 2 of them for the first time (probably more to the delight of aging folkies than theatre scholars, but they nonetheless occupy an important place in the history of documentary theatre in Britain and elsewhere for that matter). Central to these was the use of what Parker (presumably pinching the term coined by the pioneering documentary film-maker John Grierson before the war) called ‘actuality’ – audiotaped oral history interviews with a particular constituency for each one (railway workers, fishermen, coal miners, traveling people etc). 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 revolutionary at the time for allowing ordinary people to speak for themselves, in their own accents and idioms, rather than through the voices of actors or mediated by a BBC received English narrational voice. 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.

2. Parker’s theatrical experimentation in the late 50s and early 60s – as I’ve written elsewhere (NTQ at inordinate 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. These used audiotaped ‘actuality’, documentary material from newspapers, books etc., slides, films, in some cases dance, and, centrally, music (ranging from folk song to a full choral performance of extracts from Haydn’s *Creation* in his bravest attempt, *The Maker and the Tool*, staged at 6 trade union festivals organized by Centre 42 in the summer of 1960-61). These drew on his knowledge of radio and film documentary, half-understood fragments of information on the Living Newspaper experiments of the Federal Theatre Project in the USA before the war, and tales from MacColl about his work with Joan Littlewood before the war, but presumably not much on German and Russian experiments in documentary before

the war, which were little known when he began in the 50s. He saw them as a model for a possible emergent theatre form which he described as the ‘theatre folk ballad’.

3. Venues and audiences – *Collier Laddie* was designed for performances in the calculatedly informal setting of a folk club, and the ongoing relationships with mineworkers Parker had formed out of the *Big Hewer* more than a decade earlier led to touring performances in social clubs, miners’ welfares etc to audiences who were essentially the subject of the piece. This established the pattern of performance in non-theatre venues to non-theatre audiences, many of whom have been at least peripherally involved in the making of the piece, which has been Banner’s standard mode ever since. (It’s also worth pointing out that the connections established with this specific audience some 40 years ago remain strong – Banner’s latest show, *Burning Issues*, which I’ll get on to, came from an invitation by the NUM to consolidate an ongoing relationship by making a piece to mark the 10th anniversary of the 1984 miners’ strike)

Banner has never deviated from the use of ‘actuality’ as the centre of the work, and is probably now closer to the Radio Ballads than at any time in its history – largely as a result of the confidence in the form engendered by their developing relationship with Don Bouzek (it’s always good to discover you’re not entirely alone).

The venture has taken a number of forms:

- Amateur theatre, as in the case of *Collier Laddie*
- A hard core of amateurs involved in agitprop performances in the streets
- A professional ‘company’ of four performers able to work in more theatrically sophisticated styles and forms (ironically first receiving funding to do so in 1979).). This is really the only period in which Banner could be meaningfully described as a theatre **company**, and it only lasted a short time.
- A ‘community theatre’ venture utilizing a professional core to work with community participants

- A ‘song group’ able to perform at a moment’s notice, which was particularly busy performing at fund-raisers and on picket lines during the miners’ strike of 1984 and has probably been the major ongoing activity of the venture. It still exists as the 1st of May Band, available for bookings for ‘rallies, socials, conferences and educational schools’ according to the website....

At the moment the venture is closest to the structure of Ground Zero ie a small business with a tight core (administrative staff when funding allows, or otherwise volunteer, and Dave Rogers) which contracts appropriate labour to work on particular projects, and a large network of associates, some with connections going back the full 30 years of the venture’s existence, who contribute to the work, occasionally even in a paid capacity.

Projects are, as often as not, the result of invitations to work on a particular issue with a particular community organization, and are often generated out of ‘community residencies’ in which the ‘subjects’ of the projects are engaged in discussions out of which the show emerges. A show from 2001 makes this clear:

Black and White in the Red emerged from discussions with the black and Asian sections of the Fire Brigades Union following an incident at the Greater Manchester Fire Authority training centre in 1998 which led to unofficial strike action and was finally resolved at an Employment Tribunal in early 2000 when the Greater Manchester Brigade was found to be in breach of the Race Relations Act and the Deputy Commissioner of the Fire Service was forced to resign. The incident galvanized black and Asian fire fighters, and Banner was brought in by the Union to make a show in consultation with them and tour it to fire stations as part of the Fairness at Work policy which the union introduced in the wake of the crisis.

Banner’s CDs (available via the website) give a tiny indication of the forms of the shows – music and audiotaped ‘actuality’, spliced together with song contextualizing, expanding and extending the recorded voices of real people talking about their lives. ‘Actuality’, in the early days, was often given to actors, but increasingly, once the technology allowed such precise splicing and control over volume, left as taped voices. This was always further embellished, and complexified, with projected images, usually

stills but with the possibilities of DVD technology now incorporates moving images, including videotaped interviews, as well.

This also at least indicates the characteristic movement of the shows between local stories, grounded in the ‘actuality’, and a broader, global contextualization, which is perhaps clearer in the brief descriptions of some recent projects taken from the Banner website:

Two of these shows, *Criminal Justice* and *Sweat Shop* receive discussion in the book, but it’s worth making a brief point or two about them in passing. The project which produced *Sweat Shop* began with a local story, a small unofficial strike of Asian women at a metal finishing plant at 10 Downing Street Smethwick, one of many tiny localized industrial disputes in the early 1990s. Dave Rogers’ work on the project instantly made clear that talk about one tiny sweat shop only made sense in a global context, and in fact only if historicized as well. This means that the show reaches back into the 18th century to the beginnings of the industrial revolution and the British occupation of Bengal, and geographically from Texas to Indonesia. It thus entailed taking a show full of local stories, apparently isolated events, to the sites of similarly isolated events, thus drawing the connections between local communities in struggle in ways which spoke to the globalization of which they were all victims.

The alliance-building which this made possible then led into a braver experiment in *Criminal Justice*, which collaged a wide range of stories from a disparate collection of grassroots social movements and then played to mixed audiences who were often surprised to find themselves in the same room together, much less finding common ground in dialogue. This has led to the most elaborate version of a similar strategy in the Banner/Ground Zero collaboration on a long-term project called **Local Stories/Global Times**. To date this has produced two shows, *Migrant Voices* and *Burning Issues*. As will become clear, *Migrant Voices* has carried the process of the collecting and touring of local stories, gathered from a range of immigrant groups on two continents, from the national to the international level.

The Collaboration

In the process of researching our book, we literally put Ground Zero and Banner in touch with each other, passing addresses and phone numbers. The collaborations began even before the book was finished. In the fall of 1997, Bouzek traveled to England and met Dave Rogers, and began a series of conversations that led to:

- Banner undertaking a short Canadian tour of their 1999 show on the British National Health system, *Free for All*
- a ‘creative development’ workshop in early 2002, funded by West Midland Arts, including Bouzek and director Maggie Ford from Canada, two Birmingham filmmakers (Pervais Khan and Mukhtar Dar) and Rogers and photographer Kevin Hayes from Banner, on the use of DVD technology in performance
- Maggie Ford developing a show in the UK, which was then taken to Canada in 2003 for further work
- Rogers in Edmonton workshopping a show with Bouzek and singer-songwriter Maria Dunn on Alberta labour history (*Troublemakers*) and working on the Canadian end of the *Migrant Voices* project.

The collaboration continues with Bouzek working as a director on Banner’s Miner’s strike anniversary show, *Burning Issues*, and a redevelopment of *Migrant Voices* with Banner performers in Canada. Bouzek will be working in Birmingham in May and June of this year to produce a series of workshops with Canadian popular educator Barb Thomas.

From Ground Zero’s grant application:

Creative Workshops in UK [May / June 2004]

The use of Popular Theatre techniques in general is not common in the UK. Outside of some Boal based Forum Theatre, there is very little work being done. Introducing these techniques virtually from scratch creates an opportunity to re-examine the interaction of Popular Education and Popular Theatre in both the initial creation of a show and in its presentation.

The first step would be a weekend workshop for Banner Theatre people. During this session she would both familiarize participants with Popular Education techniques and define the company's overall approach to the work, paying particular attention to the issue of the role for a white-led company on an anti-racist project.

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.

Troublemakers: Reterritorialized Aesthetics

Banner's history in the theatre 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 possibilities avenues of release from the disciplinary frame of the theatre profession. From the beginning, Bouzek has subsidized Ground Zero with media work, first as a radio producer for the Development Education Centre in Toronto, and then with his own video editing suite, producing videos for labour groups. For years this entailed swapping budget lines and juggling grants, until in 2000 Bouzek incorporated his video enterprise as a private company under the name D.Active.

As a director, Bouzek has always been most interested in the performative relationship of human actors and artifacts: puppets, objects, screens, cameras, etc. His personal fascination with technology in performance has taken him sometimes to the kind of phenomenological performance techniques of the New York avant-garde – he once remarked that he was fascinated by Mabou Mines and the Wooster Group—but he has always retained a fundamental interest in the direct theatricality of the actor as talking head. The direct address storytelling mode is a recurring feature of Canadian theatre culture – we can theorize this in a lot of ways, but I tend to think of it as a performance of invented authenticities: The fascination with the authentic is deep in Canadian performance, perhaps, as communications theorists have explored, the experience of a

small populace across a vast landmass leads to a particularly anxious postcolonial ontology.

With *Troublemakers*, Bouzek produced a hybrid form that derives from Canadian storytelling, early 20th century Chautauqua (the traveling educational tent performances that originated from the Methodist Chautauqua Institute in New York State), and working class concert, reconsidered in terms of Banner's experience in adapting the radio ballad form to digital video. *Troublemakers* is a digital presentation with live performance, based around the songs of Maria Dunn, an Edmonton singer-songwriter whose music fits squarely in a familiar Canadian country folk tradition. It was workshopped with Dave Rogers, and performed for the first time last November at the Alberta Federation of Labour school (which is not a school as such but a series of courses and workshops).

The mix of live music, digital video, documentary collage and news item voiceovers disrupts normative patterns of theatrical reception. One of the main criticisms that have been applied to Ground Zero is that it isn't really theatre (this chiefly from arts councils: one officer wrote that he didn't understand where GZP sat in the "theatre ecology.") 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. No longer is it a performance of alterity (theatre marked by its refusal of the regimes of the theatre); it's a *video ballad*!

Twenty years ago Bouzek moved to the model of the independent production house because he wanted to escape the institutional politics of running a theatre facility, with its dependence on arts councils and boards of directors. The model he adapted was one that allowed him to reconfigure his work as a continuing series of one-off projects, but as a labour activist he remained committed to hiring Equity actors. And in fact his commitment to cultural diversity has enabled many actors from minority cultural backgrounds to access Equity membership by working with him. But with *Troublemakers*, Bouzek found himself working with the Musician's union rather than Equity. This was a practical move, because of Maria Dunn, but it also enabled greater flexibility in programming and scheduling: musicians can be hired on a gig-by-gig basis

but actors have to be contracted for a run. Like Banner, Ground Zero reformulates the fundamental expectations of theatre work.

The Banner End: *Migrant Voices* and *Burning Issues*

Migrant Voices has been described by Banner administrator Ian Gasse as ‘the learning curve’ on the use of DVD technology in the development of the video ballad as a form. It uses audiotape, back-projected video, stills and captions, and live music from three musicians, Rogers, Fred Wisdom, an Afro-Caribbean performer-musician-composer who has worked on a number of the shows, and Jilah Bakhshayesh, an Anglo-Iranian musician, whose combined knowledges allow for a rich musical mix. It is designed for performances in non-theatre spaces – community centres mostly – which are hosted by anti-racist community organizations. Typically the script allows the insertion of an introduction to the show by the organizer of the event of each performance.

It began, in a fairly typical way for Banner, with interviews and workshops with Iranian Kurdish asylum seekers in Sandwell in the West Midlands and then with Iraqi Kurds in Salford, and also with their ‘host communities’, this time with the assistance of Pervaiz Khan, a documentary film maker and theatre worker familiar with work in community contexts, and Don Bouzek from Ground Zero. These workshops actually produced short videos for the communities in question as well as the material for two different versions of the show, a short one for the West Midlands which toured briefly in 2002 and a longer one which was based in the Salford material which started touring in 2003 (including to Canada) and will be on the road again in a few weeks. (see the Banner website for dates and venues...)

Banner’s stated aim for the show was to use the ‘actuality’ to

enable [Middle Eastern asylum seekers] to tell their own stories to British audiences, because so often their real-life experiences are denied by the British tabloid press or replaced with lurid sensationalism

This entails detailed story-telling, such as the horrific tale of the Halabja Massacre in Kurdistan in 1988, in which Saddam Hussein used the chemical weapons given to him by the Americans to wage war against Iran to kill 5,000 Kurds in a day and another 11,000 from their effects in the following year. It also allowed stories of the migrant experience – racist violence etc in Salford – but the ‘actuality’ also allowed stories of other migrant experiences – Irish immigration, Jewish immigration in the 1930s, black and Asian immigration in the 1960s.

Projected captions and audiotaped readings from documentary sources combined with the ‘actuality’ to offer a history of the British occupation of the region since 1917, including the military suppression of Kurdish resistance to British rule – my favourite sequence of quotes from this section starts with Winston Churchill in 1919:

I do not understand this squeamishness about using gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisonous gas against uncivilized tribes.

Some song, then:

Caption: Sir Aylmer Haldane, Commander of the British Army

We used gas shells with excellent moral effect

Caption: Sir Hugh Trenchard, Chief of Air Staff

I think we should consider using these techniques against risings in Britain itself.

Captions: 1921 British installs Emir Faisa bin Hussein as king of Iraq

Industrial unrest across Britain

Ruling class fear revolution in Russia and revolution at home

Images: Industrial unrest UK

So this is a show which can cover a lot of territory – the form allows the presentation of a number of local stories, placed in a global context, and toured to a wide array of communities for performances in their own venues. It’s already been on the road for a year or so, including to Canada, and as I’ve said, hits the road again soon. Plans are

for a Canadian version of the show to be put together by Banner, and performed by them, out of interview material gathered there in spring 2005.

As we have pointed out, these shows are more like band gigs than theatre pieces, and can thus be pulled out virtually at the drop of a hat – you just need to remember to grab the right DVD as you leap into the van. This is what gives them their long shelf-life and makes it possible to tour two of them at once, which is what Banner will be doing with *Migrant Voices* and the new show, *Burning Issues*, for most of this year. Banner's press release to unions on the requirements for a performance indicates that portability:

For a performance we need a hall or other venue with a ceiling height of 8' 6'', a performance area measuring 15 feet by 15 feet, access to six 13 amp. Sockets and level access to the performance space (no stairs). We bring all equipment, including set, PA, lighting, musical instruments, video and mixing desks. Fee? 800, but they will negotiate down.

Burning Issues

This is a particularly interesting development in the Banner/Ground Zero collaboration, given the position the show holds in Banner's long history. As I said earlier, Banner's first show, *Collier Laddie*, owed some of its success in 1974 to the connections with mineworkers built up by Charles Parker and Ewan MacColl in 1960 during the making of the Radio Ballad *The Big Hewer*. The relationship with the NUM was sustained through a highly successful 1975 show on the legendary Battle of Saltley Gate, which was cut down from a huge amateur cast to a two-hander song-cycle with 'actuality' which toured mining communities for many years at the request of NUM members, and through the work of the song group throughout the 1984 strike. The association continued with a project to produce a song group with the North Staffordshire Miners' Wives Action Group which then went on to become *Nice Girls*, a Peter Cheeseman documentary which the NSMWAG disliked almost as much as Dave Rogers. *Burning Issues* actually came about at the invitation of the NUM to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the strike. That the task of directing a show built out of this long-standing relationship should be given over to Don Bouzek indicates an extraordinary level of trust.

Banner, like Ground Zero, has been accused of not really being “theatre”, but “accusation” is not the universal tone of such comments. The following is an unsolicited “review” from a happy punter on the Liverpool Socialist Labour Party website: ‘If you find theatre somewhat up-itself (as I do in general) then make an effort to see this play...’ The “reviewer” then goes on to point out that it’s really not theatre but a sort of documentary with songs and therefore worth risking as a night out.

Digitalization and globalization

We want to close by posing some quick questions about the politics of this form of collaboration in the era of globalization. In a sense the idea of globalized culture is a fallacy, because the practice of culture is always local – even if the local is migrant and rhizomatic as Deleuze and Guattari have shown. The theatre has always been transnational, and in Canada the attempt to institutionalize the theatre as an estate, and as a simulation of the state has always been pressured by imperial economics.

Today transnational collaboration and production is one of the principle means by which theatrical innovation is capitalized, across domains of value and reception: whether in blockbuster musicals, prestige festivals or canonical opera. The economy of international exchange in the theatre is a flow of money, reputation, legitimation and futures market value. But for the most part, national culture is itself a commodity of value, branding nations by cultural export and tourism.

With the Ground Zero/Banner collaboration, I suggest we see the possibility of the supranational and an active disruption of the solidity of national culture: an exposure of the nation as practice. What seems new here is the way in which the supranational is understood and activated: not as a transnational class structure, as it was understood in the 1930s, when the notion of the international superceded the national in theory but was captured by statism in practice – but as a rhizomatic structuring of the local in the process of reproduction through transference. In this regard, I think the video ballad form is a major development

The transnational and supranational 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 as 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, 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 Auslander's term; it produces embodied authenticities. The Ground Zero/Banner collaboration is activated by digital communication, through the internet, the web, 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 work leads me to my final reflection on this conference: that alternative theatre in Britain today is neither alternative nor British, and it may be local somewhere else.