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**The Rogue and Vagabond Hybrid:
theatrical liminality as transgressive act**

This paper examines, within the context of the author's work as an international creative artist, the place of theatrical performance in the 21st century. After the era of post-colonialism, and post-post-structuralism, so-called national cultures are still attempting, using restrictive and outdated paradigms, to align themselves to the new reality of globalisation and cultural hybridity. Theatre has also been viewed as an antiquated mode of social discourse and in many western countries audiences have diminished even as plays have become more overtly commercial in orientation. The thesis of this paper is that theatre, as an inherently hybrid cultural form, has much to offer societies in the midst of their own existential struggles with inward and outward migration and other issues of post-national identity.

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Between the two concrete barriers which together made up what was known in the West as the Berlin Wall, there was a space. Ossies desiring freedom traversed this closely watched patch of open land at extreme peril. Wessies, believing they were already free, or at least freer than their eastern cousins, never set foot in this stateless expanse. Neither side was much interested in spending time there; it was a non-space linking "go from" to "go to". In these remarks I would like to suggest that all of us take up residence in such a place between borders, if not permanently, then at least for periods of time sufficient to enable us to question precisely where we belong, which in my experience is seldom the same as where we are from. Could such residency between borders destroy the idea of nations? Probably not. If it could help eliminate the plague of nationalism, however, its value would be sizeable enough.

This liminal space exists everywhere, generally unacknowledged or viewed with suspicion; psychologically it's the space between decisions. This terrain of uncertainty most benefits the kind of visitor too sure of who they are and what they know. We all know that such people seldom travel, though, in any real sense. The sojourners who regularly traverse liminal terrain tend to be those comfortable living life in the shape of a question mark.

Canadians have been, historically, caught in-between political and geographical spaces. Neither American nor British, French nor English, caught between Europe and Asia, barely separating the Pacific and Atlantic oceans from having at each other's throats, we are, in general, welcoming of outside influences yet at the same time suspicious of globalisation. While the notion of unfettered markets and the ubiquity of access seem attractive, there is a feeling amongst Canadians that globalisation exists to benefit the larger dogs at the smaller dogs' expense, and that while the small dogs are chewing at the hind legs of the big dogs the ones in-between will be

left, again, with nothing but the dog house, having mediated unsuccessfully and finally ended being resented by both. Until recently the predominant interpretation of globalisation amongst commentators was that it was a homogenising force, a kind of cultural sandblaster which would reduce the sharp edges of distinct cultures to a softer, rounder, less individualised mass. This makes globalisation sound like the macro version of multiculturalism, the unofficial Canadian mantra for the past forty years. So there is an inherent contradiction in the two postures. Perhaps we are not as multicultural as we like to style ourselves; or perhaps we misunderstand what globalisation could mean. Recently we have come to understand that perhaps globalisation, if separated from purely economic considerations, can be viewed as the logical extension of a cultural hybridity which is emblematic of all but the most isolated of peoples.

The notion of ethnicity as a key marker of identity exists in far stronger measure in Europe, particularly in Balkan Europe, than it does in my home continent, North America, or my native land, Canada. Racial and ethnic biases continue to exist in all cultures but generally North America has long embraced an immigrant-fuelled ethos of a Big Cultural Tent. Within that tent you could call yourself what you wished, as long as the social rules were obeyed and as long as you publicly identified, particularly in the United States, as a national of the home country. In recent years the notion of multiculturalism as cultural doctrine in Canada has eroded. The “big tent” appears to protect some but not all its citizens. A Polish emigrant to Canada is tasered to death at the Vancouver airport and the RCMP escapes censure. An Iranian-Canadian journalist travels to Iran and is beaten to death in a prison cell without government reprisal. An Indo-Canadian woman travels to Saudi Arabia and is detained against her will by her father for two and a half years. Most notably, Omar Khadr is the only foreign national remaining at Guantánamo after eight years, seemingly unwanted and unprotected by the country whose passport he carries.

At the same time, there is increasing evidence that emigrants to Canada take their home beliefs and rivalries with them to the new land. Some return to the land of their ancestors once they've made their money or secured their health care. There is a growing sense that multiculturalism has failed. If people use your Big Tent as a convenience and nothing more, how viable is your tent? Does this confirm that national identity remains the fundamental marker of personal identity, wherever one moves? Or is there something more hopeful embedded within these events, in a global sense?

I would argue that these incidents point to the *erosion* of the concept of a national identity. Hybridised Canadians are “neither-nor” citizens. They no longer live in their native state; nor are they entirely within the day-to-day reality of current Canadian life. A tension, often a creative tension, exists between their past and present selves. If such a person fails to identify fully with their new state, they rest in one of two categories: stateless, or many-stated. They are living in the space between walls.

This points to the inescapable irony of national identification in an age of globalisation. Canada is an extreme case of a settler nation where virtually every individual identifies at least partially with their former homeland. So the question must be asked: is it merely multiculturalism that is dysfunctional, or is the idea of a “Canada” increasingly out of date? Should the notion of what it means to be Canadian be re-defined? I too, like Bono and our Ambassador to Croatia, believe the world needs more Canada, not because we are a model state, but because we are barely a state at all. If we can act as a haven for those who would reside in-between states, then perhaps we have a role to play in a true globalisation, the kind where people connect with each other on many things but not as entities from rival nations.

Lest I seem categorical in my condemnation of the idea of the nation, I will list some of its good points. It provides a rallying point based on blood or soil, for those of us disinclined to choose what we believe in. It can comfort citizens on a daily basis with all the habits of thought and behaviour that a nation shares, even as the government of that nation quietly picks the pockets of each of its true believers. No, against my better judgment I am constrained to say that the nation is a good thing, in the way that a gun is a good thing. It's just a shame the way some people use it. Many of the things people take as national characteristics that make them feel at home are not national at all, but simply human, and found in many places. A shared history binds people, it's true, but when that binding includes a continuing sense of grievance or entitlement, perhaps what binds should be cut. Perhaps there is a sense of nation that rests solely on love of the land, and with this I have no argument. In the case of Canadians, who love to trumpet the beauties of the True North, most of our knowledge of our country is not based on the experience of a foot treading trail. We are virtual tourists of our nation. “Virtual”, of course, is a word associated with the internet, which is as liminal a space as one can find. So as we profess our love of country, we are simultaneously somewhere else, not entirely present, never having been there in person, reliant on reaching out, desire, interest, for our knowledge. This collection of feelings leading to action is a good thing, even if the result is virtual citizenship.

As a theatre professional, I have always considered myself a citizen of the theatre first and a national of a particular country second. After all, like most Canadians, my background is hardly *pur laine*; Flemish and Wallon blood squall dyspeptically on my mother's side while the Scots and Irish donnybrook on my father's. It is a matter of bemusement that when I work in the Balkans I am asked constantly if I have ancestral ties here. I am the subject of lectures by friends on crucial national distinctions, which turn out to be difficult to define in practice. Was Nikola Tesla a Croatian-Serb or a Serbian-Croat? Two listeners would be certain of the answer, and yet might profoundly disagree. The truth lies in the space in-between their two certainties.

The cure for the disintegration of the Big Tent state is not, as some might think, to give every people, or self-described people, a country. We would end up with a wonderful postage stamp collection and a world that is more Balkanised than the Balkans ever were. Nor is the answer to homogenise the world in a beige-wash of American or transglobal pop culture. The Eurovision Song Contest is a fascinating television event, but it tells an observer nothing about the culture of any country which competes in it, other than that they will appropriate any pop cliché they can in order to win, or enter into whatever regional cabal of votes will suit their purposes.

What the Eurovision Contest has taught me, and what I have learned from fifteen years working in the Balkans, is that there is a commonality, a regional sense of community, which outsiders must take into account and which contrasts with the ready stereotypes offered by North American and British commentators. Watching Belgrade Serbs in a bar cheering on the Croatian national team at the last World Cup after their own team's demise would be surprising only to someone who has never actually lived here. This is one example, among many, of the *shared communities* concept of identification. Young Serbs, in my experience, are more like young Croats than they are like older Serbs. This is not simply a function of the ability to utilise electronic media and to know, as a result, people from around the world, although this is a significant factor. It is also that we define ourselves by what we like and don't like, what we tolerate and what we don't. All of this is negotiable; elements of our deeply held preferences change throughout our lives. So why doesn't nationality change? Is this not an indication of its deficiencies as a marker of cultural identification? If nationality is really a cultural phenomenon rather than some god-gifted work of destiny, shouldn't we be thinking of expanding our sense of identity to include all the relevant cultural influences we are subject to?

There is no such thing as being unaffected or uninfluenced by others. *Homo sapiens* migrated

north out of Africa and found a particularly foxy Neanderthal with predictable results 35,000 years ago. Since then all humans have been hybrids. Through the information we assimilate, and the internet and other media we use to get that information, we change, becoming at once part of a greater community and bringing our own distinctive elements to it. Global communities are mutable. Hybridity itself is constantly in flux. Why, then, do so many remain fixed in a paradigm which identifies hybrids as somehow lesser or toxic?

The answers lie partly in analyses of nationalism and other poisonous doctrines, but essentially it can be found in an unwillingness to look at ourselves, honestly, as individuals who are members of communities stretching far beyond borders. In this respect each of us is a *liminal citizen*: not stateless, but many-stated. I am not advocating here the old European notion of open borders, though the Schengen agreement has, by and large, worked reasonably well. I am talking more philosophically about the importance, the necessity, of realising that our most valuable lives and living may take place *between borders*. We need to stop thinking of ourselves as people of a certain nation who travel, and more as travellers who can be found in a particular nation for stretches of time.

Of course this would constitute a transgression in political terms. The ruling class will not support this uncontrolled outward and inward migration of non-aligned souls. It implies that the traveller's allegiance is to the Road, and not to the country of origin. This logically leads to the conclusion that such a citizen will look more objectively and with a more clinical eye at the policies of such origin states, being untainted by the excesses of nationalism and other elixirs and opiates. That is always a dangerous situation for any religion and any nation-state. "Where is loyalty?" they might plead. "Where is patriotism?" In the trash where it belongs, one hopes. Affection for one's home land should never be confused with a willingness to follow its policies against one's sense of ethics. Yet it often is, to our lasting detriment. The individual makes the strongest citizen, and the strongest citizen is always a threat to entrenched dogma.

We must ask not what country or nationality owns our allegiance but to what core community we choose to belong. Allegiance to a country might force you to end a stranger's life, whereas allegiance to a community such as the theatre could enable you to change the life of a stranger. At worst, it might make you complicit in the making of bad art. Allegiance to the community of academics has its pitfalls, certainly: over-reliance on theory over practice, ideology over pragmatics, a form of insularity which is easy to misinterpret as elitism. Most of us are saved,

however, by our membership in other communities; our love of jazz or blues music, for instance, or our willingness to imbue sports such as football with the most profound sociological significance. The myriad communities to which we lend our hearts and minds save us from the rigidity of an over-arching identification with the larger, more erasive, political entities which crave our fealty.

The theatre, of all the communities to which I belong, has the most utility. It has brought me into many cultures, introduced me to alternate ways of thinking and living, and demonstrated that what appears true and inalterable is, in fact, alterable and negotiable. Theatre is the Country of Asking Questions. It exists in opposition to the Countries which Fabricate Answers. In the theatre, we are all rogues and vagabonds, as British law was once fond of referring to us, because we owe our allegiance to a fixed yet moveable truth, rather than to a single political system. As a community of outsiders, we provide support in the face of overwhelming pressure to reify the status quo, to just get along, to provide “cultural product” which can be analysed (and valued) for its economic impact and exploited, through its desire to please, as a tool of conformity. Theatre isn't about economic impact. It's about asking existential and social questions, in an intriguing and provocative manner, that the good sons and daughters, the favoured siblings of the political family, lack the courage, the sensibility, or the will to ask.

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To date I have directed plays in seven languages, and led BoxWhatBox, my acting methodology workshop, in fifteen countries. BoxWhatBox is a system of actor training and performance creation. It's a holistic method of training the actor's body, mind and spirit so that they can work in the most creative manner possible. To do this they must identify the habits they rely on in communicating their needs and wants to others. Once these habits—ways of standing or breathing, for instance, or ways of thinking about people and therefore characterisation—are acknowledged, the performer begins to acquire a sense of control over which habits are genuinely useful and which habits are counterproductive. Their ability to express becomes at once more accurate and more extensive.

An actor who does not breathe properly functions perfectly well in ordinary life, where most of us subsist on a diet of short gasping breaths. She may not be aware of her habit of gasping until she is called upon, through exercises or games, to use breath properly. An actor wedded to dogma, such as that all capitalists are bad, or performance must be “realistic” in the American interpretation of Konstantin Stanislavski, has hobbled himself not only in terms of limiting his

ability to play different genres but in terms of producing truth on stage, which should be the actor's ultimate aim. An actor who refuses to play Hitler because he "doesn't want to bring any more evil into the world" unwittingly carries on Hitler's work of intimidation and placid compliance. Only if an actor understands that Hitler was a human being before he became a monster, that all humans have characteristics in common, and that Hitler at points made choices which irrevocably determined his later acts, can that actor perform truthful characterisation free of predetermined bias. Bias exists in the body and in the mind. BoxWhatBox does not ask performers to be free of bias, since this is impossible. It merely draws attention to the bias so that it can be rendered neutral if need be or utilised in positive ways. If you cannot see yourself in your enemy, you are more like him than you would wish.

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The essence of BoxWhatBox is simplicity. All the principles of acting can be reduced to a series of core fundamentals. I play a very simple game with a ball which incorporates all the principles of acting into physical metaphors. Initially actors resist believing that acting is about simplicity. They want it to be difficult, so that it will seem more valuable when mastered. They want it to be mystical, so that others will not compete with them and will instead regard the actor with something like awe. There is a mystery at the heart of acting, of course, which is called talent. This mystery is not about creating a lifelike illusion on stage or other party tricks which mimic but actually avoid truth. Like most important things, acting, and fundamental truth, is simple. That doesn't mean it is easy to achieve. Simplicity is perhaps the most difficult element of performance, and character, to attain, and then to maintain. Throughout one's life, as one picks up experiences both positive and negative, these experiences begin to weigh, like a set of bags carried from one place to another. Here I must take gentle issue with the demi-god of the theatre, Mr. Stanislavski, who made much use of the technique of *affective memory*. If we carry all our experiences around consciously, waiting to be plumbed for a role, we will be the equivalent of the old vaudeville performers who carried around a literal bag of tricks. We become caricatures of people, stereotypes rather than archetypes, cartoons of ourselves. The actor should not *remember* emotion, she should *feel* emotion. To do this requires a *tabula rasa*, an openness to what the text or the scene offers, the effective neutralisation of mental and physical bias.

What are these fundamentals of truthful performance that are part of the game I call "Ball Basic"? Commentary, Direct Contact, Adjustment, Purpose, Neutralisation. Each of these involves the proper use of the ego. *Commentary* is the ability to avoid judgment when judgement is counterproductive—criticising another actor's performance, for example, is commentary, as is

apologising for mistakes, or demonstrating in a showy manner how well one plays. It's very polite to apologise, and in daily life this is a useful trait, but in rehearsal or performance it is ego-based time-wasting. The goal of Ball Basic is to keep the ball in the air; when the ball is dropped, it must be picked up, without commentary. There is work to do.

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Direct Contact does not merely involve looking someone in the eye, as most American actors seem to believe, but making certain that what you say or do has made its intended impact. There is a *loop*, or circuit, in the communicative process that actors often short-circuit by concentrating on *generation* rather than *reception*. In order to perform an actor must reduce the infinite number of choices available to her to those which are not only plausible but which are capable of producing revelation. The only way she can do this is by actively *listening* with her body as well as her mind. When you generate energy in the direction of someone else, that person must respond. His or her response creates the set of choices available to you in responding to her. And so on. Simple.

Purpose incorporates two or three essential elements of performance. First, any moment on stage requires the actor's total commitment. Commitment cannot be separated from purpose. If you lack purpose you lack conviction. This is linked to Stanislavski's notion of *intention*, that characters (as with people generally) always act with purpose, to achieve something, either a moment-to-moment objective (I am going to eat that chocolate now) or a Super Objective (I want you to respect me). Part of purpose involves knowing when to act, to step forward to save the ball, and when to defer to others, for the sake of the over-riding purpose of the game's objective. The concept of purpose is closely associated with the *decided body* of Eugenio Barba and his work at Odin Theatre in Denmark. In Barba's work there is the *pre-expressive* moment, the moment of the action, and the aftermath of the action. This is best described by the Japanese actor Yoshi Oida's concept of *JO-HA-KYU*. Every action has a moment before, when you know something is about to occur; this is the "JO". The body is alive; in actuality something is already happening, as in the moment when your mother is deciding how to speak to you after you have broken her crystal vase. The "HA" is the explosion, the action, physical or verbal, that most contemporary theatre has become fixated upon. American films in particular obsess with the moment of explosion, and lack the pre-expressive thought necessary to render such films plausible. The "KYU" is often overlooked, but equally important: it is the time after an action when the impact is felt, both by shooter and shot. The aftermath of a moment naturally leads into the pre-expressive moment before the next action. In theatrical performance there is no such thing as time between emotional or physical beats. One leads directly to the next.

Adjustment is the actor's ability to rid himself of preconceptions and to adjust to the requirements of the moment. If a physical act is performed incorrectly, as in dropping a ball while juggling, an adjustment must be made; it is not sufficient for the actor to continue, mindlessly making the same error over and over. And yet this is what actors often do. They repeat the same errors of mentality or physicality over and over, forcing a character to become more like the actor than vice-versa. An actor who fails to adjust is guilty of ego-crimes of the first magnitude. The world seldom arrives at your door. So it is for characters in plays, and so it should be for actors as well. We compromise, bargain, employ force to get what we desire. Adjustment also has to do with the ability to function within an ensemble or team environment. You tone down certain elements of your nature and play up others, as needed. You determine what your partner needs on stage and you attempt to supply it, regardless if it was your first instinct or not, trusting that, with a director, the end result will be dimensional and truthful (and probably very far from your first instincts). Some actors who play Ball Basic tell me that they are not athletes, or that they hate sports. They must make an adjustment, because all actors are athletes, and all of life is sport.

Finally, the concept of Neutralisation is at once the simplest and most opaque of elements to communicate to the actor. It begins with physical neutralisation, the cleaning away of various habits of posture and breathing to create an aligned body which enables the actor to enter what Stanislavski called the *creative state*. This aspect alone is a life-time of work for an actor accustomed to relying on larger muscles to compensate for smaller, injured or atrophying muscles they choose to ignore. The price an actor pays seems negligible when they are in their 20s but soon becomes clear when an actor attains middle age. They lack stamina, they rely on fixed postures and a booming voice to mimic authority, they no longer possess the flexibility to express the full range of emotions in anything but the most naturalistic ways. A physically limited actor concentrates more on saying "I can't" than "I can", which should be the actor's mantra. Emotionally this is even more important. Neutralisation through breathing and alignment is a technique for freeing an actor from the accumulated baggage of experience. Humans suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune repeatedly throughout their lives. Every injury creates a scar. Scar tissue inhibits free movement. This is simple physiological and psychological logic. But it is extraordinarily difficult to encourage actors to leave behind an obsession with their scars. The problem of adult life is that we forget that at heart we are all still children. An actor must never forget this. To witness Ukrainian politicians fist-fighting in their Parliament, or a man and woman arguing in public in a hotel breakfast room over a piece of toast, is to witness children who have forgotten that they are adults. Actors must be willing to un-learn all the lessons of so-

called maturity, of so-called civilisation, of prudence and decorum and all the rubbish we learn so that in daily life we will not all commit mass murders of the little old ladies standing in front of us, who take too long to board the tram.

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BoxWhatBox, above all, is about un-learning. When one unlearns inhibiting habits one is free to play. Play is at the centre of all great theatre work. In études that I structure for each group with which I work, we create new material for performance from *targeted improvisation*, that is, improvisation which creates a set of known parameters for the actor. They have a basic character, a basic circumstance, and a basic task to achieve. In our improvisations we sometimes allow words and dialogue, sometimes merely sounds, and sometimes no sound at all. Actors are not allowed to rely on verbal dexterity to trick their way through an improvisation. In the Ball Basic game, if they are right-handed, they should use their left hand. In improvisation, if they are verbally skilled, they should improvise physically. No vocabulary is excluded from our improvisations, but none is valorised over another.

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This non-reliance on language has enabled me to work in different countries with different groups of actors, sometimes all of the same nationality, sometimes of mixed or various nationalities. In freeing them from their own language BoxWhatBox also frees them from some of the dogma of their cultures. In this way we are able to do shows which might otherwise be considered controversial within the cultural paradigms that they are produced within. A show such as **HAWKS**, for instance, which I created and directed in Southern Serbia in 2007, was a series of physical metaphors for tribalism and the warring instinct and what happens when destruction is the only thing you understand. This would be a difficult subject to broach in a language-based play in Serbia. The actors who embodied the two groups of hawks did so using only a language of shrill cries and calls, and the physical portrayal of birds that can no longer fly.

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In creating such work I generally arrive with a theme. In training the actors in BoxWhatBox we become linguists with a shared vocabulary. As I know them better I create new improvisations for them, leading to études which develop the original material for the play. Actors are generally wary, if not frankly disbelieving in such an approach, which eschews an established text and which places such emphasis on the relationship between performer and spectator. For the actor who commits to the process, however, there results a re-discovery of theatre, of its true power, and a kind of magic that is not based in technology or the conventional actor's sleight of hand.

What this also means is that the actors who work in a BoxWhatBox process with me become citizens, at least temporarily, of that liminal territory of which I speak. Using, but not relying upon, their cultural backgrounds, subordinating their cultures to that of the theatre, they become rogues and vagabonds for a time. The rogue plays with the boundaries of what is acceptable in society; the vagabond owes her allegiance to no doctrine or state. Both transgress for the gain of all.

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As for writing, far be it from me to denigrate the modus of Shakespeare, Pushkin, Goethe and Molière. Molière is an interesting case. As an actor, he toured the provinces learning the fundamentals of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the Italian art of improvised theatre. He knew that speech, even a rehearsed text inserted into an improvised scenario, changes when it is transformed into writing. It acquires a permanence which can aid us in historically tracking the development of cultural expression, but that permanence can also hinder the negotiability of the present moment, by bringing the weight of past baggage and stylistic expectations to bear.

Thus it was that gradually I came to the conclusion that I would leave script-based plays behind when I was afforded the opportunity and I would work with actors to create original material. This is what BoxWhatBox allows me to do. Over the period of time—a week, or a month if the producers are kind—I work with a group of actors on targeted improvisations, that is, a series of games and études that I create specifically for them, all based around a theme we have agreed to explore. The contributing principles I bring are that we should work as much as possible with indigenous elements of the culture, from musical instruments to scenographic materials to the vernacular of the dialogue. More than anything, it is actor-centred theatre. Actors are repositories of cultural information that cannot be found in a book. When I work in a culture that is foreign to me, I bring pieces of myself, and then join them to what the other artists bring. We find pieces of each language that we share. The actors, who will be performing in their own culture and language, make use of the outside influence I bring to transform in some way the form and content of the material they produce for their audience. The result is definably a hybridised performance.

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BoxWhatBox is therefore *intercultural*, not for theoretical purposes or as part of agenda for social change, but because I believe in the benefits of a more-or-less permanent liminality. I try to live between cultures. When I create a new work in Serbia, Croatia, Finland or Romania, my hope is that I can bring the actors and designers, musicians and spectators to that liminal place as well.

Free to abandon the habits which bind them to conventional views and interpretations—conventions which can result in insularity—we become *world performers*, not in some generic sense, shorn of cultural markers, but incorporating our cultures within the linking language of theatre. In creating a “dangerous present” on stage—the actors can change their dialogue at any time—we do not deny the past. We simply announce that we are not beholden to it.

Perhaps, I hear someone say, film is the best medium for this alchemy, bringing together as it does filmmakers from many countries on virtually every film. Perhaps. We must be brave enough, if we are to be the citizens of the Country Which Asks Questions, to ask the fundamental question: *why theatre?* Is it still relevant? Have we moved beyond the tiny interiors, the temporal limitations of live theatre performance? My answer is that nothing has ever replaced the theatre as the salutary voice of the rogues and vagabonds. We may believe we do not require such questioning, but that is another issue entirely. No mediated form, such as film, on-line streaming, or reality television, creates the elemental contact between human beings that theatre does. Music, dance, and performance art all have this impact, but each forms a part of a totality that theatre can provide. The theatre is for everyone, although it seldom is represented that way. *Humans in action.* That’s the way Aristotle put it. There is nothing more universal—and nothing more essential—than theatre.

Michael Devine

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