
Healing the Body Politic: 1968-2008. A Theatrical Reflection Across Time¹

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October 2nd, 1968:

A meeting is scheduled between university students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and representatives of the Mexican government. The goal is to resolve conflicts that had arisen after a cycle of violence and repression had been aimed against student and social movements that year. The government promised peace, but instead, on that night, 300 to 500 students and workers were killed in what would be called the massacre at Tlatelolco.

The week after the massacre, the Mexican government arrested nearly 2,000 people on suspicion of involvement with students and workers who had protested. These 2,000 people were imprisoned without trial at three different cities. Two months later, most of those who were detained were released. However, nearly eighty others remained in prison without a trial until 1971 at which point all charges were dropped, the individuals were released, and the government decided they had made a mistake in arresting them in the first place.

February 22nd, 2008:

It is the fortieth anniversary of the worldwide cultural revolutions of 1968. It is the seventh decade of the nuclear age. What happened in Mexico City that night on October 2nd, 1968 — an event remembered by many south of our border but curiously little remarked on here in the north — seems almost inconceivable today. Our world, after all, has changed. Progress has been made. The tumult of the 1960s — the sexual, social and political

revolutions of the ‘Boom’ era — have forged a new US society where the politics of representation (if not its poetics) and categories of identity have been addressed and re-dressed consistently over the last forty years. Race is a construct. Life is an artificial post-modern performance. And the modernist notion of creation and action in the real world is discounted in favor of the ascent of the reality show in the age of positive disenchantment.

But scroll through the physical and digital front pages of our news sources, and images from the conflicts and civil wars in Darfur, Kenya, Afghanistan and the ever-troubled Middle East, the so-called low-wattage repressive regimes alive and well in Cambodia and Belarus, and the unpredictable, seemingly progressive but yet to be determined neo-socialist coalitions forming amongst countries in South America, belie the instantly-achieved bright change tomorrow that seduces our wishful, collective imagination. Although enterprises of global connection, through significant advances in information and technology, have forged hybrid engagement and unity across borders and boundaries, division and disunity are visibly present in separatist actions on the political, cultural and linguistic fronts all over the world.

The beautiful fervor of redemptive hope is one that most societies cling to in order to move forward. If the body politic in which we live in the US has been rent — through the red vs. blue divide, for instance, that deepened considerably during President George W. Bush’s administration — in what ways can it be transformed and healed? And are we in the US ready as citizen-artists to do the kind of healing that faces both the truth of politics, and the more ambiguous truths of fiction and art? Is it possible to truly shrug off the post post-modern embrace of artifice and the simultaneous importance it places on discursive re-articulation and simulation, which a great part of Western democratic culture has accepted psychologically, ideologically and imagistically, in order to reclaim the modernist affirmation of artistic force?

The poetics of representation

Simon Critchley argues in his book *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007) that the new politics in order to be effective must be located at a distance from the state. Critchley identifies the politics of resistance as contingent upon the ethical dimension of the “infinitely demanding” call for justice. Operating outside the state’s terrain and borne out of new spaces outside its control, the kind of resistance that Critchley speaks of has to do with a consistently positioned

‘outsider’ status that depends symbiotically on the state’s recognition of its outsider-ness. Infinite demands are met occasionally and serve to reify the state’s benevolence in allowing such calls for action and protest to be made in the first place. Thus, a cycle of passive-aggressive resistance centered on philosophically infinite calls for the hope and advancement of citizens is put in motion. I do not wish to counter Critchley necessarily but use his articulated position of resistance to cast into the light the many ways in which politics and art not only differ but also how they can find a meeting place that is both infinite and finite.

If we consider the politics of representation that continue to govern much of practical and theoretical query in the arts and specifically in theatre, the uses of resistance (under Critchley’s definition) have been effective in challenging the languages, faces, bodies, signs, and elemental and sophisticated machineries at the forefront of play and practice. While identifying and dignifying a visible platform on our stages for the many languages (verbal, visual, emotional, spatial, temporal, accented and controversially unaccented) that shape our nation and culture is an ongoing struggle, nevertheless the infinite demands placed on the forms and uses of art made and seen have altered and in many cases transformed the way our histories are understood and taught. Yet the poetics of representation are inherently less easily grasped but I think more crucially in need of examination and indeed passage into the finite demands of our politics.

Art and literature, in the modernist sense, are strong, destabilizing forces in culture. If we set aside the post-modern dilemma that the real is reduced to representation and that there is no difference between an original and a copy, then it follows that instead of celebrating a culture of salvage from the debris of history (as we have done for almost thirty-five years), as theatre-makers and practitioners we could celebrate a culture of radical innovation in form and thought, which on the one hand would run counter to the status quo entrenched in disillusionment, cynicism and enamored of replication (and equally enamored of the illusion of classlessness and color-blindness, for that matter) and on the other would open up intensely aporofic possibilities for positive rupture. In effect: if we allow ourselves to meet the tragic human condition(s) in which we live through our art, are we not then opening ourselves and our culture up to engage in and reflect upon more complex and sensitive areas of existence?

To make art is an interventionist practice. Its very making posits difference and the acknowledgement of difference, which falls under the

politics *and* poetics of representation, and occurs against, and resistant to facile recognition and identification. Interventionist art cannot be discounted because of its difference. It cannot be swept away and summarily dealt with because it cannot go away easily once it's in the world. The mark of interventionist art is also related to its vulnerability to experience, travel, and melancholy. — One of the inheritances of modernity, in fact, is rupture and the sorrowful meditation that rupture engenders. The act of rupture is akin to being newly born into a new language, born into the blues, so to speak. It is also akin to traveling in a country where you don't speak the language of currency and capital but nevertheless make your travels anyway, finding the new paths and customs available to you but not readily and easily appropriated for consumption by you.

In the poetics of representation where interventionist art lives, memory, ghosts and healing are intertwined spiritually and metaphorically. It is hardly surprising that as a language of hope and instant renewal was used by the 2008 US Presidential election campaigns many artists in this and other countries were trying to recuperate and investigate erased cultural memories that spoke to repression, horrors of war, and uncivil acts of human behavior and order.

Subversion and its Vibrancy

If the outsider position central to resistance places primacy on its outsider status, then it is caught however vibrantly in its own surrender. Protest enables the state to acknowledge the beauty of protest but not necessarily to listen and respond to the changes demanded from protest. Hundreds of thousands of people protested against the Iraq War all over the world, and while the protests were of value in and of themselves, curiously they also served to legitimize the decisions made to invade Iraq. The cynical state used the act of protest to further bolster their argument for invasion.

Another country, another time: Argentina during the Dirty War and the act of continuous protest made by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Under threat and fear, they chose to not relinquish their resistance and demanded to be heard. The demands were strategic, unswerving and precise: Where are my children? Where is my family? They did not disappear. I remember. I remember. Slowly, in time, and with difficulty and great pain, the process of remembering, the process of entering the labyrinth and refusing to accept the enforced consensus that yes, these people, these citizens of the state, were simply gone, was an act of true subversion and radical resistance. The

state could not after a while, and the world could not after a while, turn the other way.

Theatre too is in and of the real world. Documentary, docu-drama, verbatim and journalistic theatre all fall under the rubric of speaking truth to power in a legitimate way, although all too often, however well-intentioned, it preaches to the converted and assuages residual guilt. Did David Hare's absolutely exceptional and thrilling *Stuff Happens* change anything in the end? Except make us laugh at our own inescapable and horrible machinations of war? A good night out, as the late John McGrath of 7:84 famously said, is what he didn't want his audience to have, because you forget that good night out as merely that, and if your goal as an interventionist citizen-artist is to shake things up, then really shake things up.

Let us consider acts of radical resistance as we consider acts of theatre-making in the theatre of everyday life, human engagement and intimacy. Let us also consider the options for resistance in the theatre of artifice, which is situated in the limbic state between itself and the world, between private, subjective consciousness and its articulation, public presence, action and thought. The taut string of the subversive and revolutionary stance, of work that runs counter to the game of mere "hysterical provocation" (to quote Slavoj Žižek in his critique of Badiou, 1998) does not seek to cut the line of responsibility between the demand of the infinite and the options for response from the state and public, but rather to test the heroic endurance of the strategic demands themselves, and the state and public's inability to shrug off demands that call for attention.

Vibrant subversive resistance in our art-making is not, therefore, a utopian premise or an unstable position within an old paradigm but rather a positive and necessary act of will and love for true societal and artistic transformation. One of an artist's duties is to observe society's ills and offer possible diagnoses (not solutions, mind you) for those ills through the creation of work. In the modernist reclamation, the tragic human condition is not solved and does not exist without conflict. In effect, it holds onto its sadness and resists the seductions of happiness that grant illusions of completion when in reality — in truth — our natures as human beings are unfinished and incomplete.

Is it too much to ask of theatre and its artists to think of the form as free and in its subversive freedom expose to the light a desire for change by other means than the replication and complicit re-enforcement of the human-made operating systems of our state and world?

Is it too much to ask that theatre strive instead to make room for unpredictable and unexplainable sadness and the kind of ecstatic attentiveness to our mysterious, shifting interiors and exteriors that would then, in turn, require through the strategic-ness of its precision and unequivocal demands, true change and healing?

1968 wasn't just a cultural wake-up call the world over. A super coffee-table book you can look at and be amazed by its eccentricities and 'groovy' trappings. As a child born into the Age of Aquarius, perhaps I'm marked by a desire to re-animate the revolutionary spirit alive in our Americas, or perhaps I simply don't want the massacre of Tlatelolco to be forgotten as so many other massacres are conveniently forgotten for the sake of happy progress.

Notes

¹ This piece, edited for this publication, was originally written for and delivered at the 2008 NoPassport theatre alliance's "Dreaming the Americas: The Body Politic in Performance" Conference at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center at the City University of New York.