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BoxWhatBox:

The Evolution of an International System of Actor Training

This paper describes the development of BoxWhatBox, an actor-training methodology developed by Canadian theatre director, actor and playwright Michael Devine. BoxWhatBox has been developed specifically with a non-native participation context in mind; that is, for a practitioner-instructor working in an environment that is linguistically and culturally foreign. The elements of the methodology, which have been applied successfully to date in Finland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Kosova, are drawn from sources as culturally and aesthetically diverse as the work of Augusto Boal, K.S. Stanislavski, Viola Spolin, Rudolf Laban and Robert Wilson. The intent is to create a practicum environment for the development of a theatrical vocabulary which is oriented towards multi-cultural or inter-cultural theatrical creation. In such a context the notion of identity, both individual and in terms of group affiliation, is acknowledged and challenged. The identity of a theatre artist is always fluid, caught between national, religious, or ethnic affiliation on the one hand, and a world community of theatre practitioners on the other. Artists are often strangers within their own homelands. As a theatre artist born in a land whose cultural identity is constantly shifting from successive waves of immigration, the pressures of globalization and American imperialism, Devine's work represents an attempt to forge identity in a context outside of the traditional paradigm employed for self-definition. Box? What box?

In describing the evolution of any organism one must first detail the context which necessitates and facilitates its development, whether that context is biological, demographic, or cultural in nature. This paper therefore takes as its starting point some basic social and political precepts generally considered fundamental to Canadian identity, and considers them in application within the framework of the still emergent Canadian theatre and its larger, global milieu.

Since the early 1970s multiculturalism has steadily become entrenched as a key aspect of the Canadian national character. It has never been fully embraced, either in the forum of politics or on the ground, but it remains, with our national medical system, a touchstone of Canadian identity. The anglophone Canadian theatre, long a white Anglo-Saxon construct which existed at odds with its constituent community, has gradually moved in the direction of the promotion of Canadian works and artists. A multicultural approach to theatre has slowly developed over the past twenty years, although it is one still dominated by the traditional Anglo-Saxon emphasis on word and text. In the age of globalisation the narratives of Canadian plays increasingly play across cultures, focusing less and less on the loss of the family farm or the iconic Canadian war hero. The form of Canadian playwriting has become less homogenous in recent years, evolving from the *pièce bien-fait* conventions of the western European canon and the psychological realism of mainstream American theatre to embrace such influences as deconstruction and magic realism. In so doing a small number of Canadian theatre artists have become aware of the limitations of the word-dominated form.

Canadians have a long history of associating language with culture, as may be seen not only in the fractious relationship between Québec and anglophone Canada but also within its native and aboriginal communities and the minority francophone communities outside Québec. Therefore one may ask what takes place within a culture when the word is no longer valorized as the dominant unit of cultural expression. Perhaps a tentative

answer is that its culture well and truly joins the community of nations as a brother rather than as a distant cousin.

Within the context of theatrical training, this reduction of the verbal imperative in theatrical expression encourages artists to shed their reliance on culturally-specific characteristics, and to acquire a more universal vocabulary as befits a pan-global theatre culture. A universalist mode of theatrical training produces a less chauvinistic theatre artist. Theatre has at times embraced chauvinistic nationalism. Now is the time to become estranged from such dangerous associates.

The notion of a universal code of human expression is not new. It has been explored in the fields of anthropology, applied linguistics and sociology, and within the rubric of theatrical study by semiotics and the work of theatre anthropologists such as Eugenio Barba. There is, increasingly, a divided world of the theatre, where on one side exists the intercultural or non-culturally specific work featured at many international festivals, and on the other the work produced within societies for the consumption of their home target audience. A minority of performers and directors are equipped to work on both sides of the divide. The thesis of BoxWhatBox is that this divide is more a function of cultural laziness than one of distinctive national identities. The assumption that spectators within a society will tolerate only a steady diet of the theatre *chez nous* is not supported by patterns of theatrical reception throughout western European history. The popularity of international theatre festivals is only one indication of the false nature of this thinking.

BoxWhatBox, a workshop format I have developed over the past four years in Canada and Eastern and Central Europe, is a methodology which can be used in the training of high-level theatre artists able to work interculturally, and also a programme which can be used with marginalised populations within a society to further their control and vocabulary of personal expression. In either case, BoxWhatBox can be utilised to create performances of original material which incorporate, but which do not rely upon, dialogic text in the traditional theatrical sense.

The emphasis on unlearning of physical and mental assumptions and patterns which restrict expression is the core principle of BoxWhatBox training. The operative premise is that each performer (or “player”) is a universal citizen already possessed of the vocabulary and knowledge with which to communicate resonantly and efficiently to other cultures. This implies a system which identifies and refines the useful and which eliminates the unnecessary. The intent is not to eliminate all facets of established expressive practice in a society, even if that were possible. Within that practice, however, lie symbols and modes of expression which transcend any one society. Societies, after all, are only partially distinct from each other, as elements of the same *genus*. They have taken elements from each other over time and augmented or particularised them to their own use. Questioning the utility of these particularised habits of movement and thought, these rigid ways of seeing the world, is a fundamental aspect of BoxWhatBox training.

Within the framework of this paper it is not possible to give a detailed description of the various exercises and games which characterise the BoxWhatBox methodology, or even to fully describe the variety of forms the workshops and performances have taken to this point in its development. What is possible is to describe the three core frames of BoxWhatBox training and to provide some illustration, through a brief description of

some techniques, workshops and performances, of what those frames comprise, how they function and what principles of performance they elucidate.

Demechanisation, Rhythm, Non-Linear Text and Image Creation

The first stage of BoxWhatBox training focuses on relearning the nature of *play*, and unlearning habits or patterns of thought and expression. The primary game used in demechanisation is called *Ball Basic*. All of the principles involved in effective emotional expression—in other words, in acting—can be found in this seemingly simple game. It begins with the group placed in a standing circle, facing inward. A small, hollow rubber ball is introduced: *the play*. Using only one hand at a time, and one touch of the ball at a time, the players must keep the ball in the air without catching it. As the ball careens from person to person, inside and outside of the circle, three core principles are identified: *Power*, *Control*, and *Joy*. All performers possess these three characteristics but few use them effectively or in equal measure. Too much power produces a ball that is impossible for the next person to handle; the ball drops. Too much control results in a “safe”, transfer of ball from person to person, lacking in intention and commitment—and the unpredictability which produces revelation. Too much joy results in a lack of focus and an overuse of the ego, to the detriment of the ensemble nature of the game. Over-use or under-use of any of these core principles produces a lack of what in BoxWhatBox is called *True Contact*.

In English, interlocutors are sometimes referred to as having “dropped the ball”. The transfer of the ball from person to person is essentially dialogic in nature, a physical metaphor for communication. Like effectively rendered dialogue, it requires focus, precision, sensitivity, and heightened awareness to achieve true contact. Soon other aspects of performance/expression can be viewed in this basic ball exercise: *hero syndrome* occurs when a player steps into the circle, or in front of another player, to save the ball from dropping. This is a positive choice when the player is the best placed to make such a saving touch, but it is a negative choice when the player is manifesting a lack of trust in the ability of others to perform their responsibilities to keep the ball in play. *Alphonse and Gaston*, named after the two symbiotic French waiters whose excessive politeness when arriving simultaneously at a door produces prolonged stasis (“after you” “no, after you”) is the term used in BoxWhatBox to describe a player who habitually steps back and defers to another. In performance terms this is an abrogation of the player’s responsibility to perform their role as part of an ensemble in maintaining the performance. *Commentary* occurs when a player breaks their focus to comment on their own performance or that of others. Negative commentary (i.e. “the glare”) is of course easy to observe in all spheres of work, but it is the apology in theatrical performance that is perhaps most damaging to its integrity. A player who spends moments after dropping a ball apologising for their mistake or looking sheepish is piling one error atop of another. Errors occur in the most professional of performances and are easily forgiven by spectators, as long as the ball is picked up immediately and without undue elaboration. Apology is a misuse of the ego. It adds an unnecessary moment to the performance, a moment that is only about the performer and not about the performance. As such it must be excised.

Ball Basic and the many variations of the game also function as rhythm exercises in BoxWhatBox. *Rhythm* should be understood in this context as breaking down into three essential forms: the rhythm of an individual character within a performance; the rhythm

of a scene or interlude which involves one or more of these characters; and the over-all rhythm of a play or performance, which combines each of the scenes or units and the characters who comprise its structure. All people enact an innate understanding of rhythm through their sense of the atmosphere or “vibe” of a room, the way in which they walk, or the cadence of their speech. Few people, even professional performers, take the time to train their awareness of rhythm to the degree where they can sublimate their own personal rhythm to that of the character they play, or tailor their performance to the rhythm of a scene or a play.

To effect this necessary awareness of rhythm BoxWhatBox utilises vocal chants, rounds, and percussion making use of wooden sticks or the body as soundmaking devices. The nature of rhythm as a fluid organism which is broken by hesitation or counter-rhythm is explored in a game such as Augusto Boal’s *Stick Knots*. Again the players are grouped in a circle, each connected to the other by a wooden stick of perhaps 60 centimetres, which each player holds with one finger of one hand on each side of their body. The object of the game is to move together, ducking under and stepping over the sticks, until as many “knots” as possible are made and the group is no longer able to move at all. If this stage is reached, the group must then unknot themselves and attempt to return to their original position standing in a circle. All of these actions must be achieved without verbal direction of any kind between players.

Like all BoxWhatBox games, Stick Knots is deceptively simple. It requires intense concentration, but not simply a focus upon the self. A player must be finely attuned to the partners who share the sticks s/he is connected to on either side. She or he must constantly observe and gauge what is required to facilitate the rhythm of the group. If a stick is dropped the group must return to the circle and start again. The rhythm may change, but it is constant. A group which moves too fast drops a stick, and, in their frustration, the stick drops more quickly on the second pass. A group which is too tentative may place too much strain on an individual player. A group without any discernible rhythm is doomed to a never-ending cycle of dropped sticks and lost, unfocused performance moments; a cast of actors performing solo together onstage. Rhythm is linkage. An effective performance, even one which involves deconstruction of a narrative, comprises a series of links which combine to produce an effect. Even broken links connote meaning; the links, even when destroyed, are nevertheless present.

The third phase of BoxWhatBox training is *Non-Linear Text and Image Creation*. Within this phase are the exercises which develop original material for performance. The core of Non-Linear Text and Image Creation is targeted improvisation. Improvisation is often misunderstood and misapplied within and outside theatre; performers often fear improvisation because it is applied without precise objectives and parameters. When these are provided, improvisation becomes a mechanism whereby established text can be altered, subverted, or even eliminated. Improvisation can also be used to create *necessary text*, that is, text which is essential in that it communicates meaning more effectively than another mode in a given situation.

One of the core exercises in Non-Linear Text is the Gibberish Game, adapted from the work of the American Viola Spolin. In the various versions of Gibberish, players can use sounds, but not real words, to communicate their intentions. As an example, a player or group of players may be given the task of selling a product to other players who make up

a television studio audience. She or he must effectively communicate what the product is; what its special characteristics are; and why it is sufficiently appealing to be purchased by each individual spectator. Another player may be given the task of relating a past event to another, who then relates their story; each must then recount to the group their impression of what the other’s story was, as accurately as possible. Such exercises direct the performer away from a reliance on linear text and towards a wider vocabulary of modes of communication.

In the Image Creation phase of this third BoxWhatBox frame, text as dialogue may be altogether absent. Exercises which emphasise silence, absence, or stillness comprise a fundamental aspect of image creation. Four players may be given the task of creating a physical image of an event or emotion by “sculpting” a fifth player, moving his/her limbs, torso and facial features as a team to create the desired effect. On the other hand, text may be emphasised as a performative, rather than a literary construct. *Word Orchestra* takes a series of single words assigned to each player which they repeat when cued by the “conductor”, varying tone, pitch, inflection and volume until the words acquire new and surprising characteristics. In the “Yes, but Game” two players are given a character, a situation, and an objective which conflicts with that of the other. Neither player can explicitly reject the other’s statements or advances, but instead must offer an alternative which advances their own objective. So, for example, Character A may say “I want your pen. Will you give it to me?” Character B might say, “Yes, but you see, I need it just now to write your obituary. Would you be so kind as to die?” Character A: “Of course, but first I will need to write my will. May I borrow your pen?” Character B: “Yes, but I’m afraid it’s not really mine. It was given to me by my mother, whose dying wish was that I stab you to death with it. May I proceed?” And so on. Performance always must involve conflicting intentions, and the objective of each person in life, and each player on stage, is to achieve their ends—survival, approval, the maintenance of their identity—through any use of power, status or persuasion they can muster.

These are but a few examples of how the process of BoxWhatBox is conducted in workshops which vary from one to thirty days, culminating in professional performances of original material or simply in post-workshop assessments by the players. The work is physically demanding; the goal is to develop “athletes of the heart” as Artaud once described performers in an essay included in *The Theatre and Its Double*. All persons benefit from acquiring control of the widest possible means of expression. Even in moments where control is absent, the individual may at least be sure that they are expressing themselves in a manner which is as clear and unambiguous as possible. Identity, personal and cultural, is always contested. Within the arena of contestation the player who is trained to use their body and spirit has the advantage.

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