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POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES**

Jessica Ruano

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

M.A. (Theatre)

GRADE / DEGREE

Department of Theatre

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

**Impression of 'Newness' in English Canadian Theatre
The Role of Festivals in the Consecration and Distribution of New Work**

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

Joël Beddows

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

Kathryn Prince

Sylvain Schryburt

Gary W. Slater

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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MA Candidate: Jessica Ruano

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Joël Beddows

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Impressions of 'Newness' in English Canadian Theatre
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In English Canadian theatre, there exists a significant divide between established works produced in the mainstream and new work that has traditionally been relegated to the margins of institutional practice. Seeking to bridge this divide are a number of festivals committed to fostering and showcasing plays by Canadian theatre artists and companies and to attracting presenters interested in programming new works for future seasons. In order to succeed in the festival circuit, independent companies must, to a certain extent, cater to the expectations of organizations that value performance that gives the impression of being novel and yet proves accessible to festival audiences and to those targeted by presenters. This plays a role in aesthetics that become characteristic of the companies' work. These aesthetics are not only accepted, but also exploited by festivals that are seeking to legitimize the notion of 'newness', in part, for the purpose of their own sustainability.

For A.L.bion

Many thanks to my ever supportive family and dear friends; to my gracious couch surfing hosts; to all my wonderful professors in the Department of English and the Department of Theatre at the University of Ottawa; to the artists who were kind enough to share their work and thoughts with me, namely Jonathon Young, Nathan Medd, Kendra Fanconi, Jonathan Christenson, Eva Cairns, Judd Palmer, Pityu Kenderes, Pete Balkwill, Don Brinsmead, Mitchell Craib, Mary Vingoe, Ken Cameron, Norman Armour, Michael Green, Chris Lorway, Mark Ball, Victoria Steele, and Marti Maraden; to Blake Brooker, who never did end up reporting me to my supervisor; to Paul Kohler, who actually bothered to read a draft of my thesis; to Mary Lavers for thinking up the term 'thesis envy'; and especially to the remarkable Dr. Joël Beddows, who absurdly offered to supervise my thesis after having known me for only an hour. Thank you.

APPENDIX

Abbreviations

CCA	Canada Council for the Arts
CTR	Canadian Theatre Review
DDF	Dominion Drama Festival
ECT	Electric Company Theatre
FPDS	<i>Famous Puppet Death Scenes</i>
FTA	Festival TransAmériques
HPR	High Performance Rodeo
MNTF	Magnetic North Theatre Festival
NAC	National Arts Centre
OTPW	Old Trout Puppet Workshop
OYR	One Yellow Rabbit
PuSh	PuSh International Festival of Performing Arts

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In English Canadian theatre, there is a well-rooted and predominant tendency for established companies to produce plays that have 'proven potential', either classics of the English and world stage or scripts that have succeeded recently in London's West End and on Broadway. Since larger companies, especially those known as 'regionals', have no choice but to be concerned with increasing audience subscriptions in order to remain viable, it seems logical to program works with which theatre patrons are familiar and that are almost guaranteed to be popular. Even companies with a mandate to produce Canadian theatre today often program well-known plays written by established and already consecrated playwrights. For this reason, there exists a significant divide between established works produced in the mainstream and new work that has traditionally been relegated to the margins of institutional practice. Seeking to bridge this divide are a number of festivals committed to fostering and showcasing new works by Canadian playwrights, 'theatre makers', and companies, including those working in alternative production models, and to attracting presenters possibly interested in programming new works for future seasons. While the term 'festival' has many common usages today, any use of the word 'festival' in this thesis will refer specifically to curated festivals of a short duration (usually between ten days and four weeks) that focus on the presentation and cultivation of new works of theatre and performance – unless it has been otherwise indicated.

In order to connect presenters with new works of theatre, it would seem that festival curators in English Canada, as well as the companies and creators with which they work, must be knowledgeable not only in the performing arts, but also in the paradigms and paradoxes of

'theatre as industry'. The industry aspect often influences the work that is being created and presented at festivals and, consequently, the new work that later appears in venues across Canada. This thesis will show how three independent companies were able to sustain themselves and gain recognition in a theatrical mainstream that has a tendency to resist forms of theatre perceived as 'new' and created through uncommon methods of creation. For the purpose of this research, 'independent companies' are herein defined as not-for-profit organizations that, generally speaking, create their own work that does not begin with a pre-existing script. This work may be created in collaboration with a permanent troupe and with other companies; it may be commissioned or co-presented by venues and festivals. In order to succeed in the festival circuit, these companies must, to a certain extent, cater to the expectations of organizations that value performance that gives the impression of being novel and yet, at the same time, proves accessible both to festival audiences and to those targeted by presenters throughout Canada and internationally. This, in turn, plays a role in the aesthetics that become characteristic of the companies' work. These aesthetics are not only accepted, but also encouraged and exploited by the festivals that are seeking to legitimize the notion of 'newness' on regional, provincial and national levels, in part, for the purpose of their own sustainability.

'Newness' is a conceptual notion used to study art forms that give the impression of being associated with a current or contemporary form of 'avant-garde' by way of promotional and marketing techniques. In English Canadian professional theatre, the notion of 'newness' is useful when analyzing performances and aesthetics that attempt to distance themselves from

norms established by British heritage, including traditional linear and realistic staging¹. Companies that embrace such trends strive, at best, to be at the leading edge of artistic innovation by rejecting or reworking established, already consecrated and known artistic conventions, as well as experimenting with stage devices and openly disruptive techniques; at worst, they simply package themselves as new by using appropriate jargon. Often, companies and creators do both. As literary editor Barbara Epstein notes in her article "Postmodernism and the Left", there has come about in recent times "a fetishization of the new [...] It has become common practice in this arena to advertise one's own work as radical, subversive, transgressive. All this really means is that one hopes one is saying something new" (16). It is important to note the use of 'advertise' by Epstein in her explanation: oftentimes, the way a work is promoted or described to its potential audience has a significant effect on the way they understand and experience the actual production. In his book *Reading the Material Theatre*, Ric Knowles asserts the following:

Marketing decisions do quite immediately shape not only programming, but audience horizons of expectation², the constitution (or at least the discursive construction) of the audience, and to at least some extent the ways in which those audiences interpret the productions themselves. (93)

In order to appear forward-thinking and modern, if not post-modern, often companies either choose subjects with which the general population is not entirely familiar, or attempt to offer a

¹ This definition is based on Alvina Ruprecht's definition of disruptive theatre in her article "Canada's Multiple Theatres outside Québec: The Decade of the Nineties".

² *Horizons of Expectation*: defined by Hans Robert Jauss in his book *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* as "the set of cultural, ethical and literary expectations held by readers in the historical moment of a work's appearance" (1)

new perspective on subjects that are considered known, cliché or universal. 'Newness' is context-dependent, meaning that a work could be described as new to one grouping of spectators, while other people might find it reminiscent of something they saw decades ago, or in another context, whether that means a different language or in another location. A work might be considered new only in comparison to the majority of works found in local environment. While these independent companies are in favour of creating work that attracts a variety of spectators, the majority claim that they will only do so if it does not limit their freedom to experiment.

Although the term 'avant garde' is still commonly applied to anything perceived as 'new' and 'innovative' in contemporary theatre, it almost goes without saying that the term only correctly refers to a specific period in modern history. Journalists, however, will use the term offhandedly to describe anything they do not understand or with which they are not familiar. As Richard Schechner states in *The Future of Ritual: Writing on Culture and Performance*:

Although the term 'avant-garde' persists in scholarship as well as journalism, it no longer serves a useful purpose. It really doesn't mean anything today. It should be used only to describe the historical avant garde, a period of innovations extending roughly from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-1970s (at most). (14)

This affirmation reads somewhat like a caveat since Schechner's definitions of different forms of avant garde may be applied to contemporary theatre, if only for the purposes of categorization. The main category, aside from the historical avant-garde, is what Schechner

calls the current avant garde, which is “by definition what’s happening now. Of course, ‘now’ is always changing” (8). It maintains a relationship with the historical avant-garde by means of emulation or imitation, intentional or otherwise: “Today’s current theatre avant garde includes reruns of the historical avant-garde as well as the practices of formerly experimental artists whose work is by now ‘classical’ in terms of its predictability, solidity, and acceptance” (8). Furthermore, although independent companies will often describe their work as ‘new’ and ‘experimental’ in order to attract audiences and impress festival curators and presenters, Schechner argues the following:

The current avant garde offers no surprises in terms of theatrical techniques, themes, audience interactions, or anything else. Like naturalism before it, ‘avant garde’ has become a style, a way of working [...] But unlike naturalism, the current avant garde is not ‘mainstream,’ not what most theatres do. It is simply a menu of options drained of the fervor of their original impulses. (8)

Here, Schechner is effectively describing the role of ‘newness’ in contemporary theatre and highlighting why it is easy to mistake the current avant garde for something that is new. ‘Newness’ is, in practice, a discourse that encourages both the recycling of known forms and the promotion of recycled techniques, often – but not exclusively – previously developed and explored by the historical avant garde, through the lens of a marketing imperative. As such, ‘newness’ is a discursive form of ‘kitsch’, defined by Matei Calinescu, author of *Five Faces of Modernity*, as “a specifically aesthetic form of lying [...] It appears at the moment in history

when beauty in its various forms is socially distributed like any other commodity subject to the essential market law of supply and demand” (229).

By popularizing ‘newness’ in theatre and endeavouring to nurture a community of spectators, scholars, and critics that appreciate new work, festivals give the impression of encouraging innovation while, at the same time, seeking to promote themselves as progressive within both the Canadian and the international theatre communities. Thus, it appears as though independent companies are being provided with the opportunity to achieve mainstream success through the still-emerging English Canadian festival system without limiting their capacity for experimentation; from another perspective, however, it could be argued that these companies – striving to act in accordance with the expectations of these festivals, or unable to move past the influences of the historical avant-garde – create productions that fulfill yet another normative conception of theatre.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to study how festival marketing and ‘newness’ affect the creation and development of new work in English Canada. Furthermore, it examines how and why works produced by independent companies and presented in English Canadian festivals are consecrated, or, at the very least, acknowledged as professional, within and by the artistic community. As a testimony to the youth of the entire theatrical institution and tributary of the fact that local practices perceived as being specifically Canadian were, in part, born out of community and amateur theatre, the word ‘professional’ in English Canada remains to this day somewhat shrouded in ambiguity. Theatre artists and companies are labelled as professional once they accumulate a certain amount of symbolic capital “based on honour,

prestige or recognition, and it functions as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value” (Bourdieu 142). Before that time, they may refer to themselves as ‘semi-professional’ or ‘emerging’, provided that, unlike ‘amateurs’, it is their intention to achieve professional status in the near future. Moreover, the term ‘professional’ might also be applied to the *productions* themselves, independent of the individual artists involved and their personal background in terms of influence, training, and Equity status. The following definition provided and utilized by Canada’s principal national public funding source for artists represents a norm:

The Canada Council [for the Arts (CCA)] defines a professional artist as someone who has specialized training in the field (not necessarily in academic institutions), who is recognized as such by her or his peers (artists working in the same artistic tradition), and who has a history of public presentation or publication. (CCA)

As such, without necessarily considering the actual quality of a production or a performance itself, a production in English Canada may be labelled as professional because it has won awards, or it has been presented by regional theatres, or it has been invited to take part in a curated festival. The Magnetic North Theatre Festival (MNTF), for example, programs selected works “according to criteria of excellence”, which suggests that, by being featured at this festival, chosen productions thus acquire symbolic capital and may be recognized as professional (MNTF - About). Potential presenters are comforted by the label ‘professional’ because it seems to guarantee quality productions for their audiences. This same assurance of quality does not exist in Canadian Fringe Festivals, as these productions are chosen by lottery. When dealing with a company hand-picked and therefore endorsed and mediated by a curated

festival, there is not as much risk involved. Being presented by this type of festival is also less of a risk for the companies themselves, as they are not wholly responsible for promoting their work to potential audiences directly, and their payment is not determined by box office numbers, like it would be at a Fringe Festival.

By acting as showcases for new works, festivals are connecting independent companies with presenters, thereby consciously attempting to increase the lifespan of productions. This thesis will examine to what extent the reputations and *modus operandi* of festivals that promote themselves as focusing primarily on 'excellence' and 'innovation', as indicated in their mandates, through the lens of 'newness' in fact influence productions created by participating companies. It will also seek to articulate how and why these same festivals utilize the notion of 'newness' within English Canada to determine in turn whether the selected festivals are in fact encouraging and legitimizing experimental work, or if they are seeking to promote yet another normative conception of theatre, different as it may be from the known standards of English Canadian realism and British drama.

The three festivals under examination are the MNTF, based in Ottawa, Ontario; the High Performance Rodeo (HPR), based in Calgary, Alberta; and the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival (PuSh), based in Vancouver, British Columbia. There exist a number of notable French language international festivals, such as the Festival TransAmériques (FTA) in Montréal, Carrefour International de Théâtre in Québec City, and the Biennale Zones Théâtrales in Ottawa, as well as numerous festivals across English Canada, such as the Luminato Festival in Toronto, that program new work. However, this thesis focuses mainly on the aforementioned

large-scale festivals because all three have programmed and promoted the work of all three companies to be discussed and have played a significant role in the consecration and distribution of specific productions that will serve as case studies. Furthermore, French-language festivals are part of a separate theatrical institution that is more deeply connected with the international theatre circuit and only recently have both English and French Canadian festivals begun to dialogue in regards to possible common challenges, partnerships and collaborations.

To be examined in relation to the selected English Canadian festivals are three independent touring theatre companies: Electric Company Theatre (ECT) from Vancouver, British Columbia, founded in 1996; Catalyst Theatre (Catalyst) from Edmonton, Alberta, under new Artistic Direction in 1996³; and the Old Trout Puppet Workshop (OTPW) from Calgary, Alberta, founded in 1999. It is significant that these companies are based in cities with small to mid-size markets and geographically distant from Montréal and Toronto. Due to their location, it is only natural that these companies are inclined to work within the festival system that encourages touring theatre and connects them with presenters from outside their respective cities.

These companies were selected specifically for this thesis because of their eclectic processes of creating theatre: refusing to limit themselves to any one model, all three companies borrow from a variety of traditions of 'theatre making'. They also emerged while

³ Prior to 1996, Catalyst Theatre was a social theatre company with a completely different mandate and therefore not relevant to this thesis. Catalyst's history is discussed briefly in Chapter Five.

the social and political forces that allowed for the creation of large-scale festivals were first at work in English Canada. While the companies' choices of subject matter may be relatively inoffensive, their unpredictable methods of creation could be considered by some disruptive unto themselves. These processes run contrary to the mainstream theatre model, as described by Schechner:

[Mainstream] theatre begins with a source, a playwright whose play is selected by the producers (a stage director and/or whoever is in charge of the production) [...] The job of the [artistic team] is to use their particular skills to "realize" the source, in this case, a play: in other words, to make a public performance [...] In this kind of theatre, although the playwright is the source, and the producers bring the production into existence, the final relationship is between the performers and the partakers. (*Performance Studies* 251)

Whether they choose to resist this model or instinctively or organically disregard it, these independent companies could be described for the most part as 'troupes' in which the members often create all aspects of the production collaboratively – including a rehearsal script, design elements, and staging – with no intention of completing, let alone publishing, a written text⁴. As specified previously, this unto itself is challenging since these companies cannot submit a working script to a traditional playwrighting development program or to a

⁴ Electric Company Theatre published the script version of their flagship production *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* in 2004, eight years after the play was first produced. However, this product serves an archival purpose, since it contains photographs, a musical score, and detailed descriptions of staging that appeared in the most recent version of the production.

potential venue. This known reality serves to justify the creation and existence of festivals that are willing to present the work of such companies.

While the members of all three companies work collaboratively to create new productions and their processes may appear to share attributes with ‘collective creation’, the term does not correctly nor completely describe the working process of most independent companies. As defined by Robert Wallace in his book *Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada*, collective creation is “the process by which a group of people – usually the cast – collaborates to develop a play through research and improvisation” (Wallace 76). Whereas the focus in the 1970s was on the actors working as an anti-hierarchical collective with some emphasis on the actor’s body as an autonomous form of text, today’s independent companies explore the multiple possible partnerships that link designers and creators, all the while highlighting their individual contributions and acknowledging the existence of power structures between them, albeit still with the intention of working collaboratively.

Gilbert David describes a similar production model in Québec that was influenced by the collective creation movement of the 1970s – just as active in Québec as it was in English Canada – and still applicable in large part to the companies studied here:

Ce nouveau mode de production a pour principale caractéristique d’impliquer solidairement l’ensemble des créateurs dans le processus de réalisation, tout en reconnaissant à chacun d’eux des compétences spécifique. Un tel «collectif de création» gère la durée d’élaboration de ses productions selon un calendrier qui, dans la plupart

des cas, excède la norme instituée par les théâtres établis en fonction des «règles de scène» qui ont fait l'objet d'une entente contractuelle avec, entre autres, l'Union des artistes. Il se trouvera même des groupes qui présenteront publiquement divers états d'achèvement d'un spectacle, selon ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler un work in progress.

(David 23)

Alison Oddey, author of *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, complements this assessment: "There has been a move from this [collective creation] standpoint to more hierarchical structures within many companies in response to an ever-changing economic and artistic climate" (9). In devised theatre, or 'collaborative creation', each process is not pre-determined, but often grows out of design meetings and rehearsals: sometimes production roles are established as the show develops, which may or may not result in an artistic hierarchy; other times, the members continue to float between roles, contributing wherever is deemed necessary by the collective or the collective's lead creator. In the earlier stages of development, this type of unpredictable process often results in 'hybridity' and in a crossing of known genres: for example, theatre created in this way tends to include elements of contemporary dance, film, visual arts, or whatever medium suits their artistic purposes or discourse at a given time. The result may resemble aesthetics and forms typically associated with 'collective creation', but this type of process does not require that artists participate on equal terms, should a natural hierarchy begin to evolve as the productions develop and the company matures. It should be noted that ECT has described itself as a 'collective creation' company in the past because that was, in fact, the model its members followed when the

company was first formed. More recently however, they have begun using terms such as 'collaboration' and 'devising'⁵. Should a company eventually establish this type of theatrical hierarchy, the structure begins to resemble somewhat a theatre model not unlike that found in many English Canadian mainstream theatres and companies; the main difference is the way in which this hierarchy is reached. It emerges and is not imposed by a governing body such as a board of directors. Consequently, these companies always remain 'creation' or 'project' centered as opposed to 'production' or 'season' centered.

Indicative of this same process-based approach to practice, David Van Belle, a former member of the One Yellow Rabbit (OYR) ensemble, states:

One of the reasons that performance creation work gravitates toward the festival setting is that the performance creation piece is never finished; it is always in a state of being created. This takes place in an obvious way in that in the remounting of a performance, particularly after the performance has lain fallow for a while, new discoveries inevitably take place; the remount is a chance for a second, third, or fourth draft of the work. Festivals provide a unique opportunity for performance creators to do this work. (Van Belle CTR 138)

Long term and sporadic touring allows creators to regain some objectivity in regards to their work, sometimes thanks to audience input. In the case of original work, it can often be in the

⁵ "Now steered by the artistic team of Young and Collier, the company's methodology has evolved but the creative process remains highly collaborative; blurring traditional boundaries between playwright, director, dramaturgy and design." Found: <<http://www.electriccompanytheatre.com/company/mission-history.html>>

best interests of the project and the company to return to the rehearsal hall to rework aspects, clarify ideas and, if artists believe that it is important, to take into consideration perceived audience expectations to prepare the production for its next venue. Artists that embrace this incremental or tiered approach to practice may find validation in the writings of Vsevolod Meyerhold who claims that: "We produce every play on the assumption that it will be still unfinished when it appears on the stage. We do this consciously because we realized that the crucial revision of a production is that which is made by the spectator" (qtd. in Bennett 7). Whether it is considered positive or negative, groups that rework productions based on audience and critical response, or suggestions from festival curators and presenters, can be described as 'reactionary'. Not surprisingly, this is a trait characteristic of companies that participate regularly in festivals, including, to various degrees, ECT, Catalyst, and OTPW. This process works to the advantage of companies who claim that their work is always in flux and that what they are presenting to audiences are 'works in progress': it increases the likelihood of audiences returning to see the production for a second time, and provides a reason for a festival or venue to present the production at a later date, for it is always somewhat new.

The function of festivals in English Canada will be considered principally from a sociological point of view, with a focus on the mechanism⁶ by which an independent company achieves success while still working in alternative modes of theatre production. One particularly important concept is that of the "consecrated avant-garde," as utilized in Pierre

⁶ *Mechanism*: a term used by Pierre Bourdieu to suggest a "process, technique, or system for achieving a result" through the interaction of a number of agents (Merriam-Webster).

Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*. While the French cultural sociologist argues that "the artist cannot triumph on the symbolic terrain except by losing on the economic terrain," these independent companies are recognized as professional and attract audiences while seeking symbolic capital, without openly focussing on economic capital, as commercial theatres do (83). However, even though they claim that commercial success is not their primary aim, there are those that are capable – through their involvement in these festivals and the touring opportunities that follow – of producing new works that enjoy a long lifespan thanks to a good business sense and strong relationships with festival curators and other presenters.

To illustrate this concept, the first case study will be ECT's maiden production *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* (or, simply, *Brilliant!*). The show premiered at the Vancouver Fringe Festival in 1996 and has been presented at numerous venues, including the HPR, the MNTF, the National Arts Centre (NAC), and, most recently, the Belfry Theatre in Victoria, British Columbia in 2008. The second case study is Catalyst's production *Frankenstein*, written and directed by Artistic Director Jonathan Christenson, which began touring Canada in 2006. Some parallels will be drawn between that production and *Nevermore: the Imaginary Life and Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe* (or, simply, *Nevermore*), the company's subsequent original creation co-commissioned by the MNTF and the Luminato Festival in 2009, because the productions are linked both aesthetically and in the way they are marketed by the company and festivals. Finally, the trajectory of *Famous Puppet Death Scenes (FPDS)*, created and produced by the OTPW, will also be analyzed. This production premiered at PuSh in 2006,

was remounted by the festival in 2007, and toured extensively for two years, including to the MNTF, which was the company's third appearance in Ottawa since the festival's inception.

While much has been written about the British colonial influence on English Canadian culture, in particular through the Stratford Festival (herein referred to as Stratford) and the Shaw Festival in Ontario, as well as on regional theatres and early alternative theatres in Canada (a brief history of which will be presented below), a study of this new ecology grouping together theatre companies and festivals that program new productions, clearly the predominant mechanism to ensure the distribution of new work today, has yet to be articulated. By presenting a study of three companies that have developed relationships with festivals in English Canada, this thesis intends to prepare the terrain for further research on a rapidly changing theatrical institution that seems to be, perhaps paradoxically, attaining its long sought after autonomy by ceasing to discuss issues related to 'nation', 'nationhood' and 'nationalization' through artistic creation.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Canadian Theatre Part One: The Rise of Alternative Theatres from 1965 to 1995

Stratford's inaugural season in 1953 is considered by many theatre historians a defining moment in Canadian theatre, and the festival was thought to assume the role of Canada's 'national theatre': this title, however, would have been problematic considering Stratford's primary purpose remains to the present day the production of works penned by William Shakespeare. According to Ric Paul Knowles' 1995 article "From Nationalist to Multinational", the festival rationalized its existence by insisting that "Shakespeare [...] could be regarded as a Canadian playwright" and that only through the production of the Bard's classics could there eventually "evolve a distinctive style of Canadian theatre" (22). Nonetheless, Stratford was not fully supportive of Canadian artists in its early days: the festival hired British Artistic Directors Tyrone Guthrie and Robin Phillips, and British actors were cast in the leading roles, while Canadians played supporting roles. It has been argued that the festival was "using Canadian public funds to produce British high culture" and providing opportunities for British artists rather than local ones (Knowles 28).

In *Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre*, Sarah Jennings states that Stratford had planned to produce works by Shakespeare and other classical playwrights beyond the summer season: before the NAC opened its doors in 1969 in the nation's capital, there had been "discussions with the Stratford Festival over a possible agreement that would make Ottawa the winter home for the company" (58). Although this type of arrangement was never realized, a "formal agreement was signed between the two parties calling for 'joint activities' on

at least two Shakespearean plays to be performed during the winter season in Ottawa” (Jennings 58). During the 1950s, the 1960s, and well into the 1970s, even outside Stratford, the focus in Canada remained on the production of Shakespeare and the European classics, rather than on the fostering of new playwrights and the development of original scripts. New playwrights and their works were marginalized in favour of the classics, thus ensuring economic stability for new and large theatres that had little or no interest in Canadian work. In order to guarantee a full house, the ‘regionals’ felt obliged to program formulaic seasons: “a modern classic, a contemporary British or American play, a period drama in modern dress, and a Canadian play – rarely new” (Wallace 71).

In his article *Between Empires: Post-Imperialism and Canadian Theatre*, Alan Filewood points out that “such attitudes, which displaced the responsibility for developing new playwrights to small non-funded theatres, played a major role in defining the temper of the great surge of creativity and reorganization in the theatre of the 1960s and 70s” (51). In what is often described as a gesture of resistance against Stratford’s hegemony and British-inspired notions of high culture, there was the “founding and growth of a series of small theatres across the country that were dedicated to Canadian plays and Canadian artists” (Knowles 28). This grouping included Toronto-based Theatre Passe Muraille, Toronto Free Theatre, Tarragon Theatre, and Factory Theatre Lab, all of which were considered part of what is called ‘the alternative theatre movement’. This marked an important starting point in the creation and presentation of new Canadian drama and performance. However, once the alternative companies became more attractive to larger audiences in the early 1980s, they found themselves, at least symbolically, in competition with Stratford Festival and certain regional

theatres; consequently, “they lost their ‘alternative’ label” and began “to produce Canadian plays with high culture aspirations, to inaugurate subscription seasons and to install corporate boards of directors” (Knowles 33). According to Robert Wallace, this shift from “artist-run theatre to theatre controlled by boards of directors” proved detrimental to these companies in terms of artistic originality because the focus shifted toward a more economically sustainable and thus artistically conservative model (33).

Simultaneously, instead of focussing on the cultivation of new creation and locally run production companies, major cities directed funding toward the preservation of historic buildings. In the late 1980s, the City of Toronto, for example, concentrated its efforts into restoring historic vaudeville theatres – The Pantages, Elgin, and Winter Garden Theatres – and their reopening was celebrated by presenting London and New York musicals, such as Andrew Lloyd Webber’s popular *The Phantom of the Opera* (or simply *Phantom*), that had already proven a financial success. Although these productions were popular and financially self-sufficient, critics debated whether these musicals were really benefiting the development of Canadian theatre (Wallace 50-51). In the same vein, the artistic staff at the NAC worried that presenting *Phantom* as part of the popular Broadway series – and as such, not part of the English Theatre’s subscription series – would be taking focus away from regular house programming (Jennings 228). Due to stiff competition from commercial venues that presented Broadway musicals and West End shows, companies that were once considered ‘alternative’ distanced themselves from “the freedom to experiment and failure” that was and is central to the development of new work (Wallace 68). Alternative companies that had reached mainstream status – thus proving, somewhat paradoxically, the existence of a Canadian

theatrical institution and a local theatrical tradition – were made to sacrifice artistic experimentation in favour of economic certainty: “Rather than create work that leads audiences to develop new interests in theatre by presenting an artistic vision that is distinct and different, many of these theatres developed their seasons by relying on work that has ‘proven’ potential” (33).

Canadian Theatre Part Two: ‘Newness’ in English Canadian Theatre from 1995 to Present

In 1998, a new criterion for funding was put in place by the CCA. It obliged all companies receiving operating funding to explain how their mandate allowed them to contribute to the development and production of original Canadian works. Furthermore, the CCA formed the Canadian Creation program, a fund that was active from 1999-2004 and specifically designed to allow companies to follow playwrights through the development process. For this reason, companies across the country – even those without a specifically Canadian or new works development mandate – made some effort to include Canadian content into their programming, whether that meant having a Canadian playwright adapt a known foreign work or produce a new script. Henceforth, while producing Canadian works was once considered a gesture of resistance in English Canada, it thus became a mechanism to secure long term government funding.

While plays such as George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, originally produced by the Vancouver Playhouse in 1967, and *The Farm Show*, created and performed by Theatre Passe Muraille in 1972, focussed on distinctly Canadian issues, this nationalist identity slant has since lost flavour among creators. In other words, since the late 1990s, theatre artists that wish to be

perceived as marginal or experimental have tended to produce work that does not contain explicitly Canadian content or settings. Speaking specifically about theatre companies in Vancouver, though this statement could be applied to new theatre across Canada, critic Jerry Wasserman explains that “Canadian nationalism per se is largely absent from their work [...] In many ways these companies take their Canadianism for granted” and thus, their work has become “increasingly internationalist, intercultural, and even interdimensional” (244-5). Instead of creating work that focuses predominantly on the northern landscapes or Canada’s history, now considered somewhat cliché, independent companies today explore a variety of topics, experiment with form and aesthetics, and create work within a variety of production models. This newfound artistic and discursive liberty has not been without consequence to English Canadian practice as a whole: there are now producing companies across Canada focussing on new play development that refutes formulaic approaches to practice in regards to form and content. Even the Stratford Shakespeare Festival – still interested primarily in the works of William Shakespeare, as its new name emphasizes⁷ – has made efforts to include new play development into its programming: however, productions of Canadian scripts are only presented in the Studio Theatre, not on the main stages.

While Stratford’s program is supportive of already established Canadian playwrights – as evidenced by their recent inclusion of plays by Jason Sherman in 2005 and George F. Walker in the 2009 Studio Theatre season – it is not inclusive of artists working atextually⁸ or with

⁷ This new title was announced by the festival in July 2007.

⁸ Alan Filewod defines atextual works as plays that “repudiate the idea of a fixed, unchanging text which exists as a blueprint, as it were, for a performed interpretation” (x)

alternative methods of theatre creation. According to online application information, Stratford only accepts “previously unproduced plays for production” in the form of a manuscript (Stratford Shakespeare Festival – New Play Development). It would seem that Stratford employs a proven approach to new play development deemed outdated by some today, particularly those linked to Canadian festival circuits, both English and French. In the defence of Stratford, it should be noted that, despite popular assumption, the Stratford ‘Festival’, like the Shaw Festival in Niagara on the Lake, is not actually a festival: its structure more closely resembles a classical repertory theatre because it offers a six month subscription season annually and hires a company of actors. Therefore, while its name suggests otherwise, it cannot be compared to MNTF, HPR, and PuSh.

Susan Bennett, author of *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, notes that “the mainstream has accommodated playwrights whose works challenge the dominant ideology, but the cultural product is only acceptable if that challenge is contained within certain limits” (107). Traditionally, new play development programs in Canada may assist with scripts that contain controversial subject matter, but it is much more difficult for them to accommodate or adapt to the needs of theatre makers working in forms that are not script-based. As argued earlier, much, if not most, of the new work created in English Canada today has company members following an unpredictable production process, eclectically borrowing from different theatre traditions and other art forms without actually adhering to any one model. As such, instead of compromising methods, contemporary companies and creators participate in festivals across the country that are open to showcasing and promoting

such work. After a production of this kind has been created by the company, it must be submitted not as a written text, but as a project better qualified as a 'performance text', defined by Schechner as "everything that takes place on stage that a spectator experiences, from the movements and speech of the dancer and/or actors to the lighting, sets, and other technical or multimedia effects" (227). Since it is not always feasible for festival curators to see the production in full, sometimes the company must resort to submitting a written description of the production, accompanied by video clips, promotional photos and texts often more akin to musical or choreographed scores than actual written plays; it is not uncommon for stage directions to largely outweigh spoken text in these submissions. For this reason, significantly, the act of making an impression on curators is often restricted to highlighting the sensational aspects of a company's own production.

While these companies unquestionably do not follow mainstream production models when creating new shows, it is debatable whether or not they all embrace true aesthetic innovation or research. In spite of the difficulties they might face in getting their shows first produced or presented in known spaces, these same productions must be apt to be eventually accepted by a majority of theatres and presenters in order to be considered by most festivals. The tangible reality that having one's production presented by festivals is rarely an objective unto itself begs the question: where does one find experimental theatre in English Canada? For, as argued by Knowles in his article *Reading Material: Transfers, Remounts, and the Production of Meaning in Contemporary Toronto Drama and Theatre*, truly ground-breaking theatre cannot remain as such once it is adopted by the mainstream:

Despite the apparently all-consuming appetite of a dominant consumer capitalism for anything new and innovative, however, there is always a level in the public and unstable forum that is theatre at which the genuinely innovative, particularly in form, resists containment and has the potential to negotiate genuine cultural intervention. (70)

In line with Knowles' statement, Bennett suggests that theatre that is intended for public consumption must respect a balance between innovation and accessibility; otherwise it would not be the least bit intelligible to its potential audience:

[Play] texts are inevitably mediated by the reader's horizon of expectations, and the establishment of literary history [like theatre history] depends on an objectification of that horizon of expectations [...] Avant-garde texts are thus never completely 'new' – if they were they would be incomprehensible – but merely contain instructions to the reader which demand revision of the horizon of expectations of earlier texts. (48-9)

Festivals that program new Canadian theatre promote themselves as organizations that showcase new and innovative work, and yet they are equally keen on presenting theatre that would appeal to a wide range of audiences. In order to bridge these seemingly opposing mandates into a coherent whole, the festivals promote the importance of innovation in Canadian theatre through a discourse of 'newness' that turns perceived novelty into marketable product.

CHAPTER THREE: ENGLISH CANADIAN THEATRE FESTIVALS

The Magnetic North Theatre Festival

In a country with the configuration and population of Canada, a truly national theatre is not likely to be created in any one city – however much money might go into a building [...] The essence of a national theatre, as we see it, is that it should reach a national audience – even if this audience must for convenience be broken down into regional audiences (CCA as qtd. in Wallace 143)

This statement was written in response to the claim that the NAC, situated in Ottawa, could be considered the home of Canada's national theatre. Judging by the definition provided by the CCA, the MNTF that alternates each year between Ottawa and another city in Canada is perhaps a more suitable emblematic core. It is no coincidence that the MNTF resembles the Dominion Drama Festival (DDF), founded in 1932 and held each spring in a different city in Canada. 'Decentralization' was key to the DDF, as it was seen to represent and embrace all parts of Canada by never taking root in one city. While the festival's bilingualism is indicative of its aspirations to promote nationalism and nationhood through theatre, it was not concerned with the fostering of original Canadian scripts: the festival favoured productions of foreign plays, mainly from Britain and France, though one festival prize would be awarded to the best presentation of a play written by a Canadian. According to Anne Nothof, the festival retained "a conservative approach to theatre, and discouraged the participation of politically or socially disruptive plays." This approach is unlike that of today's festivals that pride themselves on

presenting work that can be promoted as 'new' and 'innovative'. Rather, the DDF was created with the intention of encouraging amateur theatre and supporting the Little Theatre movement. This community theatre focus became problematic after the Second World War with the creation of the CCA in 1957 that opted to fund exclusively professional practices. By 1978, the festival folded. Still the idea of a national festival for Canadian theatre remained, albeit with changes in terms of style of programming and, more importantly, overall purpose.

In 2000, a group of theatre artists and administrators formed a steering committee with the aim of creating a festival that would showcase Canadian theatre in English and that would encourage and promote the creation of new work. While the members from Ottawa had originally thought that the NAC English Theatre would produce the festival, it was eventually decided that the committee would "devise the festival as a separate entity [from the NAC] that would have a strong partnership with [the city of] Ottawa" (Jennings 330). To this day, the MNTF – named in part for the metaphorical magnetic force that brings the festival home to Ottawa every other year – maintains a close relationship with the NAC where it is based: as a venue, the NAC provides performance space for several theatre productions in its mainstage and studio theatres, as well as its Fourth Stage, during the run of the festival. More importantly, the NAC English Theatre acts as a co-presenter for all the plays programmed, even when the festival does not take place in Ottawa, and contributes funds directly to the festival's budget. Jennings suggests that "the initiative was an ideal expression of [President and CEO of the NAC, Peter] Herrndorf's vision for the NAC: giving the arts everywhere in Canada a hand while not trying to dominate them, yet helping to ensure the highest standards" (330). The MNTF seems

to have also proven a useful resource for the NAC, as the English Theatre has already programmed several shows that were first presented at the festival during editions held outside of Ottawa: notably, ECT's *Brilliant!* (2006), Morris Panych's *Earshot* (2006), and the Vancouver Playhouse and the Savage Society's co-production of Kevin Loring's *Where the Blood Mixes* (2010).

In an article for the *Canadian Theatre Review* (CTR), Mary Vingoe, the founding Artistic Director⁹ of the festival, states:

There was a pressing need for theatre artists from English Canada to share a platform that connected them to one another across the country. Theatre artists could literally live their entire professional careers in Toronto or St. John's or Vancouver and never actually meet! (138)

From the very inception of the project, it was considered imperative that independent companies wishing to tour meet with 'industry professionals' – a category that may include touring managers, agents, presenters, and fellow artists –, individuals and organizations that may assist them in their efforts. This notion of 'theatre as industry' is a defining quality of the MNTF, which is not at all surprising considering the number of theatre administrators and producers present on the steering committee: Heather Redfern, who served as Artistic Producer for Catalyst; Ken Gass, Artistic Director of Factory Theatre; Marti Maraden, Artistic Director of the NAC English Theatre from 1997 to 2006; Victoria Steele, former Managing Producer of the NAC English Theatre, and Pat Bradley, former Executive Director of the

⁹ The current Artistic Director of the Magnetic North Theatre Festival is Ken Cameron (2008 to 2010).

Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) and currently the Theatre Officer for the Ontario Arts Council (OAC). As part of its mandate detailed on the festival website, the MNTF was always intended as “a gathering place for artists to share work and exchange ideas” and to increase “exposure to touring opportunities, nationally and internationally” for contemporary theatre companies working in English Canada (MNTF - About).

Also on the festival website, the MNTF is described as an environment that encourages “artistic innovation”, which would suggest a type of theatre that is ‘new’ and ‘experimental’. But, at the same time, the festival is not looking for productions that are inaccessible, or too high above the audience’s horizon of expectations, as it states that the work must “appeal to a wide range of audiences” (MNTF - About). It is significant that the festival description mentions specifically its audiences, as this indicates that, beyond the creation of ‘art for its own sake’, the work programmed must be aimed at a large audience base and suitable for touring.

The MNTF attracts audiences and artists that want to attend the productions, and also those that wish to be part of a forward-thinking theatre experience by attending the ‘Industry Series’ composed of discussion panels on various theatre-related topics, as well as ‘pitch sessions’ and ‘speed dating’ between artists and presenters for the purpose of making professional connections. It is significant that MNTF uses the word ‘industry’, most frequently found in lexicon of economics¹⁰, to describe these events, as it draws attention to the festival’s role as a ‘buy-and-sell’ marketplace for the performing arts. The 2003 programme advertises the festival’s Industry Series as “the place for those who make it, who show it and who sell it!”

¹⁰ Reflecting a system of “interaction and exchange”, according to the definition of ‘Economy’ in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

(37). The programme notes written by Vingoe reiterate the importance of making connections between communities through a commentary on Canada's geography that is "both its greatest asset and its greatest challenge" (3). There is an insistence on the importance of touring as a way of sharing work, sharing resources, and sharing theatrical commodities. Theatre is described here as an accessible commodity, as evidenced by its description of 'Marketplace', a social event that invites participants to "join us for coffee and an exciting array of theatrical wares!" (37). Parallel to the festival itself, there is also a week-long youth conference consisting of panel discussions and social events entitled Compass Points aimed at emerging artists and students that highlights the business aspects and logistics of theatre in English Canada.

Unlike PuSh and HPR that program both Canadian and international work in addition to highlighting local artists from Vancouver and Calgary, respectively, the MNTF has a specific national focus in that it only programs work created in Canada. This means the festival has a different kind of relationship with other festivals and venues outside of Canada: while the MNTF encourages these venues to program Canadian touring work, the festival does not present work that was created outside of the country. The international festivals in Canada, however, have a more flexible mandate that allows them to program work from around the world. While the MNTF only contributes indirectly to the international performance scene by promoting Canadian work to visiting presenters from abroad, the HPR and, more recently, PuSh, make their involvement much more explicit.

High Performance Rodeo

Founded in 1986, HPR is described as “the largest festival of its kind in Western Canada, featuring theatre, music, comedy, dance, film, visual art and more. It is fertile ground for all things vital, surprising, progressive and wild” (OYR). Unlike the MNTF, HPR does not place the same emphasis on industry activities and marketing opportunities. Rather, the focus seems to be the presentation of new work for its own sake and for the benefit of Calgary audiences. For example, the festival programs no formal activities that are intended to encourage touring either in Canada or abroad and collaboration between artists, nor are there discussion panels and talk-backs during the day. Still, Festival Curator Michael Green attempts to shape his audience’s understanding of the festival by describing the HPR in his 2010 programme notes as “bold, independent and innovative [...] action-packed, surprising, excellent, and open to possibility” (HPR Programme 2010, 2). This lexicon is tributary of the discourse of ‘newness’: it is a strategy to make participants feel as though they are collaborating on something unprecedented, at least in this particular part of Canada. To a certain extent, this is true: while some of these productions are reminiscent of experimental work already fashionable in London and New York, for instance, they are still relatively novel in Canada.

Indeed, the festival is reputed for being far more daring than most similar performing arts events in English Canada. Penny Arcade, a popular artist at the HPR, commended the approach of the festival in regards to the work presented: “[The festival was] going to put avant-garde work at the forefront and pretend it’s not unusual, that it’s what everybody wants to see. And consequently, that was the response they got” (Morrow 171). However, after

twenty-six years of presenting work for Calgary audiences, it seems that the festival has opened itself up to a broader public while still programming some pieces that could be considered challenging to any audience. In our recent interview, Green explained that “without having to really sell out, I’ve been given the opportunity to mellow a little bit and to feel as though I’d like to have more people at the party as opposed to fewer.” While the festival was launched in the spirit of revolution, today Green is more interested in diversity, recognizing that audiences enjoy some types of performance more than others. In this same interview, he admitted that while audiences might think they want edgy material, “what really sells is pretty mainstream stuff. [The audiences] like the badge [i.e. being recognized as someone who supports experimental theatre] better than the experience to earn the badge.” Despite this, Green says he often finds a way to incorporate riskier material into the festival: after all, “if it flops, it’s only here for four nights.”

PuSh International Performing Arts Festival

Launched in 2006 by current Executive Director Norman Armour and co-founder Katrina Dunn, the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival describes itself as the event that “expands the horizons of Vancouver artists and audiences with work that is visionary, genre-bending, multi-disciplined, startling and original” (PuSh – About). Like the HPR, and unlike MNTF, this festival was founded exclusively by working artists – it was a joint effort between Vancouver’s Rumble Productions and Touchstone Theatre – that wanted to expose their colleagues to work from around the world. Now curated by Armour, Tim Carlson, Veda Hille, and Sherri Johnson, the festival claims importance as “a catalyst for cultural, economic and

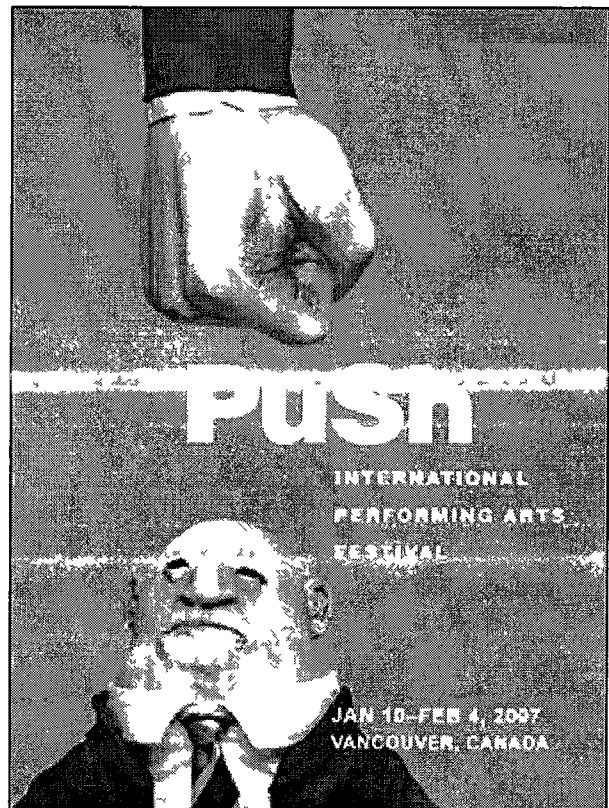
tourism development of the region” (PuSh – Mission + History). Moreover, the scope of the festival, as indicated by its title, moves beyond that of the regional and national: “It is a broker of international partnerships, a meeting place for creative minds, a showcase of Canada’s best and an incubator of brilliant new work. PuSh puts Vancouver on the world stage and brings the world to Vancouver” (PuSh – About). Like the MNTF, the PuSh marketing material utilizes economist jargon, highlighting industry partnerships and benefits to regional tourism, to show that theatre can be viewed as a ‘business’.

Although the festival has an international focus, PuSh also has an ardent interest in local audience development. In a recent interview, Armour pointed out that PuSh audiences are keen to have a personal connection with the people involved with the festival: he has been informed by the box office staff that some spectators book their tickets specifically for performances that are followed by talk-backs. In fact, at several 2010 festival performances, over fifty percent of audience members stayed for post-show discussions with performers and companies (Armour). Quite evidently, PuSh recognizes the importance of engaging with audiences not only through the productions it programs, but also with post-show events that offer a more intimate view of the work.

Moreover, curatorial notes that appear at the front of the programme and give some indication as to what can be expected at the festival each time have particular importance to Armour: “It helps our audiences consider the festival in a given way every year. Our staff was saying that people also like hearing from the curators. The impulse is to give people a bit of background in terms of where our excitement and interest lies.” Most festivals tend to have

some kind of brief introductory statements in their programmes, but Armour is especially thorough in this task and writes the equivalent of a short essay each year. While he consistently attempts to determine a theme for each festival and highlights any new developments, the focal point of his notes shifts constantly. In the 2008 programme, for example, he focused his attention on one production entitled *Haircuts By Children*, an interactive performance piece crafted by Toronto's Mammalian Diving Reflex. Using promotional jargon, Armour discusses how the company's Artistic Director Darren O'Donnell has been "creating works that are on the cutting edge of contemporary performance" and ruminates on how the show is difficult to categorize and its impact difficult to determine (3).

This insistence on promoting the new and unfamiliar is, however, contradicted by the inclusion of *FPDS* at PuSh for the second year in a row: after programming the show the first time one year earlier, Armour realized that the show had a broad audience appeal and presented the production again in 2007 and even went so far as to use a photo from the production on the cover page of the PuSh programme (see right) and for all of the festival's promotional material.



Found: <<http://theoldtrouts.org/index.html>>

In the programme, the show was described as an “audience favourite from last year’s PuSh Festival” (16). Armour explained that the festival has a tradition of bringing back shows that still retain popular appeal. For example, *Clark and I Somewhere in Connecticut*, a co-production of Vancouver’s Rumble Productions and Theatre Replacement, premiered at the festival in 2008 and returned for a second run in 2010: Armour commented that “it virtually sold out every night.” *FPDS* was equally successful in terms of box office revenue.

According to Armour, one of the most important goals of the festival is to foster future collaboration between local artists and international artists and to create dialogue between artistic communities. Part of this is achieved through the PuSh Assembly: like the MNTF Industry Series, the Assembly seeks to provide an environment for networking between artists and presenters. As described in the 2009 festival programme:

Our goal is to provide information and *business support* through our *speed-dating forum, pitch sessions, workshops, keynote speeches, and information sessions*. The PuSh Assembly prepares artists for export readiness and *international trade opportunities* for artists by providing a framework for touring, co-production, residencies and cultural reciprocity. (30, my emphasis)

There is also Club PuSh that features concerts and “cutting edge performance” and allows for a more informal exchange of ideas in a bar setting (PuSh Programme 2009, 12). However, as Armour explains, the PuSh Assembly and Club PuSh were removed from the 2010 festival programming due to severe provincial funding cuts: since partners do not generally view the initiatives as essential elements of the festival, the staff is constantly having to insist upon their

importance and function – namely, profitable business partnerships, economic growth, and international representation – in order to continue to receive adequate support. That same year, instead of his usual musings on the productions and the participating artists, Armour took a political stance in his programme notes by commenting on the importance of arts funding in the context of PuSh and the Vancouver performing arts scene. He reiterates the festival mission to “foster the development of new, groundbreaking and extraordinary works through innovative partnerships and collaborations”, focussing again on ‘newness’ and the ‘art as industry’ aspect of the festival. Arguably, these series and the opportunities they provide also influence how companies choose to approach their own creative projects and how they choose to market them to potential presenters.

CHAPTER FOUR: ELECTRIC COMPANY THEATRE

ECT has cultivated and maintained 'impressions of newness' with its production *Brilliant!* by reworking the piece considerably each time it was presented. Although this play was clearly inspired by the work of Québécois theatre creator Robert Lepage, the production has been consistently advertised as 'new' by presenting venues, rationalized by the fact that changes were made in between each series of performances. While the company has produced a dozen works since, it is this inaugural show that remains to this day most often programmed by festivals and venues. Significantly, it is also the production that has undergone the most changes: between 1996 and 2008, the show has been presented as a sixty minute Fringe show, a two hour and twenty minute epic, a condensed two hour production without intermission, and, finally, a ninety minute one-act that was published soon after.

Over these twelve years, the company and its productions have taken advantage of the expanding festival circuit in English Canada, with notable appearances at the HPR in 1999 and at the second edition of the MNTF in Edmonton in 2004. Changes made to the production were based, in different instances, on opportunity and limitation. Plainly, between runs, the company took the time to rework the play as much as its members deemed necessary. These periods of development allowed them to redefine characters, explore different types of narrative structure and experiment with technical aspects. These changes were influenced by comments made by critics or, more significantly, by suggestions made by festival curators that occasionally put limitations on the production: in one instance, by requesting the company cut sections of the script, which affected considerably the development of the whole production.

In addition to the varying running times of the production, another indicator of change throughout the process is the shifting function of the narrator. While the character of 'Phil' was considered a central figure in the first two versions of the play, the role eventually became obsolete due to its direct relationship, soon dated, with the internet. By 2004, when the show was presented at MNTF, 'Phil' had become a nameless narrator with no obvious ties to any particular period of time. As the character moved increasingly into the background, more focus was placed on the Serbian-American inventor Nikola Tesla, a rival of Thomas Edison; and, with more funds available, more complex and constantly updated technical design elements were included.

Since the company always relied on festivals for developing touring opportunities, its members paid attention to what is considered new and interesting in the contemporary theatre world when adapting *Brilliant!* This awareness of trends both in the arts and in new technology ensured that the production was ever changing and thus perceived as suitable for festival programming that embraces and promotes the notion of 'newness'. By adapting the play and its characters, the members of ECT not only prevented the show from becoming anachronistic, but also used its ever-changing nature to their advantage in terms of marketing and promotion.

COMPANY HISTORY: WORKING IN VANCOUVER

Founded by a group of Studio 58¹¹ graduates, ECT premiered *Brilliant!* at the Vancouver Fringe Festival in 1996. All four members of the collective – Kim Collier, David Hudgins, Kevin

¹¹ Studio 58 is a professional acting and production training program at Langara College in Vancouver. The program includes "Scene Study, Improvisation, Modern and Classical Text, Voice, Speech, Choir, Singing, Mask, Movement, Alignment, Period Dance, Tap, Writing, One-Person Shows, and Theatre Fundamentals" (Studio 58).

Kerr, and Jonathon Young – have worked as the principal creators, writers, designers, and actors in this show over the years. The story itself chronicles the rise and fall of the prolific inventor Tesla, who believed in a world united by his creation of free wirelessly transmitted energy and a world-wide communication network (*Brilliant!*). The subject matter of the piece was fitting for this troupe because, like Tesla, ECT was interested in scientific research and new technology. In her MFA research project, Kate Braidwood, a graduate student at the Dell’Arte School of Physical Theatre, states:

The show could be described as the quintessential Electric Company piece, as it included many characteristics typical of their work: a narrative historical in nature and dealing with science, a major emphasis on imagery and physicality, and technology playing a heavy role in design. (7)

According to Kerr¹², the members had considered writing a screenplay about this historical figure, but after some discussion began to think of it as a piece of theatre destined to be performed as a Fringe Festival production. In an e-mail to Collier, Kerr wrote: “Perhaps this could be our show? You spoke of the desire to do something that had an existing foundation [...] something historical, or something that could be researched and this is such a thing.” It seems that the company had found inspiration in the work and style of Lepage, who was already well-established on the international festival scene, as Collier asked Kerr if he had managed to see Lepage’s production of *Needle and Opium*. She explained that the production followed a format that she would like to use in their upcoming Fringe show: “a mix of historical

¹² Kerr, Kevin and Kim Collier. E-mail correspondence. 1996.

bits with a thin connection from the audience perspective. I am interested in this non linear approach” (Collier). When first considering the narrative, Collier imagined scenes in the present day during which “folks could be discussing [...] science while unconsciously using [Tesla’s] inventions,” but this idea never appeared as such in the production. Instead, the connection to present day was embodied in Phil, a character surrounded by computers in the original staging that would offer a contemporary perspective and comment on the work of Tesla; the two worlds of past and present would be separate and would allow for a parallel narrative structure, a mechanism for exploring a single theme.

From the project’s inception, the members considered how staging could reflect the chosen theme, imagining their show to be “movement oriented, abstract at times, bursting out of reality just like the man” (Kerr). Kerr simultaneously considered ways in which they could market the show to potential audiences, for example, by sensationalizing the story with the inclusion of a ‘conspiracy theory,’ since they had discovered that many of Tesla’s personal documents and research had been confiscated by the FBI. The collective also wanted the show to have a connection to Canada, seeing as the main character was a Serbian working in America: as Collier noted in the e-mail correspondence, given that the historical Tesla and Edison both participated in a competition at Niagara Falls in Ontario, there could be included in their play a “crucial debate scene between Edison and Tesla at the top of Niagara Falls with loud waterfall crashing water in back ground.” Both the use of a conspiracy theory and the connection to Canadian history indicate that the company was considering the production’s marketing potential within Canada even before it had been created. For this reason, it was

somewhat logical that they would find success in the emerging festival circuit that is attracted to shows with marketable elements. That being said, the Niagara Falls scene was only included in the 1998 version in the Roundhouse Performance Space and in the 1999 version at the HPR. Following that, the company chose to cut this scene that was no longer crucial.

Brilliant! was also the first ECT production to tour across Canada. The 1996 Vancouver Fringe Festival version was so well received that the team decided to expand the forty-five minute play into a two hour and twenty minute production. The collective rented Vancouver's Roundhouse in 1998 for the purpose of presenting this new version. The following year, a two hour version of the show was presented at the HPR. In 2003, following a run at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver, the company took the show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland; by this time the show had been shortened once again and was now a ninety minute one-act. The company returned to British Columbia to perform in Kamloops at the Western Canada Theatre that same year. In 2004, *Brilliant!* was one of ten shows featured at the second instalment of the MNTF, that year held in Edmonton. It was also presented by San José Stage Company in California in 2005, and most recently, in the NAC Studio Theatre in 2006 and at Victoria's Belfry Theatre in 2008.

Following this first production, ECT created several more original works. *The Wake* (1999) was a site-specific ambulatory production set in various spaces throughout Granville Island. According to Wasserman, "The Electrics' attraction to site-specific work derived in large part from Collier, Young, and Kerr's experience attending shows at nearby Caravan Farm

Theatre¹³ while growing up in Kamloops” (246). It is significant that by this second production the group had begun to develop, as described by Young, a “little hierarchy – a flexible hierarchy”, moving from a collective creation process to something closer to collaborative creation with members’ responsibilities more clearly established (Braidwood 7). This production and the next three that followed – *The Score* (2000), *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (2001), and *Flop* (2002) – were only presented for one run in Vancouver. In the case of ECT, touring was not obligatory, as explained by Young: “*Brilliant!* has served us – as much as anything, it became the show that we could tour. Most of our shows are so grand that they would have to be compromised [for touring].” Still, the company discovered it was feasible at least on one occasion to tour a site-specific production: the next touring show was *The One That Got Away*, a co-production with Kendra Fanconi and her Vancouver-based company The Only Animal that took place in a swimming pool. Following two runs in Vancouver in 2002, the show was programmed for the 2007 MNTF at the Soloway Jewish Community Centre in Ottawa.

Another popular touring production was *Studies in Motion: the Hauntings of Eadward Muybridge*. This production was promoted by the company as a “visual opera” and was co-produced with the Department of Theatre at the University of British Columbia and PuSh in 2006; it was subsequently presented by FTA in 2009. This play was part of the ‘Four New Works Plan’ that allowed each member of the collective to articulate and instigate a new project, while the other members would, in turn, contribute in secondary roles – a clear demonstration of their new, more hierarchical, yet still collaborative creation structure. *The Fall* (2003) led by

¹³ Founded in 1978, “Caravan Farm Theatre is a professional outdoor theatre company based on an 80 acre farm, 11Km NW of Armstrong, British Columbia” (Found: <http://caravanfarmtheatre.com/history.html>).

Collier and *The Palace Grand* (2004) written and performed by Young came out of this multi-year initiative; Hudgins' idea for a hockey rock opera never came to fruition. *Studies in Motion* has much in common with ECT's first production: like *Brilliant!* this new play examined the life and work of an isolated man – in this case, nineteenth century photographer Eadward Muybridge, “whose work in instantaneous photography and exhaustive studies in animal and human locomotion would foretell the invention of the cinema” (Braidwood 26). In addition to the thematic similarities, *Studies in Motion* resembled ECT's first production in that it was a show created for a proscenium stage and involved detailed choreography and technical elements, such as layers of scrim displaying images with which the performers interacted. Although these design elements were not present in the preliminary versions of *Brilliant!*, they became a main feature as the company continued to develop the production. In other words, like Lepage, as the company became better known and members had access to more resources, both financial and technical, productions became more complex.

While ECT's collaborative approach to creation is rare in mainstream theatre practice, this process, even in the 1990s, was not considered unusual in Vancouver's independent theatre scene. In fact, since the early nineties, a significant number of independent companies have appeared in the city, many of them interested in site-specific work and unconventional production methods. Similar to the alternative theatre movement of the 1970s in Toronto, many Vancouver theatre practitioners continue to this day to be driven to create their own theatre rather than rely on existing scripts or work exclusively with institutional theatre companies. Several of these practitioners were, like the members of ECT, students at Studio 58: as evidenced by their common practice, this unique program of training has influenced the way

in which these companies choose to create theatre. While members of ECT were inspired by the work of Lepage, Caravan Farm Theatre, and performance-based company Carbone 14 in Montréal, they have also found inspiration in and collaborated with other Vancouver-based companies, such as Rumble Productions, founded in 1990; Boca Del Lupo, 1996; newworld theatre, 1999; The Only Animal, 2001; and Theatre Replacement, 2003. All of these companies have participated in *HIVE* – an event consisting of installation-based performances that takes place in the Centre for Digital Media Warehouse – and its subsequent incarnations. For all three *HIVES* – the second of which was included in the 2008 MNTF programming – companies were encouraged to create short scenes that would highlight the strengths of its members and give them the opportunity to experiment in an unusual playing space. This event boasts automatic novelty because of its unconventional venue, the unfinished quality of an event that is more akin to a laboratory than a completed production, and the participatory and competitive elements between spectators, all of whom must draw straws – quite literally, in one case – in order to have a spot in the audience for each scene. From a marketing perspective, this event also functions like a festival ‘pitch session’ because, in a few brief minutes, a presenter in attendance may become acquainted with the style of the company and consider commissioning or programming a full-length production at a later date.

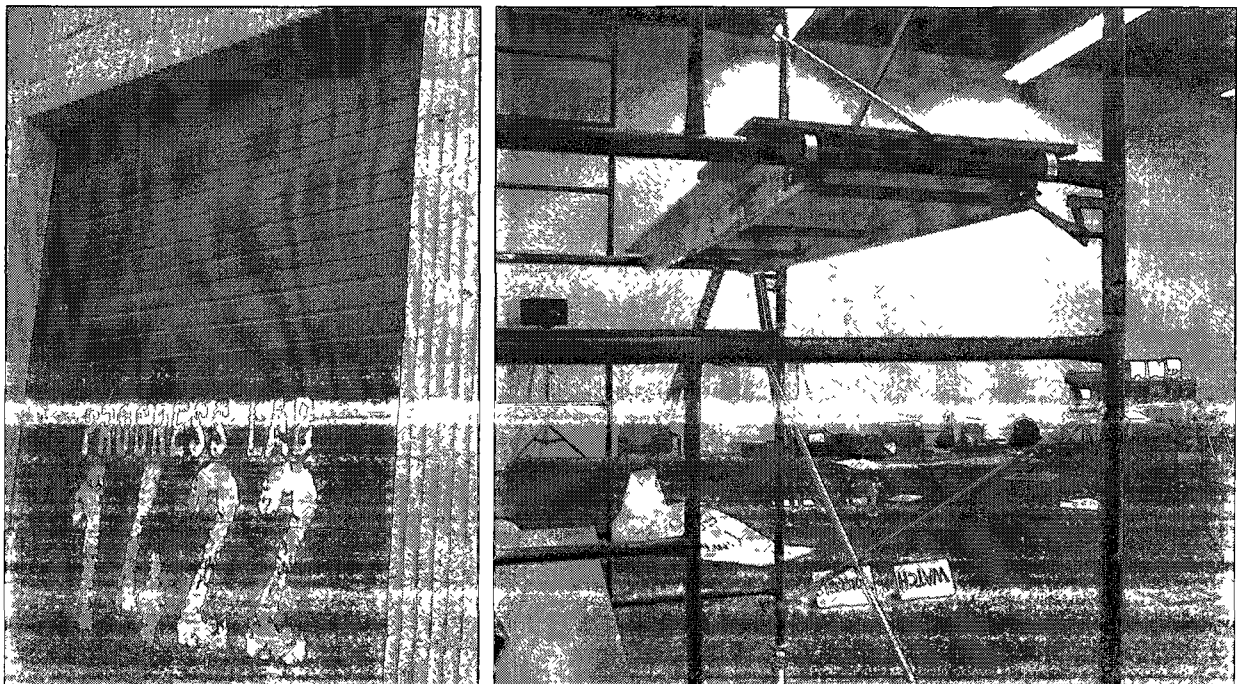
Additionally, many of these same companies are members of the collective marketing initiative *See Seven*, a subscription season inaugurated in 1997 for independent theatre in

Vancouver¹⁴. This subscription is not unlike those utilized by mainstream theatres: the main difference is that it is a combined effort between several companies with the purpose of publicizing one another's work. Both these projects indicate that the independent companies in Vancouver are keen on collaborating with each other within a common community, for both artistic and marketing reasons. To offer further examples of collaboration, as mentioned earlier, ECT and The Only Animal worked together on *The One That Got Away* in 2002, which was presented at the 2007 MNTF; Theatre Replacement and Rumble Productions co-produced *Clark and I Somewhere in Connecticut*, presented by PuSh in 2008 and again in 2010. While the audience base for independent theatre is not as large as that of The Vancouver Playhouse or The Arts Club, these companies are working in an environment in which 'newness' is more valued and they are, therefore, not marginalized. This is partly the result of self-generated marketing initiatives: rather than have their work restricted to the margins of theatrical practice, these companies imitate and adapt mainstream marketing conventions, such as participating in a subscription season that uses 'newness' as a promotional tool.

Simultaneously in English Canada, larger and more established companies have assisted in the growth of younger collectives by offering them financial support and space in which to work. In 1999, the Vancouver Playhouse offered ECT a year's mentorship that included rehearsal space, access to props and costumes and a small grant for their next production, *The Wake*. It seems that, like festivals, larger companies want to play a role in the work created by

¹⁴ This initiative exists due to the fact that these independent companies tend to produce only one to two shows each year. It would therefore be nonsensical for a company to maintain a subscription season on its own. In 2003, this idea was emulated by Saskatoon's independent companies in an initiative called Live Five and also by Montréal's French-language independent companies in Carte Premières organized by Aux Écuries.

younger companies, thus maintaining perceived pertinence themselves by encouraging manifestations of ‘newness’ within their own ecology. In other words, this arrangement is beneficial to these larger companies not only in terms of being seen as charitable, but also in earning a reputation as organizations that value and support artistic innovation and development. And, naturally, the partnership is beneficial to the younger companies that are provided with resources. Following this mentorship, from 2000 to 2001, ECT began to pay its members for administrative tasks, and then hired Cindy Reid as Producing Manager in 2002: her participation helped the company develop touring opportunities across Canada and internationally (Braidwood 30).



Progress Lab: shared by four Vancouver independent companies (Medd)

In October 2009, the company – joined by Rumble Productions, Boca Del Lupo, and newworld theatre – moved into a newly renovated building that they called ‘Progress Lab’ in

central Vancouver. Each of the four companies has their own office space, and there is one shared rehearsal space that may be used for live performance. It is especially beneficial for these companies to have their own space because their productions tend to rely on technical elements with which they can now experiment in this spacious studio.

As mentioned previously, ECT productions are not created with the written script as a starting point¹⁵. In fact, the script as a ‘final product’ – if ever there is one – does not exist until the production has been reworked on several occasions. While working on early versions of *Brilliant!*, Young acknowledged that “the ideas are physical and visual. They’re in the script because they worked onstage” (Young). The creation of this type of production is an organic process that gives all elements equal weight. In this case, the staging influenced the evolution of the written word. In the introduction to their published script, the creators of *Brilliant!* discuss the focus given to all areas of the production:

Electric Company has always treated each element of production – staging, design, and performance – as a key component in the creation and telling of a story. Therefore, the script includes references to theatrical conventions, video projections, and non-verbal performance segments¹⁶ that are as vital to the narrative as any of the words spoken by the characters. (1)

¹⁵ One notable exception is Electric Company Theatre’s 2008 production of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*. The company did, however, write more text for the Valet, who only appears briefly in the original script, to suit the staging that director Kim Collier had envisioned for the production.

¹⁶ For example, the scene entitled “Colorado Springs” is described as follows: “*The following scene is played as though it is three short scenes from a newsreel depicting Tesla’s year of work in the desert at Colorado Springs. Choppy, sped up action takes place around a large Tesla coil, emulating the style of an early silent film.*” (*Brilliant!* Brindle&Glass Publishing 36)

In terms of process, the group worked on *Brilliant!* as a 'collective creation' project: members all had fairly equal character roles in the production and they were all equally responsible for the writing and the design elements. However, as this same group of artists matured and began working on other productions, they realized that they were often suited for certain functions more than others: Collier took the lead as director of subsequent ECT projects; Young contributed to the collective by taking on the major acting roles and, occasionally, by incorporating physical theatre techniques; Kerr realized his talents in playwrighting¹⁷; and Hudgins also had some skill for writing – having completed a degree in English literature – but became more involved in the design elements and musical composition. Moreover, Kerr and Hudgins have a background in science: the former in physics and the latter in chemical engineering (Neale 5). It is significant that members of ECT – like members of the OTPW, who have degrees in philosophy and visual arts – have interests outside of theatre and have pursued these interests academically, since they can and do draw from these disciplines when creating. As such, when the company utilizes a technical element – something as familiar as the silent film sequence with projections, described above – that might be a common cultural reference point, it seems like a novelty simply because it is being framed in an unfamiliar context. This is attractive, especially, to international festivals like PuSh and HPR that value interdisciplinarity in their programming and do not restrict themselves to a singular genre or aesthetic.

¹⁷ Kerr is the author of the Governor General Award-winning play *Unity* (1918).

DEVELOPMENT OF *BRILLIANT!*

Over its twelve-year lifespan, the ECT production of *Brilliant!* underwent noticeable changes in terms of casting, character development, running time, staging, and technical elements. Although some of these changes occurred before the company began participating in the festival circuit, the influence of the festivals and suggestions from the festival curators noticeably shaped versions of a production still presented today. Still, an analysis of earlier versions of the production is useful, if only for the purpose of highlighting what originally attracted festival curators, and subsequently theatre presenters, to this ECT show.

While the Vancouver Fringe Festival version was originally directed exclusively by members of the company, the 1998 remount production at the Roundhouse included collaborator Conrad Alexandrowicz, who, along with the collective, incorporated additional elements of dance and physical imagery. It was this memorable staging that arts reporters, such as *The Georgia Straight's* Colin Thomas, remarked upon favourably:

[Characters] Katherine and Robert enter walking but wearing a rowboat to create the illusion that they're paddling, and later on, the three friends head off on a bike ride, each trotting along happily behind a set of handle-bars and one wheel. And [...] the company uses a giant white ball in several ways – as a projection screen for images of everything from pigeons to viscera [...] and simply as a wonderful plaything.

The company also received positive feedback from reviewers regarding the character of Tesla as interpreted by Young, who was intended for the role in the original Fringe show¹⁸ but instead chose to accept a part in a film. And there was yet another casting change: Phil, originally played by male actor Anthony F. Ingram, was played by Judi Closkey in the Roundhouse version. In her thesis entitled *The Electric Company Script Development Process*, Michelle Kneale explains that “Phil was transformed into a woman in the Roundhouse version to provide gender balance to the casting” (21). Despite this assertion, it is important to note that gender balance was not a priority for the group since, after the HPR version, the fifth actor was cut altogether and the role of the narrator – stripped of his/her name – was played by Hudgins, who also played the role of the tap dancing Edison.

This change may have occurred because Phil was the most criticized aspect of the Roundhouse version of this production. In his same review of the Roundhouse version, Thomas called her “the worst-written character of the bunch; she delivers far more information and flat-footed editorializing than I was interested in. Besides, the techno-guerrilla, once such a hip theatrical image, has become a cliché.” Even before this presentation at Roundhouse, there were concerns about the role of Phil from a dramaturgical point of view. On October 20, 1997, the members of ECT took part in a play reading and workshop facilitated by Peter Hinton with the Playwrights Theatre Centre. In Hinton’s written feedback, it was suggested that the company better define “in formal terms” the genre of the play: each suggestion – melodrama, (musical) dram(edy), historical drama, and tragedy – seemed to be driven and inspired by the

¹⁸ The role of Tesla was played by Andy Thompson in the Vancouver Fringe Festival production. The actor performed with the company once again in its 2008 production of *No Exit*.

Tesla character, rather than Phil, nicknamed ‘the Infogeek’. Still, there were also questions about Phil, played, for this reading, by Kirsten Williamson: “Why does the Infogeek have to give us so much information?” and “What is the unnecessary information the Infogeek shares?” (Hinton 2). While the workshop organizers found the Infogeek character “intriguing”, it was noted that, as she was written at that time, she “weighs the play down with more technical talk” and suggested that, even though it was recognized that s/he was intended as a contemporary connection to make the story relevant to audiences, at least some of the jargon should be sacrificed (Hinton 4).

According to Kneale, the character Phil was initially included as “the present day link to Tesla, his legacy searching for information about Tesla’s life,” which is precisely what the company members themselves had intended to achieve at the onset of their creative process. Furthermore, to make clear this connection, the narrator’s function was “to illustrate the connections between the birth of the modern era that Tesla helped to create and the birth of the technological era that the internet helped to create” (Kneale 21). However, by the time the show was remounted in 1998, the character’s function was already dated:

The link with the internet became difficult for the Electrics to work with in subsequent productions because the novelty of it was becoming old as technology moved forward at a rapid pace at the end of the 1990’s. Therefore, while the Narrator still maintains his place as a representation of Tesla’s legacy in the final product, he is less tied to the discovery of the internet. (Kneale 21)

In the 1998 production, Phil makes dated references to the 1980s rock band called *Tesla* and to *The Flintstones* television show, and she explains with odd frankness her not-unusual – at least

by today's standards – research methods: “With my trusty 14.4 Zoom, I search the internet for information.” Instead of continually updating the technical jargon and setting up Phil with a Mac book or an iPod simply to retain a relationship with new media, the company, following the HPR version in 1999, decided instead to recast Phil as the nameless Narrator, strip the character of any noticeable personality traits, and focus on the Tesla narrative. In a 2008 telephone interview, Young stated that he realized there were, by this point, inherent problems with the inclusion of this type of character:

The character surfing the ‘Net’ was no longer an interesting device. It caused problems having her at a computer with a whole bunch of monitors, just sitting there. It screwed up the design by tipping the story toward the narrator character and away from Tesla. It burdened the story.

By making this change in casting and overall character development, the company – intentionally or unintentionally – also dealt with other criticisms from the media and the play reading workshop, in particular the play's lack of focus due to a large number of subplots.

In the multiple reviews that followed, the critics' comments – and later, the festival curators' suggestions – indicated that additional scenes were cumbersome and that the production was in need of editing. Having seen both ECT's original Fringe production and the Roundhouse version that followed, Peter Birne from *The Vancouver Sun* noted that “success hasn't spoiled *Brilliant!*, but this innovative production certainly suffers for its expansion from a one-act hit at the 1996 Fringe Festival.” Young says that while the company was conscious of criticism from the media, he insists that the comments did not have a direct effect on the

evolution of the production: “We do look to feedback to understand what’s coming across, and we took critics into account – but it’s not always direct cause and effect. We’re generally our own harshest critics.” Despite these statements, there are noticeable correlations between the published criticisms and what the company decided to alter in the new version; though it is conceivable that the company’s decision to make these changes was based not on the reviews, but on suggestions from festival curators.

HPR curator Green was acquainted with the Roundhouse version of the production – and presumably the positive and negative criticism that followed – when he asked the company to participate in his 1999 festival. However, after “specifically saying there was a time limit”, he requested that the company remove the intermission and trim half an hour from the production (Young). Since HPR has previously presented shows that have surpassed the two-hour mark and have included an intermission, it is reasonable to assume that Green made these requests for artistic reasons, and not simply due to logistics. Young has said that the company would not change a production for a presenting venue or festival, but would consider inquiries about production development: “We would never enter into agreement when a theatre had a say in the product. But they might ask, what’s your plan over the next couple of years? What about this point in the script?” And yet, as Young explained in a phone interview, the group not only agreed to Green’s requests, but continued cutting bits from the production – including, as mentioned earlier, any reference to Phil ‘the Infogeek’ – after taking part in the HPR, as the company intended to keep on touring the show. Four years after their run at the Calgary festival, the troupe prepared for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which, according to Young, had

been the company's aim for a number of years, and continued editing the production to create the ninety-minute version that is still being presented today.

In Scotland, the company performed in C Venues, a theatre that "seeks out the brightest and best work to showcase at Edinburgh [...] with an emphasis on new and dynamic work" (C Venues). Having been accepted by this venue¹⁹, arguably due to its claims to 'newness', *Brilliant!* collected more positive feedback from *The Scotsman* that commented on the show's "skilful acting and inventive directing" and notes that the production was "visually stunning, quite literally dazzling its audience with brilliant thunderbolts that come zigzagging out of the darkness like inspiration itself" (Dubois). United Kingdom dance critic Sarah Frater "reviewed the show at the Edinburgh Festival and noted that the production was similar to the style of 'a blossoming Robert Lepage'" (Kneale 27). It is important to note that ECT acknowledges Lepage as an influence and Young goes as far as to say that the production has "some of the spirit of his work," though adds modestly that "certainly we are admirers, but we're nowhere near his genius" (Personal Interview). Thanks to Lepage's reputation outside of Canada and his presence on the international festival circuit, there were comparisons being made between Québec City's best known theatre creator and ECT, as though its members were his disciples.

Furthermore, when it was presented at the NAC in 2006, *The Ottawa Sun* reviewer Denis Armstrong called the production "one of the more imaginative visual experiences Canadian theatre has offered since Robert Lepage's *Seven Streams of the River Ota*." Alvina

¹⁹ Unlike the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, the Edinburgh Fringe does not employ a lottery system, but rather leaves its venues in charge of selecting productions.

Ruprecht made a similar comparison in her review of the production for *Ottawa Morning* on CBC Radio 1:

The Electric Company is a theatre based on new stage technologies and, in fact, this is similar to the Laboratory called Ex Machina that is run by Robert Lepage in Québec City, and I have this feeling that this group from Vancouver is very much influenced by the work of Robert Lepage on stage. They both explore theatre and multimedia creation using state-of-the-art computer equipment, and in *Brilliant!* especially, you see how film, dance, mime, comedy and drama are filtered through graphic computer technology and it creates the most exciting visual effects just to explain the inventions of Tesla. (CBC)

The fact that *Brilliant!* is repeatedly compared to the work of Lepage and his well-known aesthetic further highlights the company members' roles as students, learners, and researchers, marking them the perceived next generation of theatre creators. In other words, this company sparks interest because they and their work are seen as 'young', 'innovative' and 'new', though, at the same time, part of a recognizable theatre tradition in connection with Lepage. For the MNTF, the notion of 'youth' – which, of course, is a relative term – is an effective marketing tactic, as seen in Vingoe's curatorial notes for the 2004 festival brochure: "What excites me about the Electric Company is their unbridled energy, intelligence, and visual style, all reasons to make *Brilliant!* a triumph for this bold, young Vancouver company." The visual images from the production were also attractive to this festival, as a picture of Young in the role of Tesla was the focal point of the front cover of the MNTF programme.

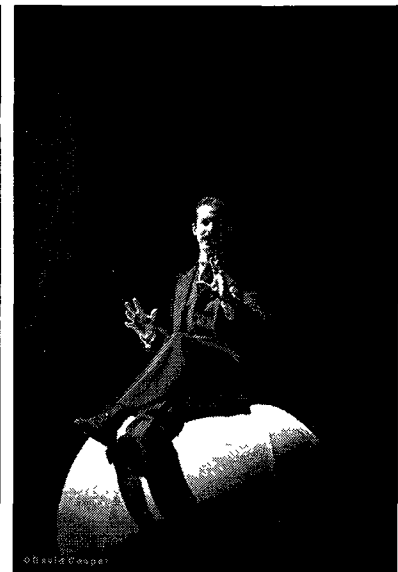
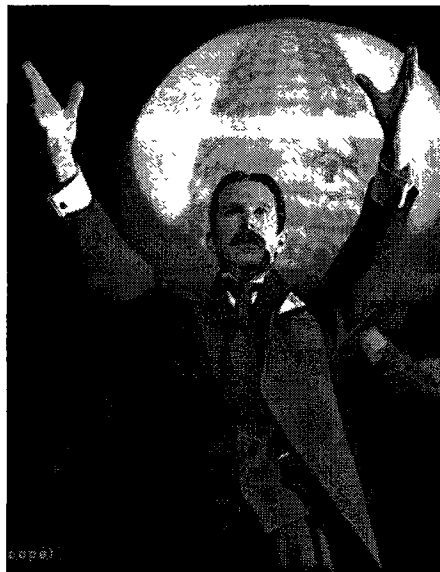
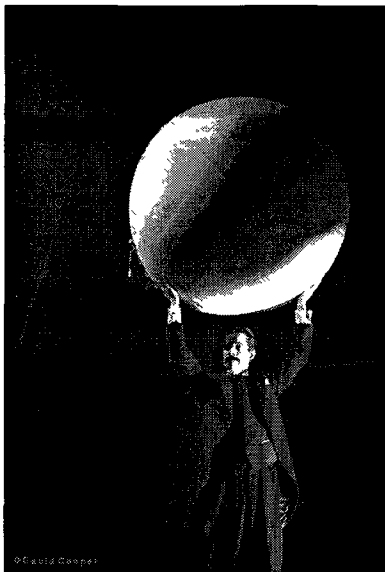
It was at the MNTF that Maraden, invited by Vingoe, saw the *Brilliant!* tech run in the Citadel Theatre at the 2004 festival and decided to program it for the 2006 NAC English Theatre season. Maraden – who was acquainted with members of ECT, having taught them at Studio 58 – explained that: “I was inspired to invite *Brilliant!* for the final season I programmed at the NAC. I remember how much I loved its joyous physical evocation of the theme of creation/science/invention” (Maraden)²⁰. Young remembered that, “for whatever chemical reason, the show had a really great run. Marti [Maraden] had wanted to program us for awhile, and Kim and I had acted at the NAC when she worked there. We were certainly on her radar and we were promoting our work.” While previous acting experience and early networking were important factors in getting recognized by the NAC, it is clear that participation in these festivals secured ECT’s prospects for a national tour.

Brilliant! appealed to presenters for several reasons: it had already garnered a reputation in national and international festival milieus; it was considered an ‘innovative’ production, comparable to the work of Lepage; and it had a marketable nature that could appeal to a mainstream audience. Over a decade after the ECT production was first presented at the Vancouver Fringe Festival, both presenters and reviewers alike consistently referred to the production as ‘new’. The NAC English Theatre marketing staff used a vocabulary tributary of the discourse of ‘newness’ when creating promotional material for the 2006 presentation of *Brilliant!* For example, in the NAC press release, ECT is called “innovative” and the production

²⁰ The only other new Canadian play that was programmed for that same season was *Earshot*, written and performed by Morris Panych, and it had also been showcased previously at MNTF. Clearly the festival had some influence on the NAC English Theatre programming.

labelled “explosive, extra-dimensional, and alarmingly theatrical.” However, comforting descriptors are also used, such as “playfully eclectic staging” and calling the inflated sphere – an integral part of the staging – the production’s “biggest crowd pleaser” (Collins).

More recently, the Belfry Theatre advertised the 2008 version as a “new production” because the company added a chorus and incorporated new design elements. ECT Managing Director Nathan Medd comments: “We were able to make four big improvements that in the past had simply been beyond our budget: a five-member chorus, an up-to-date video design, dozens of new costumes, and new choreography” (Personal Interview). Part of what maintains this sense of ‘newness’ is the enthusiasm created by the presenting venues in reference to the company’s ever-changing productions: in fact, Young maintains that “audiences actually enjoy seeing unfinished work” because it allows them, albeit indirectly, to take part in the production’s development and the company’s growth.



The giant sphere is referred to as the production’s “biggest crowd pleaser” (Photo credit: Cooper)

CHAPTER FIVE: CATALYST THEATRE

While theatre theoreticians attempt to analyze companies by way of certain aesthetics, theatre companies that produce new works, such as Edmonton's Catalyst Theatre, lean toward a sort of aesthetic ambiguity to resist the incorrect labelling of their work by others. If this makes an analysis of their work somewhat challenging, it presents an even greater challenge when marketing productions. In order to entice an audience, it is common practice to use specific known terms that offer a clear connotative meaning in order to create the impression that the play is accessible or, at least, somewhat familiar. In other words, marketing usually involves 'managing' audience expectations through the use of overt references to norms and known aesthetics. This being said, ambiguity and the impression of novelty can spark interest, as spectators try to find similarities between the company's style and something with which they are better acquainted. Unlike ECT that works with new and emerging technologies and the OTPW that works, as its name suggests, in the field of puppetry, the full range of work created by Catalyst cannot be so easily associated with an already defined or known category.

Proactively attempting to seek out labels that suit its productions, the company states on its website: "Catalyst's work can be described as 'small-scale spectacle' - big plays with big ideas, stunning, surreal designs, evocative musical scores, and a heightened approach to language, movement and performance style²¹" (Catalyst - About). However, even the term 'spectacle' is problematic because it holds a negative connotation in some circles by evoking a

²¹ The term 'heightened approach' refers to the company's use of rhyming poetry as narrative, as well as the stylized choreography typically seen in its productions.

lack of substance. This association is historically-based and due to the fact that Aristotle listed 'spectacle' as the last of his "Six Elements of Tragedy" in the *Poetics* calling it "very artless and least particular to the art of poetic composition" (Aristotle 10). Thanks to misunderstandings surrounding this definition, theatre theorists and critics that follow Aristotle's school of thought tend to regard 'spectacle' as inferior to an approach that prioritizes plot and character. For the type of theatre that Catalyst creates, it would be prudent to look to Patrice Pavis' definition of *opsis* (or spectacle) that refers to the *mise en scène*, rather than the written text: "that which is visible, offered to the gaze." This definition is echoed by Schechner's description of the aforementioned 'performance text', a concept that is widely accepted by festivals and organizations open to atextual work as previously defined.

Much of the narrative is sung and accompanied by a musical score, associating Catalyst's work superficially with modern musicals found on Broadway or London's West End; but again, the word 'musical' is often associated with flashy production values and show-stopping numbers, quite unlike the work of this company. Instead, it might be most appropriate to describe the company's most recent work as 'gothic musical' with post-modern elements. As a literary genre, 'gothic' has transcended eras, having first appeared in the late eighteenth century by combining elements of horror and romance, and maintaining its popularity through the nineteenth century. Fred Botting, author of *The Gothic*, defines the term as "explorations of mysterious supernatural energies, immense natural forces, and deep, dark human fears and desires" (2). While this definition is entirely applicable to the 'gothic' literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Joseph Gixti explains that which was considered shocking

in the 'gothic' era no longer has the same disturbing effect in our post-modern world. In his book *Terrors of Uncertainty: The Cultural Contexts of Horror Fiction*, Gixti defines a new genre of 'gothic' better suited to today's cultural environment:

'Candygothic' signifies an attempt to reassess the function of horror in a [Western] culture in which transgressions, repressions, taboos, prohibitions no longer mark an absolute limit in unbearable excess and thus no longer contain the intensity of a desire for something that satisfyingly disturbs and defines social and moral boundaries [...] Predictable and acceptable, figures of horror function as 'titillating exercises in reassurance' which become 'highly marketable commodities'. (18-19)

In choosing to focus on well-known gothic figures, including Frankenstein and Edgar Allan Poe, that are no longer considered as threatening or taboo as they once were, the company has embraced this 'candygothic' style that appeals to a popular culture generation, and thus, thanks in part to the genre's marketable qualities, recent Catalyst productions have been recognized and celebrated on the festival circuit in English Canada and elsewhere.

COMPANY HISTORY: WORKING IN EDMONTON

Somewhat ironically, Catalyst began as a social theatre company inspired by the work of Augusto Boal. All this changed when former Artistic Director Ruth Smilee left the company, and a new artistic team consisting of Jonathan Christenson and Joey Tremblay was hired in 1996. At the time, Christenson was still completing his Master of Fine Arts in Directing at the University of Alberta and had already created a few productions in collaboration with Tremblay. They

submitted a joint application that proposed an entirely different vision for the company. To be clear, this new incarnation of the company – focussing on the collaborative work of Christenson and Tremblay – had nothing in common with the previous theatre of social activism. With this new untried artistic direction, there was a risk that government bodies would suspend funding and that the established audience base would no longer show interest in the company's productions. Furthermore, Catalyst's growth had been hindered by large deficits and its lease had expired, so the new Artistic Directors had to share a total salary of only \$24 000 in the first season. In short, Christenson and Tremblay inherited a crumbling infrastructure and were expected to rejuvenate the company within the year. In that first season, they created three productions: *My Perfect Heaven*, *Elephant Wake*, and *Electra*. Fortunately, through these productions, they succeeded in garnering new audiences and restoring the company²². In essence, thanks to the new vision, it is possible to argue that the company was, in fact, reinvented in 1996 and is therefore as 'new' as ECT and the OTPW.

While it is unusual for most independent companies to own a theatre, Catalyst has always had its own black box rehearsal and performance space, administrative offices, and design studios situated near Whyte Avenue, the principal artistic hub in Edmonton, where its staff creates work to this day in a stable environment. Occasionally, the space is utilized by other theatre companies for performance, but Catalyst is selective in its programming and will only showcase work that is "created in similar ways or has a similar style" to that of the host company (Christenson). Having its own space is instrumental because it allows its artistic staff

²² As explained by Eva Cairns, current Managing Director of Catalyst Theatre.

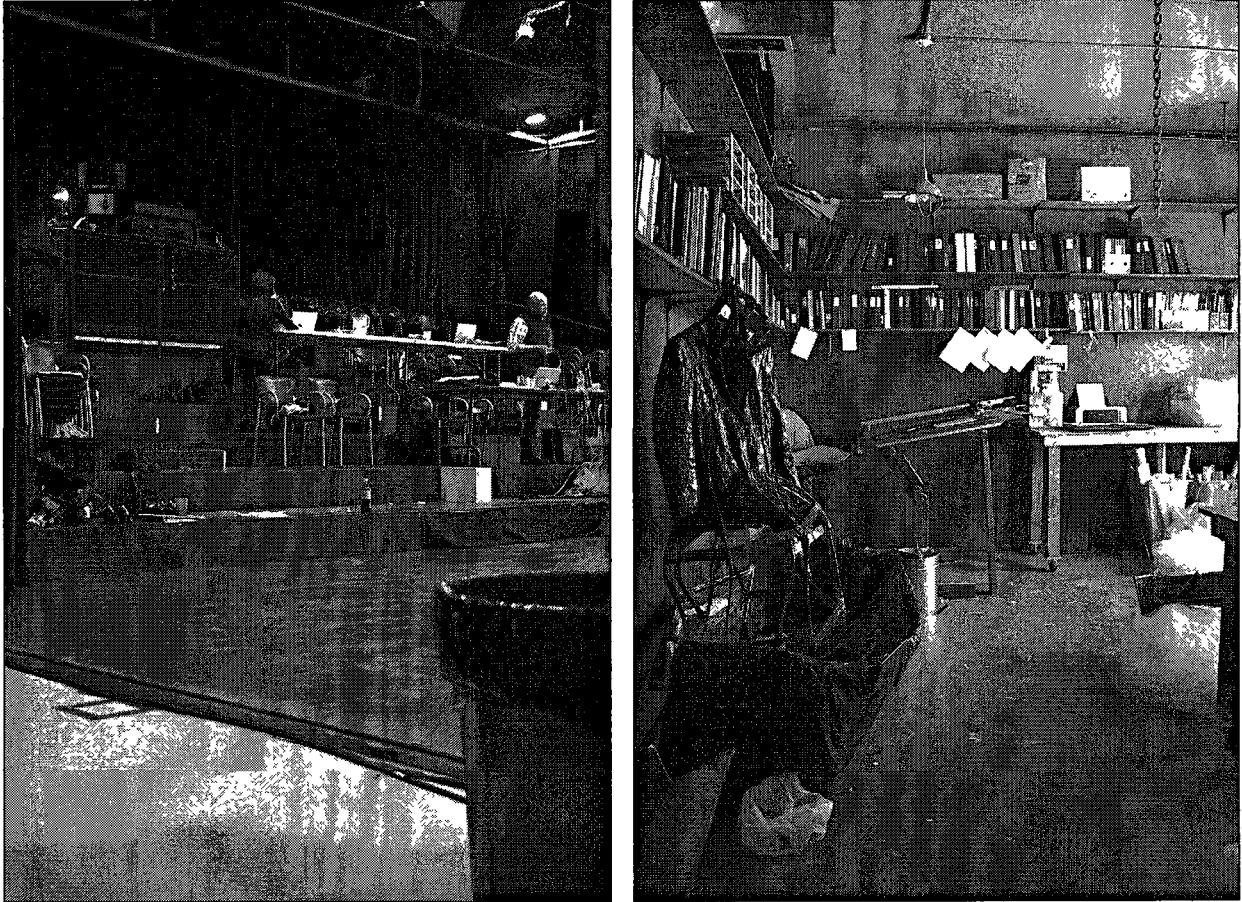
to work together in one building, to collaborate at any point in the process, and to experiment freely with various design elements:

We need a rehearsal hall and design studios, so that we can continue to work alongside each other and allow the choices to feed into both areas along the way. That's definitely the critical component: being able to have a space where the design team and the rehearsal hall team are able to pop in and out of each other's spaces in a very fluid way. (Christenson)

Although having this space is important for the company's artists, the staff has had to take responsibility for renovating and general maintenance. Still, for a creation-based company, Christenson finds that the artistic advantages of owning a theatre far outweigh the challenges.

Catalyst usually presents its productions in this venue at least twice, and often Edmonton audiences will return to see shows a second time, in part because, according to Managing Director Eva Cairns, they are familiar with the company's process and are aware that productions change between runs. Describing the atypical position of the company in the local theatre community, Christenson notes:

There has been "a longstanding tradition of companies presenting a season of four to five plays that tend to be existing scripts written by playwrights [...] [The companies] do a standard rehearsal process and run, and then that's the end of their relationship to the show." (Personal Interview)



Christenson in rehearsal in the theatre and Gerecke's design studio in the room next door (Ruano).

In contrast to most theatre practitioners in the area, Christenson has always been committed to creating and developing new productions in house and then touring them across the country with the original company of actors.

One of the company's earliest shows, *Elephant Wake*, was presented in the Edmonton Fringe Festival in 1996, and then toured to The Globe Theatre in Regina, the Brighton Festival in England, and the Edinburgh Fringe in Scotland. In a recent interview, Christenson said that "going to the Edinburgh Fringe changed everything for us. The work was widely exposed, and it was critically very well received. We also started to understand how the network of international touring worked." This tradition of touring continued: *The House of Pootsie*

Plunket was presented in Regina, England, Scotland and, this time, Vancouver, though not to PuSh, between 2002 and 2004. The production was also presented at two major Canadian festivals: the Carrefour International in Québec City and the On The Waterfront Festival (now the SuperNova Festival) in Halifax. *The Blue Orphan* was the first Catalyst production to be commissioned by the MNTF and was presented in Ottawa in 2005. The show later toured to the Adelaide Fringe Festival in Australia. *Carmen Angel* travelled to Vancouver in 2004 and then returned to the United Kingdom in 2005. Tremblay left the company after this production, and Christenson then assumed artistic leadership alone.

Over the years, thanks to the company's participation in festivals, Christenson became acquainted with a wider range of aesthetics and innovations elsewhere in the world. Also, for practical reasons, participating in festivals was a wise decision for the company because the work was much more likely to be seen by presenters:

Festivals are of course an important opportunity for people to see the work. They offer presenters the opportunity to see a large number of shows in a condensed frame. One of the struggles we've had is doing the work out of Edmonton. It's a big commitment for people to fly here; most people have to do anywhere from a four to an eight hour flight to get here. If they're doing that to see only one show, it's hard to convince people that it's important enough to come. And it also means that the stakes are that much higher. I feel like it puts an unnatural expectation on the work. So festivals are a great platform because the stakes are taken down a bit in many ways, and yours is only one of many shows. And you're not the one inviting the people to come and see the work, the festival is. (Christenson)

Most recently, the company created and produced two 'gothic musicals' that have toured Canada. *Frankenstein*, based on the nineteenth century novel by Mary Shelley, premiered in 2006 and has been touring ever since. *Nevermore* was co-commissioned by the MNTF and the Luminato Festival in 2009, and then co-presented by PuSh, the Vancouver East Cultural Centre and the Arts Club Theatre as part of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad. The company garnered eight Sterling Awards²³ for *Frankenstein* and seven more for *Nevermore*. In March 2010, a third gothic musical was announced: Catalyst had started work on a production entitled *Hunchback*, based on the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo, and it was commissioned by The Citadel Theatre, Edmonton's largest regional theatre. The significance of this trilogy corresponding to the company's ongoing relationship with festivals will be discussed in more detail in the second half of this chapter.

In terms of the company's production process, Catalyst has much more of an established hierarchy within the artistic staff than ECT and OTPW: the core members are the creators and designers, rather than the performers, which is not to imply that the performers do not play an integral role in the creative process. Performers must audition for the company to be considered for a role: while the company does not tend to use the same group of actors for different productions, the cast generally remains the same for any one production as it continues to tour and develop over time. Christenson has directed – and occasionally, written and composed – every Catalyst production since 1996 and always collaborates with other designers. Christenson has worked closely with Resident Designer / Production Designer Bretta

²³ "The Sterling Awards were created in 1987 to celebrate outstanding professional theatre in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada." Found: <http://www.sterlingawards.com/>

Gerecke, Sound Designer Wade Staples, and Choreographer Laura Krewski, who are all present in the rehearsal room as often as possible:

The result of working in that way has led to something onstage that looks very integrated, that I think you end up with a result that the lines between jobs of various people are blurrier. It's clear that everyone's choices are feeding the choices of others.
(Christenson)

This comes across quite clearly in performance, as evidenced by a review of *Nevermore* written by *SEE Edmonton* critic Marliss Weber, who described the “dark, grotesque fantasy of it all, design, movement, voice and character working in concert to create a wholly original style.” Sharon Yeo, who writes the blog titled *Optimistically Cautious*, commented, in reference to *Nevermore* that “everything from the lighting design and musical direction to costumes and dialogue were seamlessly integrated together, where each element was inseparable from the rest.” In her description of the show's antecedent *Frankenstein*, Yeo specifically acknowledges the working relationship between the artistic creators:

The production demonstrates a remarkable congruence of the script, music, lighting, and design – no one element is out of place [nor] is anything less than seamless within the musical as a whole. I am almost certain this is due to the very close collaborative relationship between writer/director/composer Jonathan Christenson and production designer Bretta Gerecke [...] I gather that it is an apt luxury for the development of a show's design to take place alongside alterations to the script. (Yeo)

Although reviewers enthuse over Catalyst's production process as though it were novelty, it might be questioned to what degree this approach is, in fact, original: in a Canadian context, for example, Christenson's approach to performance is comparable, once again, to that of Lepage, as well as other Québécois artists that have toured throughout Canada. Even though Lepage is acknowledged as the leading artist of his company Ex Machina, he nonetheless surrounds himself with collaborators that contribute to the process and help create the production. In his description of the different types of artistic roles in the theatre, performance theorist Richard Schechner suggests a title and definition for this type of overall creator:

Auteur directors totally control what the partakers experience [...] comparable to the control literary authors have over their works [...] Auteur directors collaborate or draw on the creative abilities of many people. But when one agrees to work with an auteur director, you know that the final word on what will be used, and how, belongs to the auteur. (252-3)

This idea is reflected in Catalyst's 'collaborative' process: while Christenson does work closely with a number of designers and with his actors, he is, indeed, the creator of the piece and the person that has the final say in the decisions being made. Christenson sustains an ongoing dialogue with his collaborators, and yet "it's very clear that I'm the leader of the process, and ultimately I feel that I am responsible for what ends up onstage. So any criticism of any element of the show lands at my feet." This type of theatre maker was described much earlier in the twentieth century by Antonin Artaud in the first section of his manifesto *The Theatre and Its Double*. Artaud wrote that "the old duality between author and director will be dissolved,

replaced by a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot” (94). In regards to his multiple roles in the production, Christenson explains that “when I’m immersed in the process, I don’t feel there are clear lines between the director, the composer, and the writer; I’m making decisions simultaneously.”

While there are few examples of this type of director in English Canada, this *modus operandi* is in no way ‘new’ and has been an accepted category of artist in French Canada since the 1980s: not only does Lepage work in this way, but so do most theatre for young audience companies based throughout Québec, such as Théâtre de Confettis and Théâtre Motus. And yet, it is this aspect of the company to which journalists always refer in their articles about *Catalyst* and describe as novel, perhaps out of ignorance, and most notably when Christenson began more recently to articulate a definitive ‘gothic’ style in his practice.

DEVELOPMENT OF *FRANKENSTEIN*

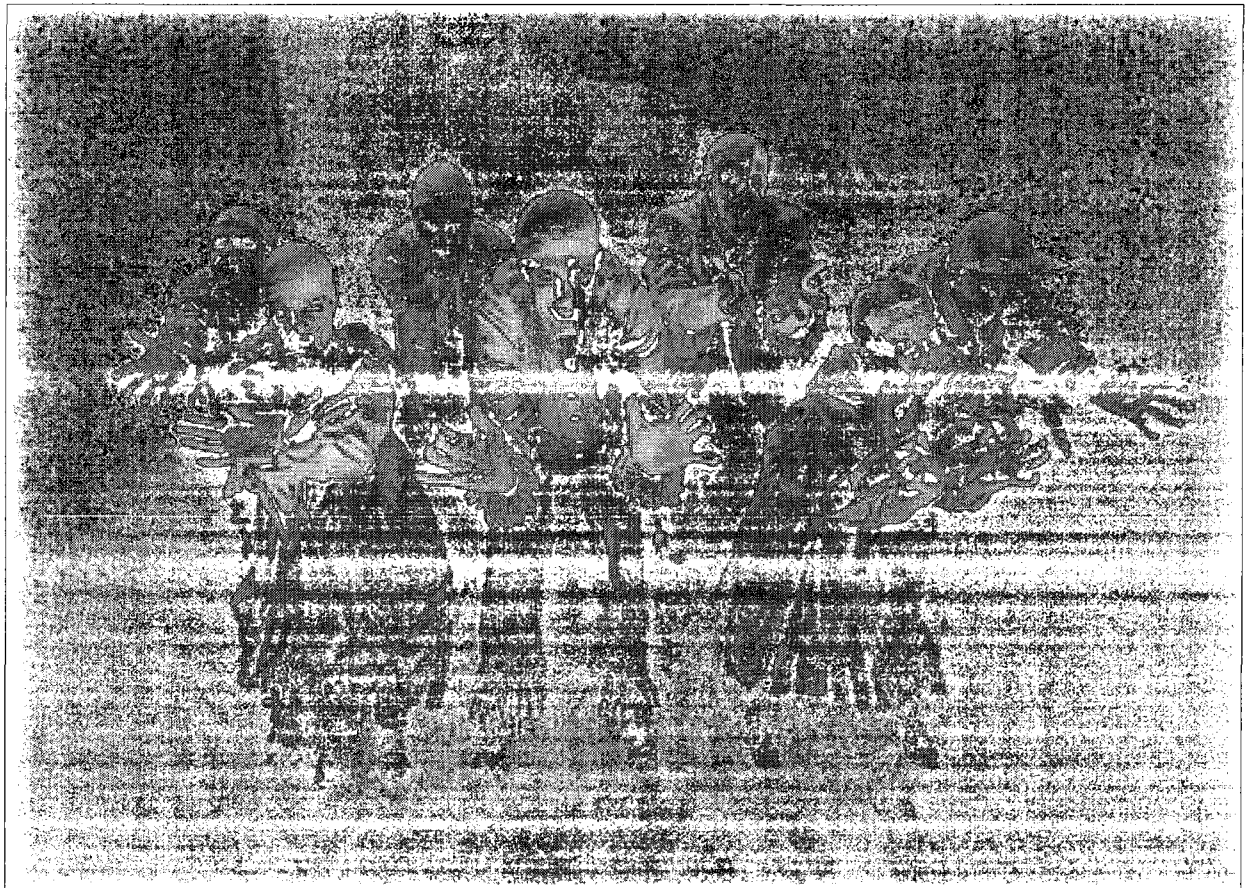
Although Christenson first became acquainted with *Frankenstein* through James Whale’s 1931 cinematic adaptation, it was only when he read Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel that he was moved to create his own version for the stage (*Edmonton Journal*, no author given). Christenson made a concentrated effort to return to the novel for inspiration, and yet he did not restrict himself to the specific plot and character details, nor to the style of this nineteenth century classic. Rather, his intention, much like that of many of Québécois theatre creators, was to produce something motivated by a piece of writing, which was regarded as a resource rather than instructions for staging:

When I've approached other people's work, from the very beginning of my training as a director, though I wasn't conscious of it at the time, I was constantly changing the material to fit what I was seeing. I don't think I have the kind of sensibility that is required to stage other people's work, which is much more one of searching to see what it is they are trying to do and how you can best bring that to life on the stage. I engage with the material more in terms of what is inspiring in me. (Christenson)

This is not unlike Artaud's belief that masterpieces could be pirated for their ideas, but must always be rewritten to reflect the creator's own contemporary perspective (Leach 174). Christenson felt no obligation to set the piece in the nineteenth century through the show's text, music, and scenography. It seems that his version aimed to be as a-temporal and a-spacial as possible: the story is situated in an unknown time in some "far-away place" that remains unnamed (*Frankenstein*). Even though Victor Frankenstein, played by actor Andrew Kushnir, does not visit the Arctic in the production, as he does in the novel, Christenson and Gerecke evoke a sense of the frozen north – perhaps northern Canada, rather than Switzerland and Germany, where the novel is set – by dressing characters in evocative costumes made entirely of white paper and with a white and shimmering set. The design is in fact somewhat mythical: in some versions of the production, strange curved trees are scattered across the stage and figures appear in colourful lights upstage behind the scrim.

While Christenson intended to distance his production from the Frankenstein films, the style of his production occasionally calls to mind cult horror B-movie classics as the narrators stalk across the stage in wide strides and lurch toward the audience speaking emphatically,

almost comically, about fate and hubris. *The Globe and Mail* reviewer J. Kelly Nestruck suggests that *Frankenstein's* style was inspired by the work of American film director Tim Burton, reputed for his dark and quirky movies often based on classic stories. Weber also refers to Burton in her review of *Nevermore*: "Full of macabre images – when the female characters aren't getting buried alive, they're dying from consumption – the show plays out like a 19th-century Tim Burton puppet show." While both Catalyst productions are complimented for their originality, it seems that part of the shows' appeal comes from the ability to relate to a popular culture generation – one that takes delight in zombie movies, yet finds solace in sympathetic portrayals of strange characters.



Narrators in *Frankenstein* occasionally evoke cult classics and zombie films (Fiorani)

In an interview with *The Edmonton Journal*, Christenson offers his own perspective on why *Frankenstein* appeals to contemporary theatre fans:

What I discovered [in reading the novel] was this story filled with a beautiful awkwardness that really intrigued me. I've always been interested in awkwardness in large part because it flies in the face of the huge emphasis we see in the world on being cool and having all the answers.



Like *Frankenstein*, *Nevermore* depicts adolescent awkwardness more than horror (Gerecke)

If awkwardness and emotional turmoil are the focus of this piece, then the narrative of Catalyst's *Frankenstein* is unquestionably fitting for an adolescent audience: "I was really struck reading the book with how fleshed out the monster was and how much pain, loneliness and rejection he experiences" (Christenson as qtd. in *The Edmonton Journal*). According to Botting, this tendency to encourage a sincere interest in and sympathy for characters once considered monsters is not uncommon in today's adaptations of gothic stories:

In the remakes of 'classic' gothic novels and movies, greater sympathy and stronger identification is unapologetically evinced for figures once condemned as incarnations of evil [...] the movement towards sympathy underlines a major shift in perceptions of Gothic monstrosity from a horrifying sight of that which was most unbearable in a culture to a recognition and embrace of the monster as the image, the inner, often denied aspect, of who we, in a (post)modern western world, truly are: love all monsters, love your monster as yourself, becomes the new refrain. (3)

Instead of presenting characters that are truly frightening and gruesome, today's post-modern 'candygothic' style includes well-known figures that are intended to be relatable, thus functioning as both known and unknown quantities to audiences: this phenomenon unto itself is tributary of 'newness', a discourse that encourages the recycling of the old and presenting it as new, in art as elsewhere.

Thanks to its marketable potential, this 'new' gothic style embraced by Catalyst has proven successful on the festival circuit in English Canada. With *Frankenstein*, the company seemed to be focussing primarily on forming or solidifying relationships with Canadian festivals

and presenters, as, for the first time, its work was presented by PuSh in 2008 and by HPR in 2009, after the show had been created at Keyano Theatre in Fort McMurray and presented at the Catalyst theatre space in Edmonton. While PuSh was a relatively new entity at the time, HPR had been running for over twenty years without having programmed a work by Catalyst: it was only at this point that a relationship between the established festival and this company was first formed. The Calgary media was especially keen to report on *Frankenstein* because, for the 2009 HPR, this Catalyst production was co-presented by the festival and Theatre Calgary, the city's largest theatre company; this was the first time they had worked together since 1997. Evidently both organizations believed this project would prove successful in terms of appreciation by their respective audience base.

Perhaps coincidentally, but nonetheless significantly, *Frankenstein* was a perfect fit for HPR that year, as the festival had also programmed shows about Gilgamesh and Dracula. *Fast Forward Weekly's* arts reporter Jeff Kubik noted "there's no shortage of monsters at this year's festival". Also employing popular horror jargon, *The Edmonton Sun's* Colin MacLean called *Frankenstein* "a monsterpiece [...] a monster hit." HPR was not the only festival that embraced the gothic horror genre: one year earlier, in reference to PuSh, Wasserman asked "so what's with Edmonton and these Gothic musicals?" At the 2008 festival, Vancouver audiences had the opportunity to see both Catalyst's *Frankenstein* and November Theatre's "grimly comic, musically grotesque, devilishly theatrical *The Black Rider*" by William F. Burroughs and Tom Waits (Wasserman). Since this subject matter clearly appealed to English Canadian festivals

and worked to great effect in marketing the productions, it seems that Christenson had chosen an ideal time to start exploring gothic themes and forms in and through his work.

By the time *Frankenstein* was presented at both PuSh and HPR, there had been noticeable changes made to the production, directly influenced by the requirements of festivals with which the company wished to engage. Like a playwright working through drafts of a new play, Christenson knew that the first production of *Frankenstein* would change in its next instalment, and he shared these thoughts with his company of actors and designers:

I was clear from the very beginning that, when we took it to Keyano, it wasn't the ultimate version of the show. And they all bought into that idea that this is an ever-evolving piece and that it can be beautifully told and still have room to grow and improve.

When the show was presented at Keyano Theatre in 2006, it was two hours and forty minutes long. For the next series of presentations in the Catalyst Theatre space in 2007, the show was shortened to two hours and thirty minutes; then, by the time it was presented at PuSh in 2008, it was two hours in length. Christenson explains that "there was the pragmatic consideration that presenters wanted the show to be two hours. I also felt that it was too long anyway, that the momentum of the piece wasn't working in various places. So those things fed each other." This is exactly what happened when the HPR requested that ECT edit *Brilliant!* to two hours: PuSh, too, placed a limitation on the Catalyst production in terms of running time, which thereby obliged the company to rework the piece.

In the original version, Christenson and Gerecke chose to create an elaborate, multi-faceted set: the show opened with a jagged white backdrop made of scrim behind which figures could be revealed; there were also tall white moveable flats used to evoke Victor's workshop. For the opening of the second act, the design consisted of silky curtains that were reminiscent of ice mountains; these curtains have been present in every production to date. In the 2007 version in Catalyst's intimate theatre space with a seating capacity of 138, the backdrop was no longer used, and the different locations were portrayed only with various flats arranged onstage between scenes. For the 2008 version at PuSh in the Vancouver East Cultural Centre (The Cultch), there was no set at all for the first act. Christenson explains why he made the decision to eliminate these set pieces and then why, aesthetically, their removal did not work in the end:

I realized what I loved was seeing these white characters against a black background. There was something that reinforced my sense of the fragility of the characters and the kind of delicacy with which the story unfolds. And almost a sense of white line drawings on a black piece of paper. And so we got rid of that white background and sort of clarified the sense of white characters floating in a darker space. And then when we did that we started to realize that the stage was a little bit too much of a big empty hole. And so then we started integrating new scenic elements so that when we're in the larger venues the piece doesn't get lost. (Christenson)

It would seem that Christenson was planning ahead in order to be able to present the production in more spacious theatre venues: at HPR, *Frankenstein* was presented in the Max

Bell Theatre with a seating capacity of 785, compared with The Cultch that has a capacity of 219. In 2010, Catalyst once again incorporated more set pieces to adapt the production to a larger venue: this time, the Canadian Stage Company presented the production at the Bluma Appel Theatre with a capacity of 876 seats.

Another noticeable difference between the first version at Keyano Theatre and the versions at the festivals is the re-sequencing of scenes. Christenson explains his reasoning for such changes:

The piece is quite substantially different at the beginning, in terms of how we set up who [Victor Frankenstein] is, what his relationship is to his family, to the other characters in the story, and to try to build a sense of value in those relationships so that when they're lost later on they resonate more.

Over this period of time, there appears to be a concentrated effort to build sympathy for the character of Victor, in line with the post-modern gothic style. While in the earlier version Victor and the orphan William never meet, in the later version they grow up in the same household. Fittingly, when the latter is murdered by the Creature, played by George Szilagyi, it feels as though Victor is losing a brother, rather than a second-hand acquaintance. Furthermore, when the show was first conceived, Christenson decided to end the story with Victor being strangled by the Creature – a closing scene that does very little to redeem its characters. Starting with the 2008 version at PuSh, Victor accepts the Creature as his own and takes responsibility for everything that has happened. With this significant change, Christenson seems to be mastering the style in which he is now working, which informs his later work; namely, *Nevermore*, first

presented in 2009, wherein he once again finds sympathy in unfortunate circumstances and beauty in the grotesque.

CAPITALIZING ON GENRE: *NEVERMORE* AND *HUNCHBACK*

The Catalyst production of *Nevermore*, commissioned by the MNTF, was aptly timed for the 200th anniversary of the death of Edgar Allan Poe. Artistic Director Ken Cameron announced at the festival launch that he was giving Catalyst a '*carte blanche*' for the new show, trusting that the end result would be worth the risk. While MNTF has only commissioned one or two original productions per festival, Christenson suggested in a recent interview that, in an ideal world, festivals would prefer to commission new works more often:

I would guess that they would love to be commissioning more work and putting more money behind those commissions. Because there's a huge advantage for them in doing that. For the Magnetic North to be the company that commissioned and premiered *Nevermore*, and then have that show to go on to have a life of a number of years beyond that, it makes you a leader. It's mutually advantageous.

Inverting the typical order of things, Christenson approached the MNTF directly to request they commission his next project: "I sat down with Ken right after he'd been appointed in Ottawa and I said, I think you should be commissioning Catalyst's next show." It is important to note that more and more the theatre community uses this term 'commissioned' loosely. While the word implies that the MNTF requested that Catalyst Theatre write a show about Poe, this is not the case: the company was, in fact, encouraged to create a work of its choosing with support

from the festival; no specific task or subject matter was assigned to the company. It should also be noted that commissioning an original work does not systematically mean subsequently presenting the work: to commission a work means to assist the company or artist financially and accompany the development of the commissioned piece through artistic input; presenting a work becomes an option only if the presenter chooses to do so. In this case, the MNTF both commissioned and presented *Nevermore*, as did the Luminato Festival in Toronto. Christenson noted that the festivals' relationship to the work was 'hands-off':

We gave the Magnetic North and Luminato opportunities to see shows at various stages of development, and neither of them felt the need to do that. I think they felt a fair amount of security in the work, based on Catalyst's track record and reputation.

With Catalyst's growing reputation for perceived innovation in the theatre community, it is not surprising that The Citadel, Edmonton's largest theatre, commissioned a third production that would complete the trilogy of 'gothic musicals'. It was announced in May 2010 that the company would be creating *Hunchback*, a "musical reimagining" of Victor Hugo's classic novel (Nicholls). It appears that Catalyst has capitalized on the achievements of *Frankenstein* within the festival circuit by continuing to explore this candygothic style with two more productions: while presenters cannot know exactly what to expect from any one production, the company itself has enough 'proven potential' to placate any possible apprehensions.

Catalyst gives the impression that its performance style is undefined and therefore 'new', which may have been true up until recently; but it is by developing and working within this candygothic genre – illustrated in recent productions *Frankenstein* and *Nevermore*, and

soon to be seen in *Hunchback* – that the company has found success. Although this precise genre is not defined or described explicitly in the company’s promotional material, the gothic style has become Catalyst’s trademark and has been recognized nonetheless in blog and newspaper reviews. By associating himself to a more distinctive style otherwise absent in English Canadian theatre, Christenson has found a way to create productions that provoke discussion and, at the same time, garner something of a cult following. Meanwhile, journalists focus their stories on the collaborative process of the company, its peculiar, yet recognizable production style, and its appeal for audiences growing in numbers.

CHAPTER SIX: THE OLD TROUT PUPPET WORKSHOP

The OTPW has found success by neither classifying itself as a theatre company, nor restricting itself to theatre traditions perceived as English Canadian, all the while being very active within Canada's emerging festival circuit. This troupe describes itself as a 'workshop' rather than a 'theatre company' because its members not only create puppets for the stage, but also craft them for film, books, music videos, and sculpture. Popular with festival curators and presenters across Canada and increasingly in other parts of the world, this company is considered 'new' and 'innovative' despite the fact that its work is rooted in well-known puppetry traditions and influenced by twentieth-century cinema, philosophy and contemporary art. In some ways, the company can be described as 'new' simply because it constantly borrows from disciplines other than theatre and because it is one of the few English-language companies in Canada to specialize in puppetry. As such, it has the advantage of being viewed as 'new' by default in a festival context that does not usually cater to puppetry as an art form. Described in the 2003 MNTF programme as "not precisely a theatre company", the OTPW is content to differentiate itself from other English Canadian companies by resisting the very names associated with normative theatre practice. It goes so far as to list its members as "a carpenter, a sculptor, an illustrator, a mountaineer, an old-school hooper, and a chef" (18).

Historically speaking, puppetry in English Canada is not a well-rooted practice. To this day, very few companies specialize in this form: notable exceptions include the Mermaid Theatre in Nova Scotia, founded in 1972, and Toronto's Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, established in 1986 in Edmonton. Although their styles differ greatly, the OTPW has been

compared to the latter, perhaps because the OTPW similarly creates puppet shows with adult content and because Burkett is an obvious reference point, being the most famous puppeteer currently working in English Canada. Like Lepage, Burkett is viewed in the English-speaking world as both original and a master artist in his field. However, Burkett is a solo artist, while the OTPW works as a collective. Accordingly, when the OTPW participates in a festival intended for English Canadian audiences, more often than not, it is the only puppet ensemble present and the sole representative of this form and tradition of theatre.

As a collective, like ECT and Catalyst, members place a great deal of importance on the creation process of each piece, using their atelier both as a studio for creating the puppets and occasionally for rehearsal. This multi-purpose space is instrumental to their work because several elements of a show can be developed simultaneously and may influence one another: while many puppets are created deliberately for a scene in a piece in progress, sometimes the fortuitous construction of a puppet can inspire yet another scene, or an entirely different play. According to OTPW puppeteer Judd Palmer:

[The art of puppetry] makes peculiar demands in terms of infrastructure – we need a permanent space, and much more time on a given production than other companies might; this has meant that we have been forced to dedicate most of our time to this activity.

Moreover, according to Palmer, working with puppets demands that members work atextually, which is time consuming and requires dedication from the collective:

Not only are there not many scripts out there for what we do, the script is such a small part of the overall effect (and in fact, might best be done away with entirely, at least in terms of actual words being spoken) that it's hard to imagine a script that a puppet company could find to commission anyway. But also: we think there's some value in the performer being invested to that extent in their words and actions... not some phantom playwright's. (Palmer)

This statement unto itself is revealing as scripts for puppet shows, including those written and created by Burkett, are, in fact, numerous and readily available. But the company is far more interested in sculpture than scripture, in texture than text, in spectacle than spoken language; as evidenced by the production *Famous Puppet Death Scenes (FPDS)* that premiered in 2006 and consisted of a series of thematically linked visual vignettes. In her article published in *CTR*, director Vanessa Porteous – who worked as a guest director with the OTPW on *Pinocchio* and later on *The Erotic Anguish of Don Juan* (hereafter referred to simply as *Don Juan*) – states that “text is the least powerful element of a puppet show: puppets are better in action than in dialogue” (Porteous 21). It is curious that Porteous makes this statement about puppet theatre because *Don Juan*, which she directed in 2009, is heavily text based. Although judging by the reviews of that production that criticize the narrative, perhaps that particular show proves her original point. This atextual approach to their work has benefits, since productions containing minimal spoken text can be enjoyed by non-Anglophone audiences. For this reason in particular, the company has been invited to participate in French Canadian festivals, such as FTA and the ManiganSes Festival International des Arts de la Marionette; the company also

travelled to France in 2009 and to Spain in 2010 to present *FPDS*, which is almost entirely wordless. This puppet theatre is in no way a literary exercise, but an exploration into the performative elements of various puppet theatre traditions. Evidently, it would be pointless to analyse an OTPW production based solely on the scripted text.

In the same article, Porteous uses the company term “bon-bons” to describe those “moments when the narrative suspends and something absurd, hilarious, metaphorical or transcendent happens” (Porteous 22). This notion is especially highlighted in *FPDS*, which is, in essence, a production consisting almost entirely of “bon-bons”, as defined by the company. This rapport with their chosen form allows them to experiment with different styles of puppetry without restricting themselves to an overarching narrative. As *NOW Toronto Magazine* reviewer Jon Kaplan points out, “Not every scene in the show works, but they're all so short that if one doesn't succeed you're quickly on to another.” The show is, in fact, a series of thematically connected *études*²⁴. This production, perhaps more than any other, is emblematic of both the company's style and *raison d'être*: structured like a type of lab, it highlights and makes use of the assorted interests of the group as well as their somewhat chaotic *modus operandi* when creating.

²⁴ According to Moscow art curators Anna Arutyunyan and Andrey Egorov, an *étude*, or ‘study’, may be defined as a “subsidiary type of visual art that is executed from nature with a learning goal”, as well as a “flexible and many-sided aesthetic category that may also be applied to certain finished works of art.” It may be understood as a “convenient metaphor for a distinctive creative stance of the artist.” Furthermore, “an immediate object of learning may not only be something physically existing, but also a purely notional feature – for instance, a concept behind the work of art” (1).

COMPANY HISTORY: WORKING ON THE RANCH AND IN CALGARY

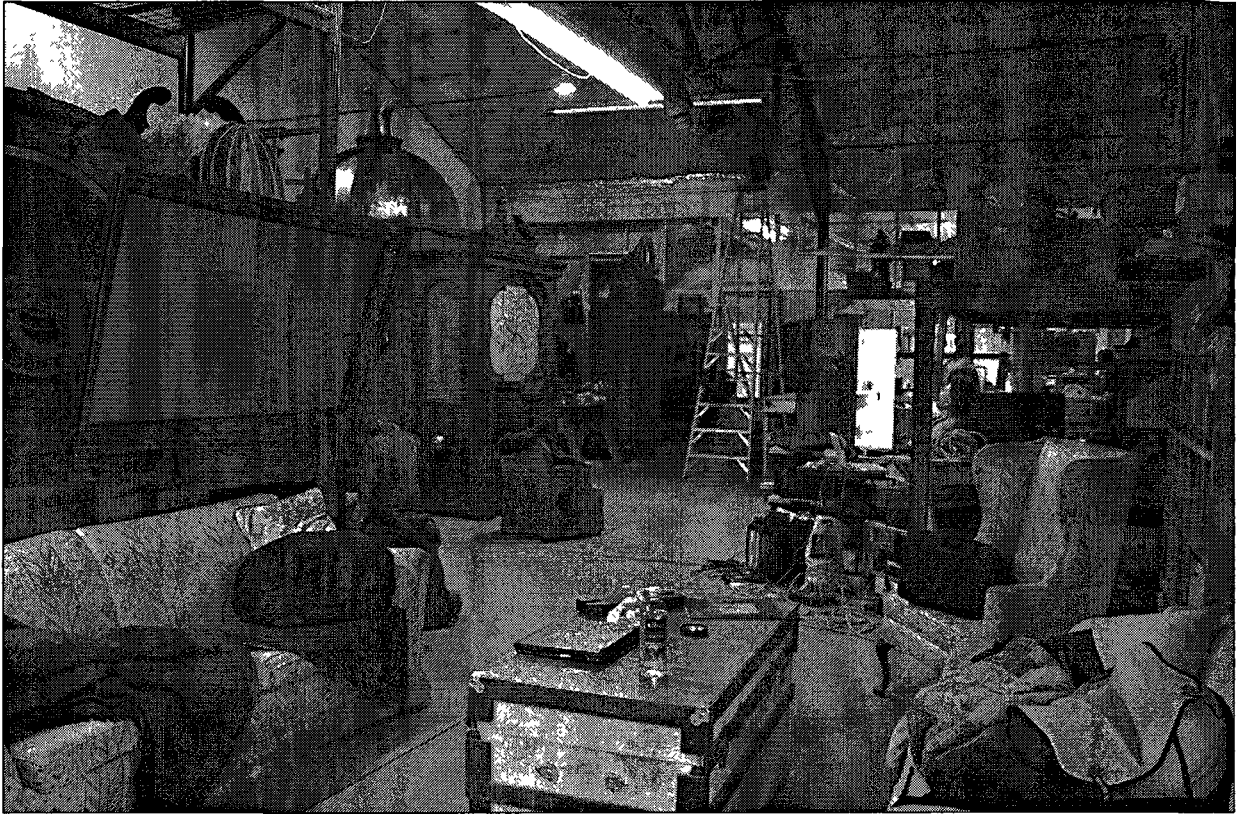
The OTPW was founded on a Southern Alberta ranch in 1999 by five men: Peter Balkwill, Pityu Kenderes, Bobby Hall, Steve Pierce and Judd Palmer²⁵. Balkwill has a background in theatre: he completed a BFA at the University of Victoria with a focus on movement and Eastern-European mask work; then he completed an MFA in acting at the University of Washington in a three-year conservatory program that was based in the methodologies of Japanese theatre artist Tadashi Suzuki²⁶. Kenderes studied sculpture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, while Palmer completed a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy at the University of Toronto's Trinity College and produced a puppet show as his final project. It was Palmer who had the idea to work collectively on this ranch and build puppet shows that made use of their various artistic abilities. Some of the members had collaborated previously with The Green Fools, a Calgary-based physical theatre company with a focus on masks and puppets that was established in 1991. It would seem that these experiences in the academy and in the theatre inspired them to create their own work, and the OTPW was formed.

Thanks to a \$4 000 grant, this group of men lived together, cooked together, and worked together in "intense collaborative isolation" (OTPW - History). Over a six-month period,

²⁵ Bobby Hall and Steve Pierce left the company prior to *Famous Puppet Death Scenes* in 2006; since then Don Brinsmead and Mitchell Craib have become integral members of the company.

²⁶ "The Suzuki Method of Actor Training develops the actor's inner physical sensibilities, builds the will, stamina and concentration. The workshop activities include a series of exercises centered around the use of the feet in relation to one's center... The best and most consistent evidence of this work is apparent onstage reflected through an increasingly centered and controlled actor" Suzuki Method
<<http://www2.csusm.edu/theater/suzuki.html>>

they developed their first show, *The Unlikely Birth of Istvan* (or, simply, *Istvan*), and performed it on the ranch for an audience composed of resident cowboys and Hutterites; it was later programmed for HPR 2000. Several members of the OTPW had worked previously at a summer camp, and many of the campers attended this edition of the festival to see this new play performed by their mentors. The festival staff was impressed by this “new young demographic” that was drawn to the event thanks to the emerging puppet company (Kenderes). In the same way that ECT was equated with ‘newness’ because its members were recent university graduates, so the OTPW had the same appeal with festivals thanks to its young audience base. Since this first production, the OTPW has sustained a close working relationship with the HPR. In fact, many of the company’s subsequent puppet shows premiered at the Calgary festival: *The Tooth Fairy* in 2001, *Beowulf* in 2002, and *The Last Supper of Antonin Carême* in 2004; though only *The Tooth Fairy* continued to tour extensively beyond its premiere. In programming the OTPW’s inaugural production and the others that followed, the HPR played a significant role in the promotion of the new collective. *Istvan* was so well received by Calgary audiences that OYR decided to present the same production for its 2000-2001 season. The show toured central Canada over the next few years, and it was programmed by Vingoe for the very first MNTF in Ottawa in 2003. The MNTF has included an OTPW show in every subsequent edition in the nation’s capital: *Pinocchio* in 2005, *FPDS* in 2007, and *Don Juan* in 2009. In a press release distributed at the 2007 MNTF festival launch, Vingoe accentuated this image of the OTPW as being entirely unique by proclaiming: “There’s nobody else like these guys” and “They are a category unto themselves.”



OTPW warehouse used for storage, design, building, and painting (Ruano).

After creating this first show, the company moved to a train yard workshop in Calgary to continue their work. According to the members, the switch from the ranch to the city occurred simply because they had “exhausted the joys of living in a coal-heated shack” (MNTF Programme 2005, 23). In 2008, the puppet company moved into a warehouse space four times the size of the train yard workshop that would house the woodworking machines and provide storage space for characters and set pieces from previous productions. Prior to moving into this new warehouse, the company kept many of the materials for building puppets and set pieces in storage elsewhere, which made it difficult for them to recycle materials when necessary. It is significant to note that, although the company has been working in central Calgary for the last decade, its promotional material still makes reference to the Southern

Alberta ranch, as evidenced by a detailed mention in the 2009 MNTF programme, thereby cultivating indefinitely an impression of novelty and strangeness, therefore 'newness' (12).

The members of the OTPW collectively conceive each project as a group, as well as create the puppets, build sets, and perform in shows. Occasionally an outside director is invited to lead the group in their rehearsals, but the creation of any new work is always described as a collective effort to some degree. In festival and venue programmes, the creation of the piece and authorship is credited to the OTPW; the design and writing goes under the group umbrella, though any outside collaborators are acknowledged appropriately. Palmer describes the company's production process:

Somebody comes up with an idea, and then tells it to the other people. They like it, or hate it; they argue against it, or express enthusiasm for it, or agree to it resentfully, or threaten to quit over it, or whatever. The idea gets bashed around in this way until some plan for action emerges, if only temporarily. Then we set about executing the plan, whether it's carving a puppet or designing a light or flopping around on stage. Then we revise in the same way. It takes forever, and we are morally and spiritually broken by the end of the process. (Personal Interview)

Despite challenges inherent to working in this manner – which is perhaps most similar to the way in which collective creation theatres from the 1970s fashioned original plays, rather than collaborative processes of ECT and Catalyst –, the members of the OTPW believe there are advantages to working collectively and prefer the chaotic nature of their process. In the *CTR*

issue on Theatrical Devising, Palmer speaks to the appropriateness of working as a group for this particular approach to puppetry:

This gangness is central to the way we make puppet shows, because we too are forced by necessity to band together. There are no venerable puppet-show-making institutions to join and work our way up their ladders; this is a form that, worldwide, is being wholly re-invented. (18)

There are at least two ideas contradicting each other in this quotation. While it is true that there are no research institutions for puppetry in English Canada, there are certainly prospects and a long tradition of puppet making in many other parts of the world, particularly Europe and Asia. Even though Palmer acknowledges that there remains a global interest in puppet making, he does not seem to think there are viable opportunities for him and his colleagues beyond the work they create as a collective, or 'gang'. Hardly a 'necessity', OTPW members *choose* to create in isolation, relying on only each other for inspiration and support because they prefer this method of working. It is this self-imposed isolation that has helped create the sense, both within and outside the group, that they are one of the few puppet theatre collectives in existence. To further emphasize their isolation and independence, the members of the workshop only create theatre within the group; they do not seek out theatre roles elsewhere, and they have not recently collaborated with any other companies, though, as mentioned, occasionally a guest director, designer, or puppeteer joins the group for a specific production. It is therefore significant to note the extent to which relationships built with festivals across Canada have affected how the company's work is distributed post-conception.

DEVELOPMENT OF *FAMOUS PUPPET DEATH SCENES*

FPDS, directed by the OTPW and guest collaborator Tim Sutherland, was programmed for the inaugural PuSh in 2006. According to Palmer, “PuSh gave us some extra tech time and money for the premiere, as a result of a long relationship with [Executive Director Norman Armour] and a description of the show over the telephone” (Personal Interview). Having cultivated an audience that appreciates puppet theatre, PuSh, the HPR, and the MNTF are prepared to invite the OTPW to participate in their respective festivals year after year – in some cases, regardless of whether or not they have created a new production. Although these three festivals value the company for its work, they are also clearly aware that programming certain types of productions perceived as innovative or promoted as such will guarantee a successful box office for that show in particular and for the festival in general, thus continuing to promote and make use ‘newness’ as a concept.

Having firm roots in the festival system and enjoying continuing success with festivals across Canada and internationally, it is no surprise that Palmer states that the company members “wouldn’t take the trouble to build a show that wouldn’t be eligible for festivals” because it is within this festival circuit that the company began its work and continues to create work. He also explains that “festivals are most important in the early stages of a show, or in the early stages of penetrating a new market, when they need to create a reputation quickly in order to develop momentum.” This company has always had a vested interest in marketing their work and makes development its prime imperative: its first venture outside of Calgary was to the 2002 CINARS International Exchange in Montréal, an event that promotes Canadian

productions to international presenters and is the largest event of its kind in the country²⁷. More recently, company producer Grant Burns participated in the Pitch Session at the 2007 MNTF in Vancouver. While the other members of the company were in Mexico working on *Don Juan*, Burns pitched this same production to presenters from around the world by showing videos of his colleagues abroad. As mentioned earlier, the MNTF organizes this event – essentially a marketplace for the performing arts – in order for companies to promote work packaged as ‘product’ to visiting presenters, thereby increasing their opportunities across Canada and internationally. This component of the MNTF is advertised as a prime market for theatre distribution in English Canada, attracting both artists and industry professionals. In an e-mail circulated to members of the theatre community, MNTF Artistic Director Ken Cameron stated: “I’ve seen with my own eyes that about 50% of the work pitched gets some sort of tour or investment.” International presenters and curators are also given the chance to introduce their organizations and describe the type of work they would like to program.

FPDS continued to tour across Canada, to the United States, and, most recently, to France and Spain. Providing another example of how participating in festivals can lead to increased touring opportunities, Palmer reports that “at our performance at Festival TransAmériques we met Paul Tanguay, who is now our representative outside of North America; he got us the gigs in France.” In addition to acquiring both symbolic and economic capital by participating in one of these festivals, the environment is also constructive in terms of

²⁷ According to The Canadian Encyclopedia, CINARS “brings together delegates from many countries and representatives of different media to attend sample showcases” and promotes “Canadian artists on the foreign market” (Vachon).

making connections with presenters and agents. These meetings can either be achieved formally through industry activities, such as panel discussions and pitch sessions, or informally at the festival bar and through mutual acquaintances. For this reason, the MNTF Industry Series and the PuSh Assembly, in their own way, can be just as productive to a company – in terms of marketing a new work – as a spot in the main stage programming; though naturally it is best for a company to participate in both areas.

Unlike the ECT's production that focuses on the inventor Tesla and Catalyst that adapted a nineteenth-century novel, the OTPW production of *FPDS* cannot be connected with one recognizable source. Taken literally, the title of the play is somewhat misleading because the company did not make use of existing scripts, but rather chose to invent these puppet death scenes that were influenced or inspired by film, theatre, visual arts and poetry. Although most of the scenes are enacted without words, there are occasional spoken interjections by the play's narrator, an elderly stick-like puppet named Nathaniel Tweak, who regales his audiences on the subject of puppet death, interjecting between scenes with brief philosophical musings. In describing the imaginary ancient practice of creating effigies and, shortly afterward, destroying them, Tweak ponders:

What primordial craving drove [this ancient people] to do this? Perhaps it was to reassure themselves that there is an eternal soul. For the mangled thing could be reanimated in the next moment. Or perhaps it was to lash out at something for fear that there is no eternal soul and only darkness awaits. (*FPDS*)

The company also prepared the audience for the production during the 2007 MNTF by including notes in the programme, signed by Tweak:

Of course, a show is not an immutable thing; it changes with every audience, and these scenes were intended for very different audiences in very different places and times. To that extent, they must be viewed with a certain philosophical imagination. (MNTF Programme 2007, 10)



Tweak speaks directly to the MNTF audience onstage and through the programme. Found: <http://theoldtrouts.org/index.html>.

The production itself is filled with such ponderings – wordless or otherwise – that attempt to understand a puppet’s relationship with mortality. The question becomes complicated when one observes that puppets are, as defined by Steve Tillis in his book *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet*, theatrical figures perceived as being objects, yet imagined to have life (65). It is this dual nature that makes puppetry such fascinating philosophical study.

The setting for these philosophical musings is a relatively conventional-looking three-part puppet theatre set: there is a main structure at upstage centre that resembles a nineteenth-century small-scale marionette theatre placed at a high level for optimal audience

viewing, and there are two similar structures on either side that angle toward the centre stage. The middle structure is used for the majority of the scenes, while the structure at stage right is generally used as a speaking booth for Tweak, and sometimes scenes are wheeled out from offstage on carts. This proscenium style set is reminiscent of the street theatre stages used to host the Punch and Judy shows; in fact, the character Punch, or Punchinello, likely served as a point of origin and, if only thematically, influenced *FPDS*, considering that the nineteenth century version of Punch was reputed for his comical-violent tendencies and his ability to defy death (Blumenthal 154).

While some puppet traditions are based on the principle that puppeteers be concealed in order to place focus on puppet characters, author of *Puppetry: A World History* Eileen Blumenthal explains that some puppeteers “challenge the illusion by remaining visible when they have no business in the characters’ world” (72). Like the puppeteers in the latter category, the members of the OTPW have no qualms about being visibly present. In fact, in the final scene entitled *The Perfect Death Scene*, both Palmer and Balkwill crouch and shuffle onstage with Tweak as he performs his closing number on the fully lit stage. This approach might be considered post-modern by some, in that the actors are drawing attention to themselves in a metatheatrical sense and highlighting the difference between themselves and the objects they manipulate. It is not, however, new practice in puppetry, as the medium itself is self-referential.

In fact, the company members experiment with various styles of puppetry that have been used around the world, and apply them in different scenes when deemed appropriate.

For the most part, they make use of rod puppets, which are, as defined by Blumenthal, figures “controlled from below via a center post plus additional slender wands” (37). However, the company is most often recognized for their body puppets, and specifically their mask puppets, which are worn on the puppeteers’ heads. One example of a mask puppet is the soldier that rests on the shoulders of a puppeteer in the scene entitled *A Desperate Attempt*. Another type of body puppet in this production is found in the scene called *Henrique*, in which two horrid looking puppet children dressed in animal outfits destroy a Fisher Price farm scene: the puppets are a three feet high and are attached to the puppeteers by the feet and around the waist; their arms are controlled by rods that are handled by the puppeteers. They also utilize hand or glove puppets “moved by a puppeteer’s fingers inside the character’s head and arms” in the German-language scene called *Das Bipsy und Mumu Puppenspiel* (German for ‘Doll Play’). According to Blumenthal, these body puppets that envelop the handler in some way are also referred to as “parasite characters” (39).

Not all puppets are borrowed from known traditions, and certain puppets do not quite fit into conventional categories. OTPW member Don Brinsmead recounts the story of a puppet that was intended to walk but did not fulfill its function and thus ended up in a pile of debris in the workshop. Palmer gave the puppet a second look and realized that it was quite capable of floating, and subsequently it became the central figure in the popular scene entitled *King Jeff the Magnificent*, in which a young man takes a celestial voyage on New Year’s Eve. The possibility of flight is useful, explains Blumenthal, because in many fairy tales and mystical dramas “theatrical roles call for flying or at least rising off the ground” (88). Brinsmead also

described another puppet that had no mobility whatsoever and was used in the scene called *The Cruel Sea*, in which a stationary sea captain waits for time to pass, symbolized by the sound of a ticking clock, while another figure passes by outside a window. Another scene could be best described as a painting rather than an action sequence: in *The Last Whale*, the curtains are drawn back to reveal a two-dimensional piece that contains the large eye of a whale surrounded by a square of deep blue skin; the texture is thick and layered, like an oil painting. The only movement in the entire scene is the whale opening its eye very slowly, and then closing it again. Owing to such scenes, the production is at moments reminiscent of an art gallery, and each new scene has the same function as a painting or sculpture that appears two-dimensional until the elements are animated. However, unlike the experience of attending an art exhibit, the company has control over how much time the audience spends with each piece. It would seem that this company creates its most innovative and interesting work when experimenting with the limits of puppet mobility and the perceived need to animate such objects.

For the most part, the company has chosen not to rework significantly the content of *FPDS*, and, in this case, it seems that festival curators did not ask them to cut or rework the material. Revealing the ‘product mentality’ that at times inhabits the company, Palmer explained that, for this production, “critical response has been good, which means that we haven’t had much cause to modify based on critical suggestions.”²⁸ However, some changes were made based on audience response – which means that the company is, at times,

²⁸ Which also begs the question of whether or not the company would have made changes based solely on critical suggestions.

'reactionary' – as well as the members' desire to rework certain scenes. For the scene entitled *The Ballad of Edward Grue*, the text changed from a obscure rhyme in the original 2006 version at PuSh to a less ambiguous piece of writing that told more explicitly the story of Edward, who, as described in *The Globe and Mail* review, had "the unfortunate habit of dressing up like a deer – during hunting season" in 2007 (Byrne). It would appear that this change was made simply to clarify the narrative of this étude.

In other cases, the action within the scene did not change noticeably, but there were more details added in the background. As Palmer explains:

The set was greatly expanded once we had the chance to do a remount, for no other reason than that we had the money and time to do it the way we'd originally imagined. Many technical changes were made as we figured out how to do things more reliably or faster.

For example, after the original version at PuSh, in *The Cruel Sea*, the wallpaper in the background changed from subtle beige flowering to a more distinctive green leafy pattern: this is significant because, in this scene, pieces of a stationary puppet float away to reveal a figure that had blended into the background, rather like a smoke stain that surrounds the contours of an old painting. With this new design choice, the idea of the scene is expressed more clearly. In this case, changes were implemented because audience members sitting in the back of the theatre might not be able to see the action very clearly, particularly in larger venues; adding details or making the visual choices a little more deliberate helped with clarity. Just as Catalyst

took into account visibility in larger venues, the OTPW adapted its production in subtle ways to suit the numerous spaces on tour.

In this production, Palmer had a lot of freedom to experiment with the scenes in which he is alone onstage. According to collaborator Mitchell Craib, “Judd is always gauging the audience feedback on those scenes. When he loses the feel of that scene, he’ll decide it needs something else now.” This willingness to adapt scenes is present in the changes made to *Lucille Arabesque* between the 2006 version and the 2007 version at MNTF in Ottawa. Originally the scene consisted of Palmer peeling the soft-plaster layers from the white face of a smooth mask wrapped in cloth. The action was accompanied by light-hearted French cabaret music that sounds as though it is being played on an old record player; this music remained the same in the different incarnations. By 2007 at the MNTF, the visual aspects of the scene had changed entirely: a life-size old woman puppet is wheeled onstage in a bed, and Palmer enters the scene, cradles her head in his hands, and ensures that she is comfortable, as though he were discovering his mother or grandmother has just died. Kenderes notes that “Judd does it differently every time, and it still gets a reaction.” It is this personal touch that makes the production seem new, not only to the audience, but to the performers in the collective as well: this instance of ‘newness’ is really an attempt to keep the show ‘fresh’ with every new series of performances, so, depending on year and the venue, the production should appear different every time.

The performers’ tendency to refresh certain scenes based on audience response is made complicated by the recent inclusion of apprentice performers recruited by way of auditions: as

the development of the OTPW productions has been so specific to the members until this point, it is tempting to wonder how changing the company structure will affect the way in which shows are created in the future.

THE OLD TROUT PUPPET WORKSHOP EXPANDS

In his book *Experimental Theatre: From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*, James Roose-Evans suggests reasons why experimental theatre collectives are not often sustainable beyond the ten to fifteen year mark:

The degree of energy, commitment and sacrifice required for experiment and, above all, group-oriented works, is such that often a group runs out of steam and creative ideas dry up; or its original members find they want to marry, have children and a home, and this requires earning more money. (188)

This rings true in the present case: members of the OTPW are getting married and engaging with other projects beyond the theatre community, which has resulted in some members moving out of Calgary to different parts of the country. Palmer moved to British Columbia and was the first to step out of the performance role when the company created *Don Juan*, though he and his wife Mercedes Bátiz-Benét did contribute to the writing of the script.

Balkwill – who played the non-puppet title role in *Don Juan* in 2009, though not in subsequent runs – acknowledges that the company, having reached the ten-year mark, needs to undergo some changes. He feels “the company is beginning to stagnate” because audiences in Canada are getting to “know who the Trouts are and what to expect from the company.” As

such, they are conscious of the fact that they are no longer perceived as 'new', as well as the importance of this perception in the promotion of their work by and in the festival circuit. Balkwill does state, however, that the OTPW has not encountered the problematic situation with which most collectives struggle; that is, exhausting their talent pool by having the very same performers featured in every single production. Instead, by featuring hand-made puppets, the company members provide themselves with an ever-changing cast of characters. Nonetheless, for a company's style of performance to survive, it must be sustained by the original members of the company, or somehow handed down to a new generation of theatre practitioners. Roose-Evans points out that, for these types of companies, this course of action has not proven altogether effective:

[Experimental companies] failed to develop any sense of continuing tradition: their works were primarily performance scores rather than dramatic texts and so could only be enacted by the group which had created them. They failed to develop any way of transmitting performance knowledge from one generation to another. (188)

Rather than retire the company, its members have decided instead to train and incorporate into their productions the next generation of puppeteers in Canada. Starting with *Don Juan* and now with the company's remount production of *The Tooth Fairy*, the OTPW is beginning to include outside performers identified through an apprenticeship program and auditions. Its members transfer production information directly to these new performers, acting as directors and instructors, a transition envisioned before the spring of 2008, as evidenced by Palmer's statement in the *CTR*: "[We] dream of an Old Trout Puppet Workshop, in days to come, full of

chubby descendents, gathered around bronze statues of the heroic founders, stomping the ancient stomp, and howling the ancient howls, to proclaim their lineage to the heavens” (19). While the core members do not plan to leave the artistic direction role, they are keen to hire young actors to go on tour with some of the productions. In a 2009 interview, Palmer reports more explicitly: “We are drifting into a new stage of our company’s history – the founders are staying home, and sending other people on the road in their stead; how we integrate the new performers into the creation process is matter of experimentation at this stage.”

This is a promising attitude in the continuing tradition of collaborative theatre: in line with the spirit of the form, the original members of the collective are willing to see their work evolve and develop in the hands of their eventual successors, thus sustaining both an impression of ‘newness’ and ‘tradition’ through these young collaborators. Furthermore, the apprentice performers are ushered into the business almost immediately and are subsequently provided with a real sense of what it means to work within the festival system.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SHAPING 'NEWNESS' IN FESTIVAL MARKETING

In the arts, the avant-garde defines itself as 'cutting-edge,' as breaking rules in order to discover new ways of doing things. But a close examination of the history of the avant-garde reveals mostly replays and variations on known themes and procedures rather than actual newness. (Schechner, Performance Studies 250)

Over the last ten to fifteen years, ECT, Catalyst, and the OTPW have participated in the English Canadian festival circuit to a great deal of success through the accumulation of different forms of symbolic capital – such as peer-assessed awards, attention from the media, and invitations to perform in other festivals and at regional theatres – all the while maintaining an impression of 'newness' that appeals to presenters both nationally and internationally. This concept of 'newness' is shaped and constantly redefined by the festivals and the companies themselves by way of marketing, promotional material, industry activities, and consumerist discourse. This much is perhaps most evident in the festival programmes and brochures that package productions through the usage of catch phrases that serve to describe shows geared not only toward audiences that attend the festival for entertainment, but also and more importantly toward presenters that are seeking new work for future seasons. In this way, festival curators act as both 'arbiters of culture' that are reputed for good taste and their ability to seek out quality work for their own festivals, as well as 'industry professionals' that are aware that the chosen work should continue to tour and should also be suitable for programming that aims to reach a wide audience base.

By meticulously using 'newness' as a marketing discourse to frame new works as being both exciting and accessible, large-scale festivals in English Canada are reaching an expanding audience and presenters that value new work, provided the work maintains a comfortable balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In his book *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, Mike Sell describes a similar phenomenon that occurred in the visual arts discipline:

The two modes of the public artist – as suffering producer of art and as embodied, petted, scandalous commodity – crossed circuits in the 1960s with [...] 'neo-Dadaist' artists and trends. The consequence of this crossing is a mode of performativity that enabled *the mass marketing of the avant-garde concept*. (178, my emphasis)

Sell uses the example of Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* screen prints that involve taking an everyday object and rendering it into something 'uncanny', a term Sigmund Freud uses to describe "something which is secretly familiar" (Freud 17). While Freud explains that 'the uncanny' is generally associated with that which is unpleasant or repellent, since it is that which is familiar that is the most threatening, Sell's use of the word illustrates an object or an event that attracts people through its sense of the familiar while holding their interest with its unusual aspects. This same notion holds true for festival theatre that embodies Schechner's notion of the 'current avant-garde' by drawing on once-progressive subjects, techniques, and genres – some of which can be traced back to the historical avant-garde and most of which are recognizable in Western culture – to create something relatively new in a contemporary context. This concept is echoed by playwright and blogger Sterling Lynch, who states that

“humans prefer efficient creativity and, for the most part, they prefer the familiar. The perpetual return to the previously fashionable allows people to be novel and familiar at the same easy time.”

In order to subsist in a primarily consumerist society that values economic capital, festivals in English Canada are keen to popularize and exploit the notion of ‘newness’ in order to sell effectively the work they choose to program. ECT, before even creating its maiden production *Brilliant!*, considered ways to market the show to audiences and presenters they hoped to attract. Catalyst, in the process of creating a trilogy of gothic musicals, secured its long-term reputation in the festival circuit and in regional theatres by pursuing a relatively unique form that combines known genres. The OTPW, having found success in the festival environment, capitalized on its collective creation style of puppetry to sustain the perception that it is the sole puppet company of its kind in English Canada. ‘Newness’, then, is essentially a marketing technique disguised as an aesthetic concept that, in turn, has a significant effect on the creation and further development of new work created by independent companies. The term refers to a series of tactics employed by festival and companies in order to achieve a common goal: the longevity of contemporary works of theatre promoted as ‘new’. As such, there is no real institutional tension between the curators and the artists, since all three companies have stated they create work specifically for festivals and the companies are reliant on festivals for further touring and marketing opportunities.

It is important to be able to distinguish between the ‘art of marketing’ and the ‘art in itself,’ while recognizing that there are links between the two, in order to understand from

whence these trends come. In fact, with this current focus on touring and collaboration between artists, marketing is shaping not only the way art is viewed by its public, but, thanks to festivals and their curators, how it is produced by its creators.

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