

Cultural Diversity as Theatrical Practice

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Reporting from the Post-Margins: Cultural Diversity as Theatrical Practice

NATALIE ALVAREZ and RIC KNOWLES (with SUE BALINT and PETER FARBRIDGE)



Soheil Parsa and Peter Farbridge, co-artistic directors of Modern Times Stage Company, open the symposium on Sunday 8 April 2017. The Postmarginal project was inspired by Modern Times' unique approach to intercultural theatre. Photographer: Nona Adil

Goals and Objectives

In April 2017 Modern Times Stage Company produced “Postmarginal: Cultural Diversity as Theatrical Practice,” consisting of a professional development workshop with actors and directors, and a public symposium, “Beyond Representation.” The titles, “Postmarginal” and “Beyond Representation,” were aspirational, intended to move beyond a current stasis in the practices and discourses of cultural diversity on Canadian stages. “Culturally diverse” was interpreted broadly, to include Indigenous and immigrant communities, communities of colour, audible minority communities, transgender and gender-fluid communities, and Deaf and disabled-identified communities.

The organizers saw the workshop and symposium as opportunities to move the discussion of diversity in the theatre forward, to start asking new questions, and to initiate new practices. Over the last decade or more there have been seemingly endless panels, discussions, online debates, and other fora on diversity in Canadian theatre. There have been many flashpoints—accusations, usually justified, about the lack of representation of “minoritized,” including racialized, groups on our main stages, and uneven efforts to redress these issues; debacles around white-washing, cross-cultural casting, and cultural “authenticity”; inquiries into the representation of gender and sexuality on stages, boards, artistic directorates, and

critical complements; interventions into the so-called accommodation and representation of disabled-identified communities; and discussions of the relative value of culturally *specific* work—where the creative team has no need to explain itself to those from the dominant culture—as opposed to *cross-* or *intercultural* work, involving complex and often difficult or painful negotiations across various kinds of difference.

Much of this discussion has been grounded in issues concerning casting, the ownership of identity positions, racist stereotypes, tokenism, and creative control. In proposing the title of the symposium, “Beyond Representation,” the organizers wanted to start with the simple assumption that, as Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, has put it, “diversity is good. We should have some. Next time we talk, can we continue the conversation from there instead of starting from scratch every time?” (99). We wanted to continue the conversation by asking not whether, but *how* diversity might be practiced in the creation process in studios and rehearsal halls in Canada. We wanted, that is, to move “beyond representation,” beyond questions about who represented whom, and beyond questions having to do with stereotypes, authenticity, and ownership—important as these questions remain—to ask *what it might mean*, in Canadian rehearsal halls, to *practice* rather than tolerate or even encourage difference.

What we hoped to arrive at was a deepened understanding of what happens when the performance of cultural identity is understood to be a practice, what people do rather than who they are; when the “markers” of identity are not taken as barriers (according to the dictates of Euro-American theatrical traditions) but as the very basis of the creative process. We hoped to advance a more precise theatrical vocabulary that could be taken up in educational and professional contexts alike; a vocabulary that centralizes this work, which continues to transform the Canadian theatrical landscape. New vocabularies that issue from the work, from processes and practices, are critical if we hope to move the conversation beyond the discourse of inclusionism and tolerance toward an articulation of new possibilities. The objectives of *Postmarginal*, in short, were to provide participants with viable, hands-on strategies for how to *do the work* of diversity. The objectives of this article are to assess how successfully the event did so, and to try to put these vocabularies and strategies into wider circulation.

Workshop¹

The workshop “Subject and Creation: The Intercultural Rehearsal Hall,” led by Modern Times Artistic Director Soheil Parsa and Montreal-based accent coach Kent Waters, was held at Artscape Youngplace and Aluna Theatre Studio, April 1, 2, 8, and 9. Two directors (Roshan Ahmadvand and Aaron Jan), and seven actors from various cultural communities (Simon Casanova, Adriana Lavinia Salinas Díaz, Roshanak Jaberri, Ahmed Salah Moneka, Azeem Nanthoo, Melanie Santos, and Peter Van Wart), explored how their different cultural backgrounds could be a source of inspiration in rehearsal. Focusing on a single text, participants explored some of the ways in which their differences—including “non-standard” accents—could be treated, not as obstacles, but as productive tools in exploring spatial, emotional, and corporeal approaches to work with text.

Parsa began with opening remarks about diversity as inspirational, and on the value of moving past the conception that ethnic-cultural identity markers are somehow a barrier to

work in Canadian theatre. He explained the choice of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as the working text for the workshop based on a shared familiarity with the play among participants and its composition as a series of scenes in which the characters and situations are seemingly "stateless." The structure of the workshop would be comprised of a series of one-and-a-half hour sessions in which Ahmadvand and Jan would alternate as directors, trying different methodologies with the actors as Parsa offered side-coaching.

- *Lead with physical improvisations and allow the text to follow*

Ahmadvand began with flocking exercises (in which a group of actors mirror the controlled movement of successive leaders, moving as one), in order to establish attention and focus on collective movement.



Actor participants of the workshop explore the space in a flocking exercise. (From left to right: Simon Casanova, Ahmed Salah Moneka, Melanie Santos, Peter Van Wart, Azeem Nanthoo, Adriana Lavinia Salinas Diaz, Roshanak Jaber). Photographer: Maxime Robin

He encouraged a shift in attention to individualized gestures and physicality allowing that to evolve the collective movement, requiring, in turn, a double-focus on the group and the individual. Improvisations based on group "clumping" and individual points of departure allowed the actors gradually to release inhibitions and work together playfully.

Ahmadvand then began to introduce circumstances with loose thematic ties to the text: a search for something, watching, waiting. He then encouraged the actors to introduce lines or phrases from the text. Parsa emphasized that actors should speak in any language but make the intentions and gestures very clear; actors were to proceed as though they understood each other. Moments of discovery—and comedy—emerged from these efforts to communicate across linguistic differences and from the surprising points of shared understanding they reached. In the efforts to make intentions clear, a new gestural and relational vocabulary emerged that offered the director a rich array of compositional possibilities.

Gestural intentionality became the basis of understanding among the actors speaking in different languages. Parsa observed that clarity of speech increases with clarity of intention: accents are not an obstacle when actors are clear about their thoughts.

- *Focus on the spaces between*

Jan asked the actors for their thoughts on what is unsaid in the text. Actors identified the unspoken preoccupations of the characters, the implied repetitions in actions, gestures, and behaviours; the shadows of loneliness and need for companionship; the lingering threat of violence. Jan then guided the actors through a reading of the text in the round. They placed their attention on the echo-effect and reverberations of words differently spoken in the mouths of each actor even as they spoke collectively.

Jan then asked the actors to find a space in the room where they felt the most vulnerable and to speak the text placing an emphasis on the silences. Actors were encouraged to read the text with the silences—emphasized by an observer reading out the stage directions for [*silence*—and were instructed to move beyond any impatience, self-consciousness, or discomfort about “taking too long.” The actors then began a physical exploration of the silence in the space, of “the dead around the text.” Actors were asked to articulate this unspoken in the form of repeatable movements. Jan then guided them through a fluctuating scale of intention and gestures, moving from 100% to a gradual diminishment by percentages.

The movement sequences were then brought into a circle, which the actors moved across or invaded, retracting in their collisions with each other or finding different ways of using their gestures in their encounters with another. Parsa remarked on the physical motifs emerging from this exercise that could come and go in performance as a means of conveying the ways in which the characters struggle with the circumstances of the play.

- *Allow linguistic difference to be a creative point of departure*

Working from physical improvisations and weaving into them text in their native languages (Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, Swahili) and English, the actors used elements of repetition in the play as sites where characters were trying to make themselves understood. The “accent problem” became a source of comedy here, as the characters shared their individualized ways of pronouncing and articulating words. This playful interchange between *how* one speaks and how that speech becomes attached to repeated physical gestures and movements brought out the musicality and rhythm of the lines. In the efforts to communicate and make themselves understood through physical gesture and sonic play, language and communication became abstracted, conceptual, and, in turn, the working material for new aesthetic possibilities for composition, stage images, blocking, and kinesthetic relationships.

This abstracted communication would be interrupted, now and again, by a “stock gesture,” such as a thumbs-up, which became very comedic by virtue not only of how literal it seemed in contrast to the conceptual language emerging; in this context, these seemingly universal gestures became unstable, a reminder of the different meanings they can carry in different cultural contexts. In this movement between the literal and the abstracted, Ahmadvand would clap his hands and call out a cultural “mode” such as Italian opera or

Bollywood, in which the actors would improvise, and with another clap of the hand, drop. The idea here was not to recreate the cultural form in an exacting or specific way, but to use it as an “ecstatic tool” to introduce unexpected frames and create new physical vocabularies. Such an exercise raises a host of questions about how to introduce traditional cultural forms without cultural appropriation. It further asks how new physical vocabularies might emerge from a practice of drawing on but not actually staging specific cultural practices. The corporeal experience of such practices in these exercises, within the context of an exploratory and safe intercultural space, became the means of unearthing new vocabularies rather than reproducing “traditional” forms.

Kent Waters led actors through an accent workshop that emphasized intelligibility and comprehension, offering a way of thinking about language in terms of segmental units— comprised of consonant and vowel sounds— and rhythmic elements. What is the music of English and how does this music change in different geographical areas? He then introduced the concept of the “prosody pyramid,” in which actors break speech into short thought-groups within which one focus word is identified which has a stressed syllable and a peak vowel. This approach offers a way of increasing comprehension and intelligibility that complements Parsa’s emphasis on clarity of intention. As Parsa observed, “accents are not an obstacle when actors know what they are saying.” Waters’s work demonstrated that specific word stress and changes in tone can help to convey intention clearly.

Symposium²

Keynote



Donna-Michelle St. Bernard delivers her keynote speech. “Let’s be bold, but let’s also look over our shoulder to see who’s behind us...”: one of many memorable observations. Photo: Nona Adil

The “Beyond Representation” symposium kicked off on Sunday evening, 9 April 2017 with a reception and a stirring keynote by emcee, playwright, agitator, administrator, mentor, and editor Donna-Michelle St. Bernard. St. Bernard addressed those who want to evolve a culturally diverse theatrical practice, bracketing off those who wished to do so for purely commercial or cynical reasons, and being careful to define “culture” to include “ethnic, deaf, queer, hip-hop, weird circus folk,” and all manner of other cultural formations. She was clear that “there are no rules,” but nevertheless laid out some explicit personal guidelines while encouraging everyone to develop and grow their own practices in an ever-evolving terrain.

- *How would it shape your practice if you were the centre of the universe?*

She encouraged everyone to consider how it would shape their practice if they were, or weren't, the centre of the universe, the standard by which everything else is judged. What opportunities and responsibilities would those positions entail? “I would have to know that I am not the most oppressed person in the room,” she said. “If I were at the centre, I'd have to turn around and see who's standing behind me.” “I would have to know who is embattled *because of me.*”

- *Accept that a symbol does not need your permission to have meaning*

Addressing symbols, images, and cultural formations, St. Bernard urged us not to assume, as creators, that ours mean the same for everyone, and not to imagine that we can restrict or control their meanings. “Accept that a [cultural] symbol does not need your permission to have meaning,” she urged. “What if the things you assumed to be understood by everyone just weren't?” But she also addressed the other side of this question, speaking as an audience member: “If I don't know what [your symbols and images] mean, that's on me. It's not your job to teach me. If you see it as your job to translate your stuff to ‘normal’ people you are alienating yourself from yourself.” What makes working across cultural difference both productive and challenging, then, is that “Your experience of the world is not my experience of the world,” and meaning is up for grabs (or negotiation). “Don't say, ‘no, that's not what that means.’”

- *Do not ask people to perform their authenticity or to speak for their community*

St. Bernard also addressed the vexed question of authenticity, or more precisely the demand that people *perform* their authenticity. “The performance of authenticity is more common than authenticity,” she said. “And the performance of authenticity is the act of stepping into what is expected. It is crushing, and you should never do it.” She similarly addressed the demand that performances represent *singular* identities: “Sometimes because we are broken up into our pieces and asked to stand for one or another part of ourselves [speaking as a woman, as a person of colour, as a member of the queer community, and so on] we forget that we are our whole selves at all times, that our adjectives are not interchangeable, they are constantly cumulative.” And no one individual should be required to speak for, or represent, a community.

- *Ask “who is or isn’t in the work? Am I being fair to those least like me?”*

St. Bernard outlined the questions that she asks of her own practice: “Where are you in the work? Where am I? Who isn’t here?” As a creator of characters, she further asked, “who of these characters is least like me? Have I been unkind, or unfair, or have I made assumptions?” “[I] have caused these people to exist. For what?”

- *Accept the criticism, fix your mistakes, and try to do better*

St. Bernard spoke anecdotally out of her own practice as a theatre-maker, and every story was about her own imperfection. She did not hesitate to discuss the difficulties of cross-cultural practice, and indeed focused much of her attention on the ways in which working this way frequently incurs wrath, backlash, and criticism. But perhaps her strongest message was that this feedback needs to be taken as productive, and as a reason to move forward, try again, and fail more productively. “Sit there and take it, then fix it and do better.” “To try once and fail is not enough,” she urged. “Let’s be bold, but let’s also look over our shoulder to see who’s behind us, with the understanding that we may not be the authority in this particular situation.” “Be bold, and make mistakes, but never be careless. I shouldn’t take risks for you.”

- *You can’t get permission from a culture, but you have to ask. Everything is a negotiation*

Addressing the issue of cultural appropriation directly, she asserted that “it is not possible to get permission from a culture, [but] that said, you still have to ask.” “Everything is a collaboration, everything is a negotiation, everything is an accommodation. [And] for every accommodation I have received, I feel compelled to look over my shoulder and see what I can offer.”

Directing Across Difference

This panel, chaired by Jivesh Parasram, was concerned with how directors can take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the presence of people of different cultures, abilities, backgrounds, training, and traditions. The panelists were Jill Carter, Karin Randoja, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Soheil Parsa, a last-minute substitute for Ravi Jain, who was unable to attend, but sent in comments.

Diversity, Difference, Dissonance

Parasram parsed the etymology and meanings of “difference,” considering its resonances with setting apart, distinguishing one thing from another, and dissonance, which led some of the panelists to reflect on the management of difference, conflict, and competing cosmologies in rehearsal. Verdecchia insisted on distinguishing diversity from difference, the former being about “togetherness,” and the presence of a fundamental sameness across differences that are seen as inessential. Difference, however, he saw as working across difficulty and encountering productive places where we *don’t* see one another as fundamentally



ASL Interpreter Anna Lee (foreground) signs during the “Directing Across Diversity” panel (sitting: Jivesh Parasram, Jill Carter, Soheil Parsa, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Karen Randoja). ASL interpretation was provided for the entirety of the symposium’s events. Photo: Juan Pablo

the same, where disjunction, dissonance, and disagreement are valued. Randoja, however, agreeing that “we are all equally different,” asserted that, more importantly for her, “we are all equally the same.” “Diversity and difference are wonderful, and can teach and illuminate so much,” she argued. “But they should never set us apart.”

- *It doesn’t have to be about conflict*

Parasram asked what happens when difference issues come into conflict. Parsa argued that he welcomes such moments, when one’s assumptions are challenged. “As long,” he said, “as it’s about the work. Not individual egos.” Carter agreed: “I find it interesting to hear all the conflicting world views,” she argued, citing conflicting European and Indigenous creation stories. “We don’t have to fight about the truth. All creation stories touch upon the truth of human genesis and meaning, and more importantly [...] all creation stories are valuable because they communicate a profound truth about their adherents. It doesn’t have to be about conflict. We’re open and we share. We don’t have to be afraid.”

- *Defer to people who know more than you do*

Verdecchia talked about deferring to those in the company with greater knowledge of the cultural context, or even to a cultural consultant. “I’d defer to people who know better than I do, which seems the only sensible thing to do.” He also talked about his current project of writing an adaptation of *The Conference of the Birds*, by Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar. “I’m working across radically different worldviews,” he said: his own “secular, European, materialist, skeptical,” as opposed to the mystical Sufi poem that is his source, and that works

towards the annihilation of the soul in God. “I can do that,” he says, “because I’m working closely with Soheil [Parsa] and because for years my Persian, Sufi friends have been teaching me about Sufism.” Nevertheless, he says, pointing to the limits of incorporative interculturalism, “the piece will fall inside a western theatre tradition.”

- *If there’s conflict, show it*

An audience member asked how much of the conflict and tension during the process is shown to the audience. All of the respondents replied, with Randoja, “if there’s conflict, show it.” She used the example of *This is the Point*, on which she worked with playwright/performer Tony Diamanti, who himself contributed to the discussion. Diamanti, who has cerebral palsy, has limited movement and is non-verbal, and Randoja attributed to this the fact that “the regular theatre timing wasn’t there, but something else more interesting was happening.” Parasram pushed this towards actually *encouraging* difference, noting that there’s often more diversity than is generally acknowledged, while Verdecchia tied the discussion to the value of productively *not* meeting audience expectations for closure, or conflict resolution.

- *Implicate the audience*

Randoja extended this to the also-productive practice of *implicating* the audience in the issues and histories that the work deals with, particularly in the case of a show such as Indigenous playwright Cliff Cardinal’s *Huff*, which she directed. *Huff*, she suggested, directly addressed its settler audiences’ empathetic wish to be “helpful” as an attitude that is potentially complicit in the colonial project. It refused, that is, to let its audience off the hook.

The Director’s Power

Parasram asked about the problem of power, and how negotiations across difference could happen when power in the rehearsal hall is distributed unequally.

- *You need somebody to stop the discussion*

Parsa acknowledged that, as a director, he is in a position of power insofar as he chooses the piece and drives the vision, and that collaboration happens after that. As Verdecchia says, “we rely on the director for some parameters, but I rely on my collaborators to bring *their* parameters into the room.” But given the tendency for negotiation to take the form of endless, sometimes circular talk, all agreed that, as Randoja put it, “you need somebody to stop the discussion.” “You are the power that leads,” she said, “but you are also nothing—just a conduit for the energies in the room.” Carter added that there are times when she is quite comfortable holding the power if she is entrusted with it, but that she is also comfortable with handing power over to people she trusts. Trust is essential; when there is trust, she said, the power relationships are “fluid.”

Strategies

Several strategies surfaced, directed at opening a space for negotiations across difference.

- *Plunge yourself into deep time, where conciliation across difference might begin*

Parsa stated his preference for operating outside of time and place as a way of mediating across difference, because no-one's specificities are at play, and concern for representational consistency is obviated. In a timeless, placeless setting, a Colombian mother can without cognitive friction have an Asian son. What he calls the "myth" of a play occurs in mythical time, outside of any single cultural or historical context (which is more appropriate for culturally specific work). Carter seemed to concur, in spite of operating out of a specifically Indigenous (Anishinaabe) position: "I'm obliged to plunge myself into deep time, ceremonial time," she said, "where all times are one and where conciliation across difference might begin."

- *Any kind of cross-cultural work needs to be long, and slow, and patient*

Verdecchia and Carter steered the discussion of time to the material realities of Canadian theatre. "Any kind of cross-cultural work needs to be long, and slow, and patient," Verdecchia argued, suggesting that arts funders need to consider the fact that working across difference can't easily be addressed in a 4-week rehearsal process.

- *All the rules have to be set aside to accommodate different bodies*

Carter added other frameworks imposed by granting agencies, rehearsal spaces, accessibility issues, theatre agreements, and funding. Citing working with nonagenarian Guna and Rappahannock actor Gloria Miguel she argued that all the rules have to be set aside to accommodate different bodies, bodies that can't access the provided spaces or can't be expected to work eight-hour days six days a week.

- *Listen, share, be curious, be suspicious of yourself, engage in "deep collaboration"*

Each of the panelists commented on the need for what Verdecchia called "deep collaboration," listening, curiosity, and "suspicion of oneself." Ravi Jain's written contribution reflecting on the Greek theatre as "a sound instrument," and on its tendency to stage women, children, and others, talked about democracy's concern with "how you listen" — along with theatre's concern to make the invisible visible and eliminate barriers. Randoja concurred. Citing the need for profound curiosity when working across difference, she argued that "my job is to *see* — what, or who, is in front of me, and how I can draw on that." Carter emphasized the importance of generously sharing stories as a way of letting one another know who we are. Verdecchia advanced deep collaboration as a way of addressing any director's limitations in terms of engaging with cultural and theatrical forms with which they can never been sufficiently familiar. He also cautioned that directors need to be deeply suspicious of themselves, their processes, their taken-for-granted. "It is possible," he argued, "that we're just repeating the biases that we've internalized through our training, our practice, and our culture."

Beyond Accents

This panel, chaired by Marjorie Chan, focused on the various languages of the theatre, on translation, on acting with accents, on signing, and on supertitles in order to explore techniques by which linguistic differences (interpreted broadly) can be used as tools for the creation of new theatrical forms. The panelists were Samreem Aziz, Cynthia Ashperger, Julia Lenardon, and Shelley Liebembuk.

Chan began with a series of questions: How should plays that are written in English, but feature characters living in a different country and speaking in another language, handle the dialogue? What are theatre schools doing to prepare students for a diverse marketplace? What role does sur- or supertitling have in an increasingly diverse theatre community? What about performers with accents? Where is there space in Canadian theatre for works that do not feature English or French?

- *Move beyond the myth of “standard pronunciation”*

Ashperger addressed the challenges faced by “audible minorities,” who are rarely included in conversations about diversity. Accents often consign performers to “self-portraiture,” rarely allowing them to perform in roles that do not correspond with their identity position. Pointing to the ways in which English has become a *lingua franca*, and to the cultural plurality of Canada, Ashperger insisted that “standard pronunciation” (generally understood as “un-accented speech”) is an abstract phenomenon. How, Ashperger asked, might Canadian theatres engage a multiplicity of English pronunciations that better reflect this reality and its far-reaching socio-political implications?

Lenardon, an accent coach, complemented this view in her discussion of her work, which emphasizes not “accent reduction” but clarification. She challenged the view that actors must get rid of their accent, which is an indelible part of who they are; rather, actors must be empowered to embrace their accents. “Clarification” does not refer to a universal standard but is a fluid term based on how the actor speaks. As an example, Lenardon referred to her work with a Moroccan stand-up comedian, whose process of “clarification” constituted a focus on intonation, pitch, and rhythm.

- *Explore the spaces between culturally-specific knowledges for creative possibility*

Aziz, a Deaf artist, spoke about conditions that privilege “hearing theatre” and that often result in cultural appropriation when a hearing actor is chosen for a deaf role. *cas9*, directed by Peter Cockett and featuring Aziz, was a rare exception: it de-centred “hearing privilege” by integrating Deaf and hearing artists. Aziz noted the importance of changing perceptions about the presence of interpreters. They are not there to make the work accessible to Deaf performers. Rather, interpreters are for people who do not share the same language. Rather than seeing the meeting of hearing and Deaf cultures as an impasse, *cas9* sought ways of bridging that difference. Aziz noted that as a director, Cockett worked as an ally of Deaf culture, viewing Deafness as a quality rather than a disability. During the rehearsal process, “if something became a barrier or a hindrance,” she added, “it wasn’t about being Deaf or an inability to do something; it was approached as a challenge.” When theatres actively work towards

bridging difference with mutual respect, only then will we have a theatre that is open, accessible, and diverse. From the audience, Cockett reflected on the spaces between culturally-specific knowledges as exciting creative territory. In Cockett's view, encounters *between* culturally distinct ways of working are opportunities that open up creative possibilities for the stage.

- *Move beyond language as a problem to language as a possibility and allow moments of "short-circuiting" to give way to new theatrical form*

From her position as a dramaturg working in multilingual theatre, Liebembuk shared her interests in theatre for code-switchers, moving between languages and cultures. Her work focuses on ways of working that invite performer-creators based on their multiple fluencies, languages, and cultural knowledges. How can we invite other ways for the body to speak? Liebembuk noted the inevitable moments of short-circuiting in the multilingual rehearsal process, which produce exciting moments of tension that allow a rethinking of theatrical form and offer different ways of working. After a rehearsal process such as this the playtext could be performed in English, but the final production would integrate layers of multilingualism and physical vocabularies that have been internalized by performers.

- *Embrace moments of incomprehensibility*

Liebembuk asked how a multilingual theatre might invite audiences to navigate the challenges of comprehension alongside performers. Can we play productively with limits to comprehension and the inability to understand?

In response to an audience member's question about the possibilities of surtitling, Aziz spoke about *cas9*'s movement between dynamic surtitling and voice-over translation of a signed scene, which shaped the scenographic space in innovative ways. Cockett added that while their goal was to make the show equally accessible to a hearing and a Deaf audience, their intention was not to make the performance understandable to everyone at every moment: "Everyone was in this position of trying to reach across this language divide to try to understand. In some moments, there was a bombardment of surtitles so that you couldn't possibly understand; at other times, the actors were talking over each other [...]. [W]e created a certain amount of linguistic confusion, which represented the gap between cultures." Aziz noted that Deaf people don't have surtitles when they go about their daily lives, go to the movies, so to place audiences in spaces of incomprehension was a way of approximating that experience.

- *Don't leave yourself at the door*

For Liebembuk, one of the more interesting aspects of multilingual theatre is how it can trouble the "representational expectations" that attend particular cultural positions. Liebembuk is not interested in colour-blind casting practices that celebrate diversity but erase difference. Rather, she is interested in theatre that honours cultural specificity. This way of working breaks from that tradition of "leave yourself at the door." For Aziz, ASL is

something one embodies from the moment one acquires the language: “There is facial language, there is visual grammar, there are time and tense markers that are shown on the face. These are elements that are embedded in you. We have a different structure in terms of subject, verb, and object. [...] An English phrase doesn’t necessarily translate into ASL in a one-to-one relation; one has to keep in mind different cultural experiences.”

The Critical Difference

This session, chaired by Harvey Young, asked: “how can theatre critics find inspiration from theatrical practices that emerge from diverse cultures? How can they learn to watch such work with new eyes, welcoming difference beyond clichés about tolerance, tokenism, representation, and universalism? Have the professional practices of the Euro-American theatre tradition limited our understandings of what ‘good theatre’ is or can be? What is the critical practice of difference?” The panelists were Ric Knowles, Carly Maga, J. Kelly Nestruck, and Glenn Sumi.

- *Educate yourself; train yourself to be more open*

To everyone’s surprise, the session began with three theatre critics, Nestruck (*Globe and Mail*), Sumi (*Now Magazine*) and Maga (*Toronto Star*) each independently apologizing for reviews that they had written that Nestruck characterized as (culturally) “ignorant.” This led all three to propose various ways of educating oneself. Nestruck talked about the educational role of doing interviews, writing features, and getting to know the companies he was reviewing. He talked about the need to do research about what one is entering into, and to “train yourself to be more open,” believing that artistic choices *are* choices rather than necessarily failures.

- *See what’s being done elsewhere in the world*

Sumi talked about the need to see theatre from other countries in order to learn to be open to different styles, and to re-examine what we take for granted. Nestruck cited such traditional wisdoms as “show, don’t tell” as being fundamentally Eurocentric, acknowledging that various culturally-specific story-telling traditions can be very powerful. “There are a lot of things I’ve had to unlearn,” he said.

- *Refrain from telling minoritized communities what shows they should be doing*

Panelist Ric Knowles read from Yvette Nolan’s *Medicine Shows* about reviews of *Death of a Chief*, Native Earth Performing Arts’ adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, in which non-Native reviewers, assuming an authority that was not theirs, lectured the company on what shows were or were not relevant to “Native issues.”

- *Contextualize appropriately: not all “brown plays” are the same*

Knowles also read from a blog by Marjorie Chan in which she chastised reviewers for discussing Afghan Canadian Kawa Ada’s epic, imagistic, and episodic work spanning decades

and borders, *The Wanderers*, in the context of Ins Choi's one-room naturalistic family comedy, *Kim's Convenience*, presumably because they are both "ethnic plays." "I have a growing concern," she wrote, "with the ease with which reviewers dismiss a culturally-diverse piece of theatre, seemingly because it didn't meet their own expectations of what they knew or what they desired to see onstage." The panelists, acknowledging the difficulty of "researching a culture," nevertheless cited the benefits of getting to know the work and mandates of the presenting companies, developing relationships over time, and paying attention to materials made available to them as ways of thickening their understanding of the work and the contexts within which it should be discussed.

- *Be publicly challenged, take it, and learn from it*

Carly Maga talked about the training, development, and mentoring of theatre critics, and about the need to learn from one's critics: "be publicly challenged, and take it." But she also discussed the need to be open to forms outside of a European tradition, to draw on informed sources.

- *It's not the company's responsibility to inform you*

But Maga also argued that it is not the responsibility of the artists or theatre companies to inform critics about what they're doing: "Don't assume that it's not your own responsibility to find stuff out." The consensus emerged that the responsibility for learning and disseminating culturally specific knowledges was a shared one among the companies, the media, and the public, and should rely on a better developed culture of *exchange*.

- *Acknowledge your position and your limitations*

Beyond that, Maga noted, it is the responsibility of critics to acknowledge where they're coming from and what their limitations are. As one audience member argued, "positioning yourself is essential."

- *Promote diversity, don't just report it*

Another audience member asked whether the panelists saw it as their responsibility to *promote* diversity, to the degree that "you need to help us diversify our audiences, to get different people to come and see our shows." The reviewers all indicated that, despite the imperatives to see certain "mainstream," rarely wildly diverse shows, they tried to carry out this responsibility, and as Sumi said, they tried also to address the issue through layout, whenever possible featuring people from minoritized communities in order to make their work more visible. Knowles pointed out that the issue was not only about *what* shows they cover, but also about *how* they cover them. He recounted Jovanni Sy's observation that the Modern Times/Cahoots coproduction of *The Sheep and the Whale* had been widely praised for its diverse casting, but no critic noticed that a concurrent production of Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched* "represented a bold experiment in cross cultural casting" because it cast all-white

actors to play its exclusively middle-eastern roles. “In other words,” Sy argued, “a predominantly ‘white’ cast portraying Arabs was so ‘normal’ that it didn’t even merit comment.”

- *Produce more long-form writing as cultural journalism*

The panelists agreed on the benefits of working beyond single-show reviews, producing features, previews, interviews, and essays that discuss broader topics and move writing about theatre beyond consumer reporting into the realm of cultural journalism. The event ended with the wish that theatre, *and writing about theatre*, might thereby take its place as a key site for the negotiation of cultural—including cross-cultural—values.

Intercultural and Activist Theatrical Practice

As chair Spy Dénoimé-Welch indicated, this session took a different form from the others, as four scholars—Yasmine Kandil, Diana Manole, Yana Meerzon, and Harvey Young, presented twenty-minute papers, followed by questions and discussion.

The Ethics of Applied Theatre

Drawing on her own experience as a participant and an observer, Yasmine Kandil focused on applied theatre which presents the personal stories of non-professionals, usually refugees, immigrants, or victims of trauma. She made a series of concrete recommendations:

- *Place the tellers in powerful positions*
- *Provide the appropriate context, including information on the author-subjects*
- *Make sufficient support available for participants (e.g. checking in at the beginning and end of each day; making counselling services available)*
- *Define the purpose of the project in advance, outline the steps to be taken, and coordinate these with the participants’ needs*
- *Create a safe space. Constitute the company as a support network*
- *Raise awareness (letting everyone know that it is a delicate process)*
- *Choose a creative team in culturally appropriate and culturally informed ways*

Intercultural Translation

Yana Meerzon, recounting her experience of translating Nikolai Gogol’s *The Marriage* into English for the purposes of a student’s directing project, outlined some principles for what she called “relational translation”:

- *Translate rhythms, design, and structure rather than words*
- *Recognize the dramatic text as a sound score and a scoring of characters’ actions*
- *Keep the original’s visceral and somatic potential intact*
- *Recreate the complexities of the original*
- *Engage in translation as a collaboration*
- *Find equivalencies in speech and line length, punctuation, and structure*

Resignifying Multilingualism

Using Nada Humsi's *I Am Dakbel Faraj* as a case study, Diana Manole spoke about untranslated multilingualism on stage, discussing intercultural theatre as a border space. She argued that “non-standard” accents can be a means of acknowledging, negotiating, and integrating difference, but she preferred to allow actors to use their untranslated first languages. Several principles can be abstracted from her analysis:

- *Do not simply sprinkle untranslated words or phrases from non-dominant languages throughout a predominantly dominant-language show; rather, allow them to carry full and necessary meaning*
- *Rather than asking actors to speak in accented English, have them speak in their untranslated “mother tongue,” including ASL*
- *Allow the visceral nature of untranslated speech to have its full affective impact on audiences*
- *Don't use surtitles*

Gender Fluidity and Theatrical Practice

This session, chaired by Brendan Healy, was organized as a community discussion by the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts (TAPA), asking how performance award categories might better acknowledge artistic practices that move beyond the gender binaries of “Outstanding Performance—Female” and “Outstanding Performance—Male.” Using Toronto's Dora Mavor Moore Awards as the conversation starter, panelists Sze-Yang Ade-Lam, Alec Butler, and Gein Wong set out to unpack the practice of gender fluidity and equality. The symposium organizers' goal was to ask what new aesthetic and political possibilities are generated for directors, designers, and actors when they treat gender fluidity as a creative opportunity, and how critics and juries might take such opportunities and possibilities into account.

The panel began with an account by trans panelist Ade-Lam of the initial denial of their right to be nominated in both male and female categories at the Doras. They concluded the statement with this proposal to “white gate keepers”:

I want gender non-conforming people and trans people to be able to register their art in the ways that suit them. I want the art of queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, people of colour, of varying body types, ability, and class backgrounds to be honoured, awarded, in the way they/we want to be awarded, and I want a commitment to an implementation plan for change.

Healy invited the panelists to explore the intersections of gender fluidity, trans, queer, and two-spirit issues in the broader context of racialization, class, culture, and other identity categories, and to propose ways of working that might address systemic problems of theatrical practice. The processes recommended included:

- *Work from a place of non-hierarchy (Butler)*
- *Never make assumptions based on gender; create a space that is open to change (Ade-Lam)*
- *Spread out the leadership (Wong)*
- *Switch gender roles (Wong)*
- *Privilege a performer's spirit over their (gendered) physicality (Healy)*



Natalie Alvarez and Ric Knowles frame the symposium’s content during the opening reception. For them, the work of the symposium represented a first step in the exploration of cultural diversity as a creative inspiration in the rehearsal hall. Photographer: Nona Adil

Suggestions emerging from the audience included:

- *Constitute governing institutions to include representatives of a broadly diverse society*
- *Consider access as a resource*

The session was dominated by testimonials to the difficulties encountered by trans, gender-queer, and racialized artists working within a trans-phobic, patriarchal, white-supremacist culture and industry. Ade-Lam, together with Butler, Wong, and many audience members—perhaps because they had come out for the TAPA community consultation and had not attended earlier sessions at the symposium—focused on the drawbacks of an awards system and larger industry that reified problematic gender binaries and systemic barriers faced by marginalized artists, rather than on gender fluidity as a potentially positive tool in the rehearsal hall and in performance.

Reflections

Postmarginal was a successful first step in discussing and modelling a renewed theatrical practice in which diversity could provide new creative opportunities rather than barriers. But it was only a first step.

The organizers observed a gravitational pull towards a familiar dialogue on identity politics, perhaps most strongly in the panels on theatre criticism and gender fluidity.

We believe that there is still room for more productive discussions on the role of these two latter themes in a creative space. How does a critic’s fluency in culturally-diverse performance figure in the creation of new spectator-performer relationships that can enable the inclusion of difference? How can gender-fluid performances expose the public to new non-binary interpretations of gender-normalized drama?

During the question and answer period for the “Beyond Accents” panel, an audience-member raised the question as to why no one had addressed the “elephant in the room,” namely, realism, alluding to the ways in which its representational apparatus is, in many ways, responsible for the historical exclusion and marginalization of minoritized and racialized identities. Realism has become a common critical target as an aesthetic form that naturalizes the ideological worldview of the white, male, heterosexual subject and estranges those who do not fit into this normative social order. But such critiques risk creating a hierarchy of aesthetic forms between the “mainstream” and conventional versus the radical and avant-garde, leading critics to dismiss “popular” theatre as politically vacuous. Such a hierarchy potentially dismisses the efforts of so-called minoritized and racialized identities who struggle with visibility in “the mainstream.” To what extent do Canadian audiences have a predetermined set of expectations of what constitutes a “real” moment in the theatre? If an audience member can suspend disbelief while looking at a kitchen whose walls are obviously created by 4’ x 8’ flats, why can they not be expected to suspend disbelief while watching a family played by actors with different accents?

Part of the current quagmire of discourse and practice around cultural diversity stems from the various understandings of cultural appropriation and what defines its limits, particularly in a creative process. If the postmarginal rehearsal hall explores the space between cultures as a means to find new performance vocabularies, how can we understand and negotiate a code of respect that allows us to function as creators in the rehearsal hall, in the hope that potential conflict or psychological hurt can be addressed in an open conversation, in the same way that physical risk for an actor can be mitigated through certain mutually established “ground rules”? The rehearsal hall is an imaginary world in which the removal of societal masks and taboos is often at the basis of creating interesting and provocative work, and does not imply that the explorations will end up unfiltered or without context in a final product. The actor’s work, moreover, is always appropriative, insofar as it involves assuming the identity of another. How can this work be engaged in ways that are respectful and humble before difference while still engaging audiences with provocative and unfamiliar forms, ideas, and representations in ways that are neither voyeuristic nor objectifying?

When the discussion of cultural difference regularly returns to questions of representation, casting, and inclusion, how to move beyond that somewhat “familiar” territory without policing the conversation or forcing it into directions that, for some, might feel premature? To some, discussions of representation and appropriation remain as urgent as ever, and conversations about the “practice” of difference may smack of a particular kind of privilege that operates in a naive bubble from the oppressive political regimes that continue to regulate and ostracize those who do not “fit” within the normative status quo. But the shift in attention toward cultural difference as a *practice* does not dismiss the political realities that continue to constrain and shape the work. Panelists at “Beyond Representation” moved fluidly between a discussion of their artistic practices and the political stakes of those practices. The organizers remain hopeful that a shift in attention toward how the work of cultural difference gets done in rehearsal halls and studios offers a path forward from the deadlocked discourse of identity politics. But these new critical directions should not—and cannot—leave the political circumstances that shape those politics at the periphery of our attention.

Notes

- 1 For more information, please visit: postmarginal.ca/subject_creation/
- 2 For more information, please visit: postmarginal.ca/symposium

Work Cited

St. Bernard, Donna-Michelle. "What Did You Say About My Mother? On Being Productively Uppity." *Canadian Theatre Review* 146 (2011): 95-99. Print.