

NKARC Letter-- 2013 Summer (1)

Nonkilling and Humour in the Arts

Dispatch on Humour in Theatre by Lib Spry

In 2006, courtesy of the Canada Council, I travelled to France to study with Philippe Gaulier, master clown teacher. I went, I have to admit, thinking that I would learn some useful new skills and enjoy myself in France for a few months. Instead, I had my mind blown and my approach to theatre radically changed. I kept going back over a three-year period (with help from the conseil des arts et lettres du Québec) as I learned that the best way to approach all theatre, but especially theatre filled with passion—sadness and joy, horror and laughter—was not through psychological analysis, nor intellectual discussion, nor heavy emotional digging, but instead through lightness, laughter, and play.

I recently had the pleasure of directing Kevin Loring's *Where the Blood Mixes* for Montreal's Teesri Duniya Theatre. It is a play that shows the destructive impact of one residential school on one community. In doing so, it talks to us not only about the horror of the attempts of the Canadian government and Protestant and Catholic churches to wipe out First Peoples' cultures across this land, but also about how human beings treat each other as they isolate themselves in their own little worlds in order to survive. But what could have become melodrama or hopelessness is instead a play filled with the passion of hope and life. While Loring gives the tragic moments in the play their full due, he then undercuts them with humour. He does not allow the audience to be sucked into self-indulgent sympathy, nor does he let us off the hook by thinking that if we suffer through an evening of "serious" theatre, then we've done our duty. In this play, it is not the tragedy that makes the audience weep, but the discovery of hope.

Molière said (according to Franca Rame), "Laughter should open the mind of the audience so that the nails of reason can be hammered in."¹ Laughter also needs to open the minds of the actors, so that rather than suffering an angst-ridden experience, they find a joy and pleasure in playing with the play, be it *Medea* or a clown piece, which they then share with their audiences. I have two mantras I brought home with me from France: "The heavier the scene, the lighter the performance" and "The audience are the ones who need to feel, not you." This does not mean that actors do not feel, but rather that they do whatever is needed to get the audience to feel. One of the ways I get this to happen is by feeding the actors their lines from day one, rather than letting them read from their scripts. This gives them a freedom to move, to play, to open up to their bodies' instinctive processes as well as their brains' thoughts. Instead of digging pre-planned emotions out of themselves, this technique lets each actor discover his or her character and story through physical impulse, exploration, laughter, games, and, at times, tears.

As the actors work on their feet, we can identify together the appropriate and sometimes unpredictable emotions as they bubble up. Why do we think that re-creating heavy interpretations of the "tragedy" of oppressed people on a stage will change the world? How often have we come out of a play labelled as "message" or "issue" so stunned by what we have seen and heard that we feel either hopeless and powerless, or smug because the horrible pain and suffering we have just experienced means nothing once we leave the theatre? What is more subversive and political than laughter, lightness, and hope? Laughter is healing, and has been a weapon used by the oppressed against the oppressor for as long, I would imagine, as oppression

has existed. Laughter's message is that however powerless one may seem, one can refuse the role of victim. Hope's message is that change, however small, is another step in survival.

Laughter and survival go hand in hand.

And out of this comes action.

When a playwright like Loring weaves together a passionate roller-coaster ride, it is our job to ensure that the audience exits the theatre breathless, moved, hopeful, questioning, and active. One of the most common comments we heard post-show was, "What can we do about this?" We provoked action rather than paralysis in the audience: To do this we must keep the work light and open. This is our job, and it is what, for me, makes a play genuinely political.

Lib Spry

(Excerpted from Alt.theatre periodical)

----- Original Message -----

From: "Bill Bhaneja" <billbhaneja@rogers.com>

To: "undisclosed recipients" <billbhaneja@rogers.com>

Sent: Monday, July 08, 2013 9:51 AM

Subject: Re: NK Arts RC: Nonviolent Humor

Dear friends,

Some more contributions on the topic of humour and hope in political theatre and protest:

Joám Evans sent references to two relevant books by Adam Krause:

- (1) The Revolution will be Hillarious
- (2) Art as Politics: The Future of Art and Community

You may want to review these books and send comments for this page.

For more on the books, see links below:

<http://new-compass.net/publications/revolution-will-be-hilarious>

<http://new-compass.net/publications/art-politics>

Anita Rizvi sent an upbeat youtube video she and friends put together as tribute to Nelson Mandela. I enjoyed its background score: Brahm's Lullaby followed by "A Little Less Conversation" by Elvis Presley. Click the link:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iP_r0FogTmc

Thank you, Joám. Thank you, Anita.

Nonkilling Cheers,

Bill

On Sat, Jul 6, 2013 at 3:42 PM, Bill Bhaneja <billbhaneja@rogers.com> wrote:
Friends,

Continuing on theme of 'Lightness, humour and Political Theatre and Protest'
the following two contributions may be of interest:

(1) A short humour piece on the Police Surveillance State.

Video (2:27 mins):

Feds' Deconfliction - Short Film

<http://www.ForbiddenKnowledgeTV.com/page/23633.html>

(2) A poem by Sundeep Grover which is neither light nor humorous,
dedicated

to protestors of Taksim Square. It's called "Tears in Taksim Square".

Here's the link:

<http://www.transcend.org/tms/2013/06/tears-in-taksim-square/>

Now that tv cameras are focussed this week on protests in Tahrir Sqaure,
one wonders what happened to social protestors in Turkey and Brazil?

Gandhi in an article in 1909 makes interesting point about passive
resistance and Satyagraha. He writes: "Passive resistance is a method of
securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by
arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I
use soul-force."

Nonkilling regards,

Bill

----- Original Message -----

Sent: Wednesday, June 19, 2013 1:24 PM

Subject: NK Arts RC: Nonviolent Humor in Turkey

Dear friends,

I wonder if you have been reading about the civil protest in Istanbul's Taksim Square and the
lightness and creativity of the demonstrators in registering their message. One of the comments
forwarded as an example of the nonviolent humour seen in Taksim addressed to the regime: "You
banned alcohol, now we're sober." In today's news, the "Standing Man" movement started by one
man who choose to stand with hands in his pocket defiantly for 8 hours in front of the photo of
Turkish secular reformer Kamal Ataturk as protest. It is reported that in solidarity with the
Standing Man, others are joining him in Istanbul and elsewhere in Turkey. You may find
below the link of interest to a short article on arts, creativity and protest in Istanbul:

<http://www.womencitizen.com/world-21/gezi-park-likely-to-dwarf-this-year-s-istanbul-biennial-201.html>

Please feel free to share clever nonviolent humour, slogans, T shirts
used by the park occupiers and regime critics..

In Nonkilling Peace,
Bill

From: Bill Bhaneja [mailto:billbhaneja@rogers.com]
Sent: Saturday, June 15, 2013 8:32 AM
To: undisclosed recipients
Subject: NK Arts RC: Theatre - Lightness and Political Theatre by Lib
Spry

Dear friends,

I am reading the current issue of periodical alt. theatre and found two pieces of significant interest for NKARC. One is a short and crisp "dispatch" from veteran political theatre director Lib Spry on 'Laughter, Lightness and Political Theatre'. The second one is an overview of new theatre in Central America, entitled, "Off the Beaten Track Along Pan American Routes" by Jimena Ortuzar which I will circulate later.

Lib Spry with her five decades of experience as a stage director and playwright in Canada raises some important points about alternative theatre: why do we think that re-creating heavy interpretations of the "tragedy" of oppressed people on a stage will change the world? How often have we come out of a play labelled as "message" or "issue" so stunned by what we have seen and heard that we feel either hopeless and powerless, or smug because the horrible pain and suffering we have just experienced means nothing once we leave the theatre?" For more, see her dispatch page on top of this page.

Thank you Lib, thank you Nikki
Nonkilling Regards,
Bill

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"Nonkilling is THE measure of human progress."