Best in Show: Reality Theatre, Performative Authenticity, and the 2015 Federal Election

by Marcus Youssef

Generally speaking, the performance was structured as follows:

• There were three main characters (well, five technically, but two of them had no chance of winning the game. They were more like supporting roles in subplots, with character arcs that served as a counterpoint to the main action—of interest to niche audiences but largely irrelevant to the majority).

• All five characters, main and supporting, were based on real people. They were also performed by those real people.

• Like a current of contemporary theatre, the show was structured in the form of a game. The outcome wasn’t certain, and, by definition, one of the characters had to win. Winning was each main character’s fundamental objective, and there was a clear process by which that could be achieved.

• It was a durational piece, eleven weeks long, in fact. It began, as all performances of its kind do, with an event that is purely symbolic, the dropping of a “writ,” and it concluded after the performance’s only major participatory element, in which each member of the audience older than eighteen and a resident of Canada within the last five years cast a vote. This vote determined the performance event’s winner. Think Hunger Games meets The Bachelorette, except what we were choosing was a set of policies and people to oversee their implementation—a decision that will hugely influence the course of both our own lives and the country’s future over the next four years.

• Engagingly, the performance event’s form allowed audience members to identify their own protagonists and antagonists. Each main character had the same relationship to the overall narrative structure: they attempt to win. Who each of us saw as the hero, or best stand-in for ourselves, was entirely subjective and dependent on our own personal beliefs, values, and histories.

• You don’t need me to tell you which character won.

• It was one of the better of these kind of shows that I’ve seen in some time.

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I am an artist and writer whose work is generally pretty political, and I’ve consistently devoted energy to both formal politics and activism over the last decade. I also often feel frustrated by the degree to which what we do—broadly, write and make theatre—is more or less perceived to be totally separate from what goes on in the real world. It’s no accident that latest buzzword to fill the pockets of many a merry band of roving consultants is engagement.

That’s what I feel during election periods—like I am watching colleagues attempting to put on a crazy, huge, unwieldy show that is on the more alternative side of Canadian contemporary practice, at least stylistically. With massive budgets! And actors who aren’t trained!

This is, I think, why I find elections simultaneously so exciting and frustrating. They are one of the few periods when I regularly hear the word theatre spoken in mainstream discourse, usually by pundits analyzing campaigns as they unfold. The references are almost always disparaging—a critique of candidates’ bombast or unconvincing overacting, or of failed attempts to make political arguments that are dubious at best and outright falsehoods at worst. This seems like a pretty accurate reflection of the way theatre is perceived in mainstream culture: cute in the embarrassing way and, like the little plays that nice but overbearing high school drama geeks used to stage, fundamentally false. In theatre terms, this critique assumes a nineteenth- and twentieth-century idea of what the form is. I think it is a view shared by the vast majority of
our fellow citizens, even those who still attend live theatre, most of which still plays by formal rules defined long before digital media fundamentally altered our ideas about performance, authenticity, and narrative (fourth wall, no direct address, no improvisation, audience as passive spectator, etc.).

What these popular references never do is demonstrate an understanding of how deeply some contemporary theatre practitioners are wrestling with the same super-current questions and challenges about how to engage their audiences, much like the politicians and managers running electoral campaigns. That’s what I feel during election periods—like I am watching colleagues attempting to put on a crazy, huge, unwieldy show that is on the more alternative side of Canadian contemporary practice, at least stylistically. With massive budgets! And actors who aren’t trained!

The success of the 2015 Canadian federal election as a durable dramatic performance had, for me at least, something to do with the fact that the character I identified as the villain (a particularly despicable one), Stephen Harper, was defeated. That said, I think voter turnout, 68.5 per cent, the highest level in more than two decades, is also evidence that this election had a relatively high level of engagement. In part, I think this is because the narrative that unfolded was, in many ways, very satisfying. This election show’s dynamic and satisfying narrative tropes included (1) a total reversal of Liberal and New Democratic Party (NDP) standing from the election’s onset, (2) the toppling of a Prime Minister increasingly seen as dictatorial and despot after ten years in power, (3) the return of the NDP to its traditional status as third party, (4) the dawn of a new, supposedly gentler era in Canadian public life, led by the engaging, tougher-than-you-thought son of our greatest modern Prime Minister (he knows how to box!) and the inauguration of a next-generation Canadian government that “looks like us.”

In hindsight, like most good drama, the outcome seems inevitable. But it wasn’t. I believe what occurred within the confines of this rule-defined performance was the result of how each of the campaigns responded to fundamental questions about the nature of performance that are central to my work and that of many practitioners of contemporary theatre and live-art makers. I am thinking in particular about three issues:

• The scripted versus the improvised. As Jenn Stephenson has pointed out in her blog, Upsurges of the Real, recent attempts by theatre practitioners to maximize the verisimilitude of our work involves invoking numerous signifiers of “reality”—like characters derived from the real-life personas of the actors who are playing them, use of verbatim text, and incorporation of both improvisation and improvisational idiom into pieces that are in fact mostly scripted. I’ve been touring a reality-derived, partly improvised debate show, Winners and Losers, which I wrote/devised with James Long, off and on for the last three years. It makes liberal use of these techniques. It also partially relies on the audience to determine which of the real-life characters is winning. Like much of what happens in the performance of Winners and Losers, this dynamic relationship between what is planned (or scripted) and what ostensibly “real” people improvise in response to events that occur unpredictably, dovetails pretty closely with actual campaigns, in which politicians and their advisors plan a strategy (a kind of script) and then make a choice to alter it or not, based on their analysis of always contested real-life circumstances.

• The question of authenticity in performance. Authenticity, and its related phenomenon, presence, are constructed and dependent on cultural signifiers of what constitutes truthful speech and believability. Achieving it is also central to the success of many of the performance pieces I’m most interested in both seeing and making. Many of those pieces also feature actors who are playing representations of their own real-life “selves,” and in some of these the performers are
people who are not trained as actors. In this form an audience member’s experience of what is and isn’t authentic, and particularly what is or isn’t believable in the performance of someone ostensibly being “real” and “themselves,” becomes layered and complicated.

- Critically, how the two issues above intersect. What if the characters are in fact real people with little to no training or interest in the practice of acting, and whose various target audiences respond to a fairly wide variety of authenticity markers? If circumstances demand a change in narrative, do the actors/persons change their performance in response to a new or evolving storyline? Do they have the skills to do so? What happens to audience/voter perceptions of authenticity and different performers/candidates’ experiences of authenticity when they do alter their performances?

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The most obvious failure to nurture a dynamic performative relationship to circumstances as they evolved during the campaign belonged to the NDP. The narrative the party began with was absolutely clear. Riding high in the polls as the writ was dropped, NDP strategists banked on a story that seemed drawn almost directly from the Conservative war room’s (Department of Dramaturgy?) attempt to define him as a lightweight and as fundamentally unready to lead.

This led to fairly specific performance choices for their leader, Tom Mulcair. The attitude they asked him to adopt was seeming above the fray, reasonable, more or less already in power, and—that most presumptive conglomeration of high-status character attributes—prime ministerial. The big challenge they faced, in my view, was the gulf between this persona and Mulcair’s natural public performance style and rhythms. The NDP leader is universally known as combative, brusque, dismissive, and sometimes caustic. These are the natural, real-life strengths that made him the indisputable ruler of question period.

The impact of this gulf first struck me during the initial English-language debate, in which Mulcair’s performance was universally critiqued as disengaged, inauthentic, and ineffective. I said this in a Facebook thread I posted afterwards:

‘Trudeau’s relative skill in a debate and working a crowd is not an accident. He taught drama. He has performance skills. And while I don’t think he’s super-great at it—too much interrupting, too much finger wagging (what is it with finger wagging???)—at least he’s in the ballpark (May is better but she has a lot less message pressure on her, so I imagine it’s easier). Forgive the presumption here, but perhaps like in [then BC NDP leader] Adrian Dix’s unexpected loss here, the NDP seems to fail to recognize that relaxation, spontaneity, rhetorical agility and likability—that ol’ seeming “human” thing—are simply skills. With an investment of time, they can be learned. How one does so, like all art-making, will be unique and emerge from the individual doing it. With commitment and work, I believe most people can. But I know that you have to start by recognizing that it’s an actual thing.

Mulcair’s not an actor. And his team asked him to play tactics and attitudes of authenticity that aren’t naturally his. And so his performance sucked. It felt leaden, unspontaneous, and without real energy. As a non-actor, he has a limited range. And his team failed to understand this. In that context what surprised me most was that, as the election narrative began to change and the NDP’s poll numbers began to drop (in Quebec, maybe because of the niqab issue, but also across the country for other reasons), and it became clear that the “anybody but Harper” vote was moving to Trudeau and the Liberals, the NDP campaign made no attempt to shift their strategy. This was true in relation to Mulcair’s performance. He stuck with the same anti-dramatic, aloof, about-to-be-coronated posture right to the end.

It was also true about the story he was telling. Even during the campaign’s dying days Mulcair stubbornly stuck to a text that had been written weeks before, in response to narrative conditions so different they essentially belonged to a different script. In the face of both internal and external polls pointing to the exact devastation that occurred, Mulcair said this on the evening of the election, in Ottawa: “Tomorrow, with your help, New Democrats will prove that Canadians are ready for change. Ontarians know that it is New Democrats who defeat Conservatives’” (qtd. in Galloway). It doesn’t get a lot more inauthentic than that. Mulcair
Harper’s brand is, by definition, anti-performative. It is his clear disdain for performance itself that communicates to his audience both his trustworthiness and his authenticity as a guy who will simply do what needs to be done, no matter how dull or unpopular.

However, in addition to their cynical and ultimately failed attempt to change the story of the campaign to be about the threat posed by so-called Muslim values, the Conservatives did change one aspect of their leader’s performance events as the campaign marched toward its climax. In a truly bizarre and seemingly desperate attempt to refocus the campaign on their core message of fiscal competence and experience, they subjected their leader to that most arcane and traditionally left-wing of theatrical traditions: agitprop.

Do you remember? Day after day in the final week of the campaign, Harper appeared in Conservative strongholds, in front of a strange little box set, with a prop cash register. Aided by local supporters who generally seemed as uncomfortable with carnival Barker aesthetics as the Prime Minister, Harper woodenly attempted to perform lines from a simplistic script about the alleged costs of Trudeau’s campaign promises. Each staccato denunciation of Trudeau’s purported tax hikes was punctuated by the local supporter stiffly slapping down $20 bills as Harper rhymed off the various tax credits for families that he said the Liberals would cancel.

From a performance perspective, the effect was disturbing. To move from a long-standing and highly successful rejection of theatricality in almost any form whatsoever to an utterly mannered, inauthentic enactment in the style of a low-end game show almost felt like waving a large white flag. For me, it was clear evidence that this particular protagonist’s story had quickly morphed into a tragedy. The choice of a co-host for Harper’s penultimate campaign rally a day or two later—the crown prince of hubris, Doug Ford—seemed clear confirmation of this.

Which leaves us with our final protagonist, and now Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau (speaking of crown princes). I stand by the criticisms of Trudeau’s performance style I articulated in my Facebook post above, and am inclined to throw in a few others: there’s a mannered, private-school boy distance in his speaking tone that I find irritating, maybe in part because I come from a similar class. At the same time, I think there is no question that the combination of Trudeau’s relative skill as a performer and the way in which his upbeat public image supported a narrative of “real change” contributed to a win that far exceeded anything any pundit thought possible at the beginning of the campaign.

The climactic evidence of this potent intertwining of performance and message was a political ad the Liberals released three or four days before 19 October (Liberal Video). While it’s debatable how much effect political TV ads have in the post-cable age, the dramatic impact of this particular text was, for me, undeniable. Trudeau stood in a large hall, speaking to a massive crowd of cheering Liberal supporters. Framed by a direct rejection of what he described as Harper’s “politics of fear and division,” Trudeau invoked both the grand themes of his campaign and the issues that had developed during it—desire for change, Harper’s insistence on his own inherent superiority as a leader, racial and cultural tolerance and compassionate values, and investment in infrastructure and support for the middle class. The speech is punctuated by very specific images. As the Liberal candidate ties Harper to an ideology that asks Canadians to “fear each other,” the ad cuts to a very brown man in his 40s, more or less alone in the frame, looking directly at the camera and holding a Trudeau campaign sign.

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I remember reading about when the ad was shot. It was a week or so before it was released, when I presume the campaign’s polling was telling them that what no one predicted would be possible at the beginning of the campaign—a Liberal majority—was now within reach. The ad’s penultimate image confirms this. The campaign’s previous ads all finished with an image of the Liberal logo, and the hashtag of their campaign slogan, #realchange. This ad inserted another image before the campaign’s unifying brand. It was a single word: “Ready.”

When I watched this ad, tears came to my eyes (and I’m embarrassed to admit that). I felt moved by Trudeau’s passionate, engaged, early Obama–like performance. I felt inspired by the way
he seemed to authentically feed off the excitement of the crowd of thousands watching him. I felt grateful for the articulation of values that rejected a view that implies that I, an Arab-Canadian, am an outsider, or some kind of potential threat. I am no Liberal supporter. I believe that it’s in the party’s DNA to campaign from the left and govern from the right. And I thought, now I know who the hero is. This is the show’s climax. And clearly he’s going to win.

I was right. As is obvious in hindsight, Trudeau and the Liberals triumphed massively, to a degree far greater than anyone predicted. It would be more than presumptuous to suggest that this was solely because of the now Prime Minister’s facility with performance. But the suggestion that this position somehow made him unelectable in Quebec is clearly untrue. Trudeau was equally dismissive of both the Conservatives’ data-driven targeting of a single woman who wished to wear the face covering during a portion of her citizenship ceremony, and their bizarre, xenophobic, and equally Orwellian “Barbaric Cultural Practices” snitch line. Trudeau even made a point of staging appearances with Muslim Canadians to signal his opposition, a narrative thread that climaxed in his decision to include in his victory speech a story about his encounter with a grateful, young, Muslim mother who wears hijab. Despite all this, the Liberals took forty seats in Quebec. While this is also the result of a complicated series of vote splits, it demonstrates clearly that a performed stance in favour of minority rights for Muslims did not make Mulcair and the NDP unelectable.

It’s also possible that this was merely an attempt to shore up their base, which they knew would react positively to these culture-war wedge triggers.

Notes
1 By the end Harper felt almost Lear-like, except that two of his heir-apparent daughters, Regan-John Baird and Cordelia-James Moore, had removed themselves from the tragedy before it played out, leaving only Goneril-Jason Kenney to trot around the country pretending to sell the old man’s wares.

2 Recent Canadian examples include Itai Erdal’s How to Disappear Completely, Carmen Aguirre’s Blue Box, my own How Has My Love Affected You?, Ravi Jane’s Brimful of Asha, and Pamela Sinha’s Happy Place. International companies have more regularly used non-actors to provoke an increased sense of verisimilitude in their audiences. Here I’m thinking of the work of Germany’s Rimini Protocol, Belgium’s Pol Hayvert, and—recently—Yael Farber’s international collaborative creation with rape victims from India, Nirbhaya.

3 In no way do I mean to understate the integrity and importance of Mulcair’s principled stance on the niqab issue. But the suggestion that this position somehow made him unelectable in Quebec is clearly untrue. Trudeau was equally dismissive of both the Conservatives’ data-driven targeting of a single woman who wished to wear the face covering during a portion of her citizenship ceremony, and their bizarre, xenophobic, and equally Orwellian “Barbaric Cultural Practices” snitch line. Trudeau even made a point of staging appearances with Muslim Canadians to signal his opposition, a narrative thread that climaxed in his decision to include in his victory speech a story about his encounter with a grateful, young, Muslim mother who wears hijab. Despite all this, the Liberals took forty seats in Quebec. While this is also the result of a complicated series of vote splits, it demonstrates clearly that a performed stance in favour of minority rights for Muslims did not make Mulcair and the NDP unelectable.

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Works Cited


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Playwright, performer, and director Marcus Youssef’s plays include Winners and Losers, Ali and Ali & the aXes of Evil, Jabber, A Line in the Sand, Adrift, and How Has My Love Affected You? He is Artistic Director of Vancouver’s Newworld Theatre and co-founder of the East Vancouver production hub PL1422.