Keileydography: The Symphonic Theatre of Jillian Keiley

I first encountered the name of Jillian Keiley in 1997, when the General Manager of Theatre Newfoundland Labrador, the theatre company of which I was Artistic Director, returned from a PACT meeting singing the praises of a talented young artist from St. John's. As no one ever says "no" to Gaylene Buckle for long, I soon agreed to give Jillian her first opportunity to direct on Newfoundland's west coast. My friend John Mighton had written a challenging play called ***Possible Worlds***, which I'd wanted to direct for years; hearing of the intelligence and verve of this young, homegrown director changed my plans and I assigned her the project. Soon after, I saw her production of ***Under Wraps*** in St. John's, a production so mesmerizing that it remains, with Robert Lepage's ***Polygraphe*** and Carbone 14's ***Le Dortoir***, on my list of the most significant Canadian theatre productions of the past fifteen years.

The significance of Keiley's work, which has developed since ***Under Wraps*** as a staging process called *kaleidography*, doesn't lie simply in her willingness to depart from accepted forms of conventional Canadian productions. It has also to do with the positioning of the work and that of the artist herself. For, although she now tours her work throughout the country and opportunities for international work have begun to come her way, Jillian Keiley is a Newfoundlander who has chosen to live and work in Newfoundland. As with the seminal artist Andy Jones, who also chooses to make his home in his native city, St. John's provides Keiley with a creative context, a place where such artists "fit". Like Jones, in order to achieve this fusion of context and creativity, Keiley had to buck the "Goin' on Down the Road" trend of out-migration. In one sense, coming home was the easy part. Apart from the Resource Centre for the Arts Theatre Company, where Keiley worked as an Associate Artist from 1994-99 and which produces

a truncated season, there were no full-time theatrical employers in the city when Keiley returned from Toronto in 1995. She was forced, like CODCO before her, to create her own opportunities. Through the establishment of Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland with artistic collaborator Robert Chafe, now in its twelfth year, Keiley has become an employer as well as employee, providing much needed opportunities for the multi-disciplinary artist community of St. John's.

The fact of Keiley's recently accelerating success has not influenced her decision to set up operations in St. John's. Having received national honours such as the Canada Council John Hirsch Prize in 1998, followed by the Elinor Simonovitch Prize in Theatre in 2004, and with the increasingly national profile of Artistic Fraud, as the most exciting and febrile theatre enterprise coming out of the Atlantic region in a generation, Keiley has almost single-handedly re-established St. John's as a regional and national centre for theatre.

This in no way implies that the development of a truly independent world-theatre approach in the roiling waters of the St. John's theatre scene has been without risk. Tightly-knit, marked by generational divisions on training and theatrical structure, and forever brimming with passionate debate and colourful invective, the St. John's theatre community teems with talent and yet demonstrates a manifest insecurity. Keiley simply directs differently than any Newfoundlander has ever directed before, and the path to acceptance of her style by actors and audiences has not always run smooth..

(From a director-director interview/chat in December 2005)

MD How do you feel your work fits into NF theatre…the culture as a whole?

JK I think it's one of those anomalies that grew out of the fact that it was not allowed…In fact it was the opposite of what was happening here when I came back (in 1995). It grew out of…while the collective was the big thing…when I first came back to work here they didn't have stage managers…they had directors who were not directors…it was a very strange time and there was a high degree of ….paranoia…there was a lot of infighting. The money was pretty scarce.

MD This is when you were working as Artistic Associate at RCA.

JK And even before that. I learned later…because I was tied up with Gordon Jones [at Memorial University's Drama programme]…there was a huge divide, there was a big divide between the university and the downtown…the [LSPU] Hall…a tremendous divide between the two. The university disregarded us and the people in the downtown thought the university was stifling or killing [independent work] and creating expectations of mainland or British or American art to be forced into Newfoundland.

MD They were setting up that kind of expectation that the Arts and Culture Centre had become known for in the 1960s?

JK Right…with John Perlin …who would bring in – like wouldn't ever allow a Newfoundland play – but would bring in a 40 person production – because that was what theatre was…our artists downtown rejected that model and were doing collectives.

MD But the era of the collectives had largely finished by the time you were starting to train. So what did you feel was the environment that you came back to?

JK Well that was the tumultuous time…a very tumultuous time. There hadn't been an audition at the Resource Centre for the Arts for seven years.

MD An audition?

JK And so I held auditions…I was crucified for doing so. Crucified. How dare I come in there and…when I first showed up I was pretty innocent. I didn't realize, I didn't know the history and I didn't realize… I know I had sympathy for both sides but I was so raised by both sides…and so pulled part by both sides…

MD It was really a very difficult time. But there was an issue, too, I mean they'd done so much work on their own, without help from the university, without support from the government…most of the artists in that generation – some of them had gone away to Toronto and trained and come back, like Mary Walsh, but a lot of them hadn't…I was telling Ann (Brophy, General Manager of Artistic Fraud) the other day that I remember sitting in the Duke with you listening to Rick Boland rag on you for the better part of an hour…mostly about the fact that you had gone away to train at York University.

JK I was given a lot of grief about that. People have come round…it just doesn't happen anymore [*grumbling from Ann Brophy*], the people who do that kind of thing are getting tired and old and some of them have died….so the people who are doing that are dying out. I don't see it happening with the new generation…it's just not there.

At York University Keiley was exposed to the work of Brook, Lepage, and early 20th century director/scenographer Gordon Craig. She developed an interest in commedia dell 'arte, but was stymied by the demands of the genre until she discovered what she regards as its secret, which has come to define her directing style; timing. Timing, however, cannot create a unified work in and of itself. Thematic unity needs to be created first. In working with Bach's Fugue in G minor as an initial template for kaleidography (later filled by Chafe's scriptwriting), Keiley developed a beat-by-beat transformation of a

precise musical equation (the Bach) into a precise theatrical equation (*The Cheat*). ***The Cheat*** involved 81 people working on a 9X9 grid. The recapitulation and variations on a theme for which Bach's music is famous served as touchstones for which Keiley sought to find "harmonizing actions…instead of the notes having a tonal value they have an action value" (AF Presentation document 2004: 6).

These actions may seem sufficiently specific to create paroxysms in that demon sub-species of Canadian theatre, the indulgent, pause-taking, wildly inconsistent pseudo-Stanislavskian actor. An example from ***The Cheat***: beat 4 of bar 42 instructs an actor to extend his left hand and drop the pen he is holding. The actor standing stage left of actor 1 (as marked on the grid) is instructed on beat 3 to hold out his hand and on beat 4 to grab the incoming pen. The pens were not insignificant; at points the actors used them to underscore action and text through a soft percussive rendering of the fugue (AF, 7). The beats form a set of interlocking musical units, accompanied by music in various forms – for example, percussion or vocalized sound produced by cast members. Actors have the freedom to interpret the movement; the key to the process is that they have precise parameters in which to complete it. The effect is to liberate the actor from the plethora of seemingly-inspired but utterly wrong choices s/he might make in a haphazard foray into text analysis.

But surely wrong choices are the path to dimensional correct choices, just as the commission of sins enables the definition of virtue? Aren't actors the artists, and directors the traffic cops? Of the eight countries in which I have worked as a director, Canada remains the only country where, at least in the major regional theatres, a director is often implicitly instructed to work *without* a concept, and simply to "stage the play",

performing the role of what in opera is called the "stage director" – making sure the scenography is elaborative rather than evocative, and adhering to a playwright-centred notion of text interpretation. Canadian theatre has only recently begun to question its fealty to text-based realistic theatre and this marginalization of the director. Keiley's staging vocabulary explicitly valorizes gestural and sonic expression over pure spoken text. In one respect, this explains her insistence on working with a small number of artistic collaborators inculcated with her working methods and physical vocabulary, and in founding her most creative work within the supportive framework of her own theatre company.

In the ten years since the success of ***Under Wraps***, Keiley, working both independently and with Artistic Fraud, has created a body of work which features Newfoundland writers, established and new, in various forms. She has helped develop adaptations (an environmental production of poet Michael Crummey's Salvage), brought new verve to the work of established writers (Rhonda Payne's *Stars in the Sky Morning*, Berni Stapleton's *The Pope and Princess Di*), created new work with musical collaborator Petrina Bromley (*Icycle*, *SIGNALS, Under Wraps*), and championed emerging playwrights (Torquil Colbo's *Beyond Zebra* and *Ragnarok*). Above all, she has matched her directing approach with the luminous, lyrical writing of playwright/actor Robert Chafe (*Empty Girl*, *Under Wraps, Belly Up, Burial Practices, Nightingale*). Leading a workshop, or introducing a staged reading in December 2005 of Artistic Fraud's latest work, Chafe's *Nightingale* (about the legendary Newfoundland opera singer Georgina Stirling), Keiley is a charismatic presence. The director is cresting six feet, and possesses a resonant, musical voice which evidences her talent for, and fascination with, all things

musical.

Kaleidography owes at least part of its process to musical scoring, but the connection runs much deeper – to the idea that every gesture, every choice within a performance, has both a discrete meaning and life as well as an inextricable link to a greater totality, and that this totality can be *composed* – that it is the director's responsibility to create a score the actors interpret, rather than to coax out the direction of that interpretation in rehearsal, a situation where experienced actors often may seem to be more in control of the production than the director. The idea of a unified set of rhythms to a production is not new, but in the New World eagerness to define realism in psychological terms this approach has been largely confined to the major works of artists such as Robert Wilson. In the early years of the 20th century Vsevolod Meyerhold, developing industrial movement theory to the stage, systematized stage movement through his bio-mechanics; and there is perhaps a more direct link to past avant-garde theories of rhythm and movement in the work of Rudolf Laban, whose movement system still bears his name, and Etienne Dalcroze (*eurhythmics*). Scoring, too, derives from Stanislavski, although the meaning has been adulterated to the simple tracings of character and event arcs throughout a text. Keiley's scoring is at once more ambitious and more methodical. Frame by frame, movement by movement, it transcends the dogged realism of mainstream Canadian productions.

Kaleidography itself describes a "mathematically-based choreography and directing system in order to produce very specific movement and sound instances on stage, like symphonic music but created with an actor's speaking voice, natural movement, technical elements, and blocking." (AF, 1) The performance floor is charted prior to rehearsal

into a grid, using various forms, including musical notation, another vestigial benefit of Keiley's background in choral music as a teen. The execution of the system changes for every new production while retaining the system's core principles. My own characterization of these principles would be *precision*, an executed unity of form and content; manipulation of *tempo* through the integration and layering of physical and vocal expression; and *thematic harmony* comprised of actions and sounds which break apart and re-integrate (harmony and dissonance), recapitulate, and which continually act as underscores to each other, often in counterpoint. Kaleidography cannot be described without the use of such appropriated musical terms. The complex layering of rhythms and the shifting nexus of action creates the visceral impression in the spectator of a living animal in constant and unpredictable motion.

Kaleidography encompasses much more than formal patterns of movement. With ***Under Wraps*** Keiley, Bromley and Chafe began to work out the methodology of "fuguing" text – that is, synchronizing it with the musical score while keeping it comprehensible (for actors and audience). Months before rehearsals even began for the production, actors were given a "click track" so that they could become comfortable with delivering their lines within set meters, and the technical demands would not impede artistic instinct. Other Keiley co-creations have involved actors interacting in real time with shadow characters and props (***Empty Girl***), with audience members (***Signals***), the incorporation of new casts in a touring show (***Icycle***), with mirror-image film (***Belly Up***) and with characters matched with specific musical instruments (***The Chekhov Variations***). In almost every instance the effect is harmonic, if not symphonic, and the visual result is arresting. The sensation in watching a Keiley/Artistic Fraud production is one of almost Mozartian lightness; the depth of talent, intuition and preparation neatly concealed

beneath a shimmering surface. It's a different ride for a spectator, one which matches the expectations of an audience willing to believe in magic.

For those who want a cup of theatrical java, dark and bitter, rather than the deceptive latte froth of a Fraud production (the company name indicates a certain degree of irreverence), the results may sometimes be more frustrating. While the idea that the kaleidography process is a dictatorial one which allows actors little or no scope for interpretation has been proven demonstrably false in a stream of kinetic and engaging productions, Keiley's work remains, at times, unconvincing in its ability to plumb darker emotions and reach the deepest depths of psychological complexity or emotion. It needs be said that this might only be considered a deficiency within the conventional mindset of North American psychological realism. There is a function for a theatre of wonder, too. While Keiley does not demonstrate much interest in psychologically-driven narratives, and it must be said that the work of her co-creator, Chafe, tends far more to the wistful and elegiac than to *stürm und drang*, neither is their work devoid of emotion. Unlike the clinical Gordon Craig, the mechanical Meyerhold, or the worst technocrats of the 80s Québécois theatre scene, Keiley has a soul. She likes to fly, in a metaphorical sense, rather than dig deep in the ground. Groundhogs in the audience, accustomed to bathetic fare, may grumble – but what Jillian Keiley achieves in her work is arguably much harder to achieve. In this her work shares a closer affinity to that of Robert Lepage and Robert Wilson and other directors of the International School. Like Lepage and Peter Brook, her personal humility and directness have enabled her to reach audiences and sponsors who might normally find such work abstract, such as those in her home community.

The words "new" and "innovative" are the hackneyed ponies of Canadian theatre

discourse. Few artists acknowledge the work of those who came before them; the North American mindset is one of denial of the past. Jillian Keiley's work has won awards and prizes because it has been successfully promoted as innovative or ground-breaking. What is truly remarkable about her work, however, is its old-fashioned theatricality. Large casts, swirling images, and the use of music and direct address are used to engage audiences rather than illusionistic realism and pauperized cynicism. The theatre is never free of its storied and tumultuous past, and those of us who devote our lives to it pay tribute to our ancestors through the integrity of the work we do. In re-creating a sense of wonder, in giving her audience wings, Jillian Keiley's work harks back to the best traditions of the theatre while living resolutely in the present. The fact of her residence in Newfoundland, her insistence on working with, and training, a new generation of Newfoundland-based theatre practitioners, and increasingly, in productions like Chafe's ***Tempting Providence*** and ***Nightingale***, mining the rich vein of Newfoundland's history, provide some demonstration of an artist firmly grounded in her own culture, determined to integrate that culture with outside influences, and, in the ceaseless touring of Artistic Fraud, to carry the resonance of her culture far and wide. Keiley at present is only in her early thirties. It is more than plausible to observe that she is really at the beginning of her career as a director, and that the integrative power of her theatre will only grow in execution and scope.

Michael Devine

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Biography

Michael Devine is a theatre director who has created and directed productions in Hungary, Romania, Finland, and Serbia and Montenegro, as well as in his native Canada. His workshop for actors, ***BOXWHATBOX***, incorporates his own unique approach to "an open heart in an open body". He has led **BWB** at festivals, theatre schools and workshops in Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, and Kosova. A professor of Theatre Studies at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, he regularly publishes articles on aspects of Canadian and international drama.
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