

**HIVE – clawing at theatre’s coffin
in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside**

HIVE, produced by Progress Lab at The Chapel funeral home, Vancouver, B.C.,
November 9-11, 2006

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for the Canadian Theatre Review

In Carl Wilson’s essay “The Party Line: Toronto’s Turn Toward a Participatory Aesthetics” he provides examples of artists who are managing to dismantle the distinction between producer and consumer, creating work where artistic import is manifest through inducing encounters between people. Wilson’s examination of this tendency in Toronto is, however, lacking examples from the theatre community. Too bad he wasn’t able to check out Vancouver’s HIVE, a four day event staged by eleven theatre companies at the The Chapel funeral home in the downtown east side.

To understand this turn toward the participatory it’s useful to take a look at the work of political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and their two books *Empire* and *Multitude* where they identify a shift in the regimes of production from a modern Fordist factory approach to postmodern networked, communicative approach to immaterial forms. The fact is the world is – more and more – better understood as a function of interrelated networked webs where all sort of production occurs collaboratively, often accidentally or contingently.

Technology evolves, the way we are evolves and the way we explore our states of being evolve and art is nothing but an exploration of being. The question for theatre, then, is what technologies are still being employed that are unable to reveal the truth of our current situation as one of networked, communicative and immaterial ontologies. Three problematic technologies come to mind, in this

respect, being character, plot and conflict - technologies that most practitioners have such a difficult time doing without.

HIVE was inspired by Swarm, a visual arts event that brought together a bunch of Vancouver galleries for one night. Gallery-goers were invited to walk around the neighborhood and sample a wide variety of artistic offerings. These kinds of events are widespread and offer a challenge to theatre with the rigid restrictions placed on the audience with respect to time and space: you have to sit still and stare in one direction for a period usually in excess of 90 minutes. Wanting to transcend this rigidity as well as incorporate socializing – another aspect of the visual art experience that has been so difficult for theatre – was the impetus behind Hive. Eleven theatre companies each occupied a different space in a downtown eastside funeral home and created isolated, succinct and brief experiences for the audience. While the networked form that was attempted here wasn't especially successful – the particular pieces did little to address the fact that there were other performances occurring elsewhere in the building – a few of the individual pieces managed to respond to the atypical venue and viewing pattern of the audience to create small events that communicated new ways of being together while consuming something that still looked a lot like theatre.

For such a so-called collaborative form as theatre, the experience of consumption for an audience is a lonely isolating business with not even the unwrapping of candy permitted let alone cell phones and animated chatter. The visual arts and specifically gallery culture operates on the opposite premise: the more discussion the better and if it happens while standing in front of the work then fantastic. And if your cell phone rings, by all means answer it and let your friends know where you're at, what's happening and who else is there. Not so in the stifled confines of the black box.

The challenge is to create work that can fit a looser and participatory paradigm and we are just beginning to understand the wealth of opportunity this offers. Taking a look at three of the most exciting of the HIVE performances, all of which abandon – to some degree or another - the three dusty technologies: plot, character and conflict can give us a glimpse of the possibilities for new, delicate and very sophisticated technologies that are able to offer us more essential encounters.

The Chop's HIVE contribution was 2 Truth+1 Lie=Proof. Each audience member was given a Walkman and experienced their own personal and private narration, which the two performers – Anita Rochon and her father Paul, playing themselves – were unable to hear. At times, the narration instructed us to cue the actors by raising our hands in small interactive moments, reversing the typical dynamic where the audience is expected to do absolutely nothing to alter the course of events. Interestingly, director Emelia Symington Fedy approached me during the evening to worriedly confess that because of repeated playings the tapes were beginning to stretch and drift out of sync, audiences members – more and more – receiving the narration at different times and, therefore, offering cues at different times. I assured her that, as a member who was slightly lagging behind, the mystery generated by seeing other audience members raising their hands contributed another exciting layer of drama.

In a nod to classical theatre, the piece appropriated scenes from David Auburn's Proof, a story about a reconciliation between a daughter and a father. This, we learn through our personal narration, mirrors the reconciliation between Anita and her father occurring before our very eyes through their collaboration on the piece. The scenes of the play are placed nicely, which is so say, far in the background, with Mr. Rochon's efforts at acting much more exciting to watch than the acting itself. Here was some scintillating theatre: a father flies across the country to generously and stiltedly perform in his daughter's creation. His wooden

performance, then, becomes beautiful, much more beautiful and moving than had it been expertly executed. It's in these kinds of ruptures where the classical notions of virtuosity give way and we see, instead, virtuosity in conception that forces us into an encounter with something real actually unfolding in front of us. The utilization of the real, then, becomes a new, very volatile and unstable kind of technology. Heavy-handed utilization abounds with the big – but unfounded – fear being the drift into some kind of “reality theatre.” While this may be a danger, the key conventions of “reality” shows: exploitation, prurience and voyeurism simply need to be avoided and other things like honesty, openness and trust, emphasized.

In another beautiful moment, Anita, in her narration, told us they will each leave the room where the recording is taking place while the remaining person will tell us three things they've never told the other, including one lie. We might assume that, now that the piece is up on its feet, they've both heard the other's secret but we can't be certain– perhaps Emelia Symington Fedy edited the audio and, as the two performers stand before us, we are granted some privileged information. In any case, this is the fiction they create and the plot thickens, with a very new type of dramatic irony putting the audience in a uniquely privileged position.

Carl Wilson nicely frames the problem with character in his essay *The Party Line*, “Our understanding of the self has changed. ...if the self is perceived to be in many ways a social fiction, always partial, incomplete, transitory and intersubjectively constructed, it becomes comical to think of ‘expressing yourself.’ Postmodernity has encouraged us to think of ourselves as bricolage, and all communication as a minor-key farce of misinterpretation” (Wilson, 2006) So If expressing yourself is comical, then perhaps ‘tragic’ is the best way to describe theatre's reliance on character as an object that we, as audience, experience in a (false) totality. Aristotelian unities, while having been nominally shaken loose when it comes to the temporal and spatial – contemporary theatre can now easily

conceive of representing multiple and coexisting times and places - there has been little movement in the realm of character with almost all depictions unable to take into account the fluidity and contingency of being. While the interactions between the characters on the stage may contain the representation of bricolage and misinterpretation, there lacks, for the most part, actual deployment of bricolage and misinterpretation. For example, we see the eponymous character in Marie Brassard's Jimmy, transit through multiple identities but we're still always offered the false possibility of seeing the characters from a whole, complete, permanent and detached position – even as they cycle through fragmentary states. The fragments are wholly visible, each a self-contained and individual expression. Even acknowledging the real impossibility of all audience members agreeing on a particular interpretation of any given aspect of a performance, the fixity of the classical notion of character narrows down these opportunities to a scant few and most people will agree that Romeo is an idiot.

I run into a consistent problem when directing classical trained actors. They are keen to find some weird thing they call a 'character arc' and claim that the human experience of emotions travels a linear path, insisting that the character must move from 'sad' to 'sadder' to 'saddest'. If I throw in a 'euphoric' between 'sadder' and 'saddest' they claim that it's not natural. Beyond it being a dull dramatic choice, the linear progression is bogus and, while the claims that such hairpin turns are 'difficult to motivate' may be true, the problem here is a very modernist understanding of character motivation. In the era when all aspects of life were thought to be able to be rationalized and parsed down to their constituent parts and efficiently executed, we also had the utopian belief that all actions could be excavated for their unconscious motivations and the self would reveal itself as totally transparent to our understanding. Well fuggedaboutit, the beat-by-beat understanding of character motivation is as inefficient and outdated as the Fordist factory it so resembles. What we need now is an understanding of character motivation where actions proceed from unexpected and, most importantly,

unknowable, places. Unknowable, it must be said, even to the actor. And the best way to do that is for the actor to either be herself or be nobody.

Newworld Theatre presented Adrienne Wong and Marcus' Youseff's *Inside Out*, with Camyar Chai. Their piece was performed in the embalming room, and one of only a few that incorporated the location, another available technology well-known to many in Vancouver, the home of many site-specific works. But site-specificity on its own, is never enough with so many of these kinds of work using the location as merely a backdrop – a wonderfully designed backdrop but a backdrop, nonetheless – that tends to only background the performers, the audience still observing the action from a neutral zone.

Newworld theatre gently confronted us with our culture's squeamishness with the inevitability of death. The charming Adrienne Wong coaxed us gently into facing the facts of embalming, using a jelly donut as an example as she spooned out the soft insides. She then attempted to do the same with an egg. Things, however, don't go so well, as she applied too much pressure and some of the horror of death took a quick peek at us.

She and her co-host, Youseff, keen not to offend our sensibilities quickly distracted us, guiding us out of the room and into a cramped stairwell where he projected shots from Edward Gorey's macabre alphabet as Adrienne sang along accompanied by her ukulele ("A is for Albert who fell down some stairs... etc.") After a bit of that we're guided back into the room and, lying naked and dead, a thin sheet covering his privates, is Camyar Chai. It's a moving moment as Adrienne and Marcus introduce us to their dead friend. The surprise of his presence is hilarious, disconcerting and sad.

But, there's little time to dwell on sentiment – we're here to embalm. As they prepare for the job Adrienne suddenly has something in her eye. She moves

quickly to a small sink attached to the wall behind us and gives her eyes a squirt, the drainage pipe of the sink emitting a small but horrifying puddle of blood. Suddenly Camyar jumps off the table, admits he's not only not dead but also not naked and requests that we get naked so he can take a group photo. The audience experiences the kind of unease you would expect from this kind of request and, in my case, I go for it, suspecting that this might be the only chance I'll get to be naked with Magnetic North artistic director Mary Vingoe, who also happened to be in the audience and who I've had a crush on for a few years.

The performers were introduced as themselves and the action always progressed easily and simply, an association of meanings accumulating gently over the course of the work. There was no character development as such, nothing really happened that could be considered plot, nobody was pretending that anything had happened; things simply happened to us as audience, not at all to them as characters.

But there were still startling and witty hairpin turns: the shattered egg followed by the gentle singing of Gorey, the sudden puddle of blood followed by Camyar happily leaping off the table. The themes were small and simple but proved, undeniably, that less is more. Direct address, no fourth wall, no character, a loose associative series of incidences and a final interactive challenge fostered an openness and an honesty that was delightfully sophisticated while remaining perfectly simple. The event itself was an open-ended system that lent the spectator a more intensive, meaningful role in the process.

In Theatre Conspiracy's 21st Century Peepshow we observe a woman in a faux living room through a window while standing in a small booth. She is watching early footage of the Olsen Twins as they sing some demented Christmas song. Mindless consumption comes to mind as we absorb the scene. Then one of the twins turns on her own television and we see what she's watching: the famous

footage of the American war crime in Iraq where we hear and see the infrared footage of a soldier casually vapourizing three men, including one who had been injured. The horror of war, the criminally disproportionate amount of technological power possessed by America and the videogame-like distance it affords the soldier is terrifying and riveting. Suddenly the actor, whirls around and confronts us with a wide-eyed and very open stare. I was tempted to kiss her, but that's a quirk particular to me. We're all confronted at that moment by the banality of war, the complicity of our inaction but, at the same time, the impossibility of action. What exactly am I supposed to do? And there the piece seems to end, leaving me completely satisfied. Until I'm led into an adjoining booth to be confronted by a live video feed of the face of the subsequent person to experience the work. It's an interesting game until the realization hits that I had just been observed by the person ahead of me. My mind quickly retraced my reaction, making sure I didn't say or do anything stupid. Thank God, I think, I didn't try to kiss the actor. There are multiple levels of observation that feed-back into an infinity of culpability: I'm watching someone react to the disconcerting switch from the cloying Olsen Twins to the horrible Iraq footage while I frantically rewatch myself in my mind from the imagined perspective of the person who had watched me. Am I a good person? What does my reaction say about me? How is anyone supposed to react in a world where the Olsen sisters and vapourized Iraqi men can sit so comfortably together in the same moment? Is there anything I can do to intervene or am I simply condemned to always only watch, watch, watch? How can I let this happen on my watch? How can I not?

These examples, three of the best of HIVE, confidently dispense with classical technologies of plot, character and conflict, managing to keep the action – to varying degrees – interactive, dependant on exciting contingencies and fluid. We're implicated in the process, the work engaging directly with our culpability, responsibility and presence. Admittedly, all of this is easier to do when the

product is 10 minutes long and the audience ranges from a single person to, at most, ten.

The challenge now is to stretch these small experiments and create full-length work that remains committed to these same ideals. The temptation to retreat into plot, character and conflict will be strong, particularly during that rocky period in any process when everything seems wobbly and questionable. Staying the course would be the challenge but given the exciting success of these three experiments, I think it's not only doable but, at this point, to do anything else is to simply retrace tired old steps and, therefore, for anyone who actually cares about the future of theatre, simply not an option.

But as important as the question of these works' ability to transcend the technologies of character, plot and conflict is the question of the experience of the audience as they participated in the whole HIVE event. The interactivity of the individual pieces contributed to a more open, festive and communicative experience outside the actual performances: the audience found itself together, relating to the work and each other, asking for advice on which show to see, how to gain access and where to go. In this way, the work became participatory on another level, with the party that followed as relevant as the work itself. Returning to Hardt and Negri's idea of the networked production, we can see, that HIVE did, in fact produce new possibilities of being together while experiencing performance. To take it to the next level, the challenge would be to see if the individual performances could be rendered permeable to the other performances, without losing anything of their own function and integrity, shifting the experience from one of discrete wholes to the interacting of shifting assemblages. But, in any case, HIVE gave us an opportunity to appreciate the fact that, while in a previous era, art shifted from being a mirror to reflect our experience to a hammer with which to shape it, we now have the possibility of art as a circuit to

connect us and, in these new technologies of connection, new ways of being together become immanent.

Works Cited:

Wilson, Carl. "The Party Line: Toronto's Turn Toward a Participatory Aesthetics from The State of the Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto, Coach House Books, 2006.