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A THEATRICAL MISSIVE: ABOUT *LETTER TWO*

When Michel Vaïs proposed I write on the *Letter Two* experience at Espace Libre, how it differed from the presentations in English-Canada, he stressed the Carte blanche invitation was not granted everyone. Besides, the *Letter* could not be classified as 'ordinary' theatre. Useless for *Jeu* to write a review; better if I wrote something, he said.

At first, I was intrigued – even impressed. No one in English-Canada makes that kind of offer to an actor/writer. Not even close. Not to my knowledge. (In Fall 2000 Catherine Graham of the *Canadian Theatre Review* had 'proposed' I edit an issue on directors, and was visibly confused when I suggested a title: "No directors in Canada". Never heard from her since. After all, what could an actor possibly add to a journal "...committed to excellence in the critical analysis and innovative coverage of current developments in Canadian theatre"?) Michel Vaïs' offer was serious (approved by *Jeu*'s editorial staff). That, in a nutshell, defines the difference between English-Canada and Québec (now we can go home and ponder our miserable exist-

tence as a very uncomfortable, 'bicultural' Chimera whose only salvation is a bullet to the head – all heads). That's the positive. Michel Vaïs' apparent *reason* for the offer was the negative. Here we go. We *are* one country, it seems.

What is 'ordinary' theatre?

I clung to his word 'ordinary', hating what it implied, realizing it was a clear, black-and-white judgment on *Letter Two* – on 'theatre'. A critic with forty years experience, Michel Vaïs believes *Letter Two* is *not* theatre (apparently, *Jeu*'s editorial staff concurs). I disagree – and told him so. And thanked him for supplying me with an entry point to *this* piece. To his credit, he was open to the challenge. That, too, impressed me, and also marks a substantial difference: Francophone Québécois are generally more willing to debate theatre and culture than English-Canadians (as further evidenced by audiences and critics at Espace Libre's *Letter Two* presentations). It's why they produce a 'relatively' more relevant culture.

But, if Michel Vaïs' key word is 'ordinary', mine is 'relatively' (*Letter Two* betrays my point; it exonerates Québec. *Letter One* drives it home). Vaïs' had the opportunity to correct my assessment of his comment. He didn't. And I couldn't let it pass – like a commedia dell'arte actor who incorporates, on the spot, an audience member's comment because it serves the play's theme. (It's how I developed the *Letters*.)

In fact, Vaïs' categorization springs from the same thinking that provoked the writing of the *Letters* (especially *Letter Two*,



Tony Nardi dans *Letter Two*, présentée à l'Espace Libre en septembre 2009. © Stéphane Dionne.

which rebukes people's cockeyed views on 'commedia dell'arte', on theatre, and their need to 'categorize'). His comment was a lid to a canful of labels and clichés on theatre we (thankfully) never got to discuss or dissect, catchwords enjoyed mainly by those "in the know", the majority: drunken actors, pretentious playwrights and directors, most critics, and the *professional* theatre audience. Moreover, it had an inbuilt assumption that he and I agreed on what constitutes theatre (that umbrella term for a set number of ironclad definitions for dramatic forms

alien and useless to most theatre artists). Conclusion? It's impossible to evaluate *Letter Two* in dramatic terms within existing and accepted standards of theatrical form. (Clearly, Vais' theoretical knowledge of, say, Dario Fo's work and my craft-based understanding of it inhabit different galaxies. Fo would definitely agree with Michael Chekhov: "The technique of acting (and therefore theatre) can never be properly understood without practicing it.)

Defining "what IS" with such glib certainty and rigidity leaves no room for breathing

or thinking outside the box and, therefore, for theatre. It screams "knowledge", like an erection on Viagra. It makes me wonder *what Vais' saw* in the *Letter* he saw. And exposes another *Canadian* trait: "We know". The problem is always "out there". Never *here*, where *we* stand. And you – and whomever you're talking to – are *never* at fault. You're the self-designated, self-ordained social scientists that decide who IS at fault.

Vais' belief also proves that, notwithstanding the substantial cultural difference between the "two solitudes", the difference is paradoxically *way* smaller than we think. Viewed from a healthy distance, one can't tell them apart. Beyond the gloss, language, food, iconic references and the so-called culture, the collective DNA, for better or worse, is essentially the same. It is ironic; in proposing a piece that partly addresses the differences between the two in their response to the *Letters*, Vais' comment underlines their core similarity: a surface understanding of theatre craft that essentially reflects a general, superficial understanding and practice of culture.

Vais' (and *Jeu's* editorial staff) is not alone. That's why I'm on his comment like a dog on a bone. Enough people from both cultures at the *Letters'* presentations have expressed a too-clear judgment on what theatre (culture) *is*, what it *isn't* and how others *should* define it. Too often I've heard the refrain, "Now that you've done the *Letters* isn't it time to get back to doing 'real' theatre?" as if there were a last word (and agreement) on what that is. It suggests (to me, at least) that there is a problem with how we, coast to coast, perceive theatre, understand the art form, its 'quality', and its purpose – and whom we deem qualified to define it. (I'm not implying I don't have a lot more craft to learn.)

At best, this reflects an unconscious arrogance of an adolescent country too keen to teach what it has yet to learn. It reminds us that we're a 'small town' country, victims of our auto-generated mediocrity and inauthenticity, talent notwithstanding, and prefer to plastic-cover our cultures (as immigrants did with furniture). That we're living in a time of theatre and culture 'specialists' only compounds the problem and produces more nausea.

The Québécoisness of Espace Libre

That *Letter Two* felt more at home in a French milieu, where its content was dealt with more directness, honesty and introspection, speaks volumes. That a Franco-Québécois theatre presented a piece in English (as with UQAM presenting *Letter One* in 2008) cannot be overstressed. Imagine the Centaur Theatre in Montreal – or any English-language theatre in Canada – presenting a Québécois

play in French with English surtitles? Not in our lifetime, it seems. No professional theatre in English-Canada, to date, has embraced the *Letters* like Espace Libre (Factory Theatre's much appreciated 2008 mini-presentation of *Letter Three* notwithstanding). Artistic director Olivier Kemeid's theatrical and *cultural* backgrounds, and his innate awareness that different voices make a culture, cannot be overlooked or undervalued. He (thanks to Paul Lefebvre's recommendation) was the main reason for *Letter Two* at Espace Libre.

Like all outsiders from *both* sides of the two solitudes, I can read between the lines faster than they're being drawn. So I'll say what some think and fewer say: Olivier Kemeid (like Paul Tana of UQAM) is not Québécois de souche, will never qualify, notwithstanding that he's Montréal-born and that (like Tana) he possesses great command and knowledge of the French language and culture. I'm not saying Kemeid's interest in *Letter Two* was based on something other than its theatrical merits or VOICE. I'm simply underlining that Espace Libre, in my opinion, does not reflect Québec's general outlook on culture (theatre, TV and cinema), 'other' voices and minorities. Last I checked, Normand Brathwaite was still the lone token '*othercultural*' mascot in Québec's *Cré Basile* (cocoon) reality. Nonetheless, Espace Libre hails from Québec, and Kemeid (like Tana) is a very 'reasonably accommodated' Québécois.

Michel Vais' editorial-staff-sanctioned 'categorization' *also* came from Québec, from the editor-in-chief of arguably its top and only theatre journal. I'd love to know

how his logic extends to his categorization of culture, and what qualifies.

Is it theatre?

Canadian actor Douglas Campbell¹ (one of the greats and a force of nature), co-moderator with actress/wife Moira Wylie at Espace Libre, said that *Letter Two* worked because it was expressed through the tools and exigencies of theatre. Many agree; the *Letters* are acts of theatre. Michel Vais argued he did not see *Letter Two* with Campbell as co-moderator, therefore based his comment on the night *he* saw it. I couldn't even begin to understand his logic. We left it at that so I could respond with this (writing).

Though the *Letters* are anti-theatre, in that they take issue with dead, establishment-inspired, over-costumed, over-designed, over-produced, over-enunciated, colonialist-infested, glossy, dressing-room theatre, they are essentially *theatrical*. They contain and respect dramatic narratives and structures. And music. They are symphonic solos. Jazz improvisations. That's how I wrote them and why I present them live. They are exhilarating and a bitch to deliver. And the actor doesn't wear a gabardine-thick Arlecchino costume and a half mask to mask (and absorb) fatigue (and sweat), but is 'naked'. And he doesn't run to the dressing room after the presentation to hide from the audience, catch his breath, drown in a bottle and count the missed opportunities, but faces the audience and the music,

1. Cet acteur est décédé le 5 octobre, à l'âge de 87 ans. Nous signalons sa disparition dans le bloc-notes de ce numéro. NDLR.

and applauds them for tolerating *him* for two and a half hours. *Letter Two* celebrates the isolation and the death of theatre and the actor while making a case for both. It's a serious, straightforward, Pirandellian Harlequinade. Where's the problem?

Michel Vais' concept of 'theatre', in my view, is the problem; it's closed and pre-packaged; it refers to a 'past' sold as a 'set present', wax-museum theatre, as dead as the pages all plays are written on. The theatre awaits a string of Hamlets to unset it. With a few exceptions, those who teach or preach the art form (academics and critics) usually have more difficulty defining the *Letters*. Practitioners of all art forms usually get it, and understand that craft fundamentals must be complemented with a healthy disrespect for orthodox methods.

Post-presentation discussions

The Q & A's at Espace Libre were some of the more dynamic to date. The filmed version of the *Letters* will sadly miss not having them in the mix. Douglas Campbell and Moira Wylie were, ironically, two of the most revolutionary moderators to date. No disrespect to the many amazing moderators over the last three years. Campbell and Wylie were eloquent voices in defense of the actor's role, acknowledging that the actor has lost his/her place in the theatre and has essentially become a mouthpiece/mannequin for other people's ideas and art (directors and designers). Campbell urged the young actors in the audience to *live* the life of the artist, totally and completely, to *DO* it (create theatre), to read and take interest in all subjects on

the human condition – that affect the world. He called for a revolution and questioned the present-day existence and relevance of (most) theatre schools and actors' unions, including the one he co-founded: Canadian Actors' Equity Association. At 87 years of age, his was the youngest voice to date. An anarchist (by his own admission). It was a privilege to have him – and Wylie – there. Like most moderators, they had not previously seen or read the *Letter*.

The 'oldest' voice was *The Gazette* critic Pat Donnelly. If ink were a commodity or a vaccine (some maintain it's both) she has squandered more than her share. Donnelly, incidentally, was present at the Wylie/Campbell discussion and reported it as follows: "On Friday night, Moira Wylie and Douglas Campbell joined Nardi on stage for the talkback. Which almost created a second play-after-the-play, with bold declarations on many subjects from Campbell, and bilingual participation from the crowd." (Olivier Choinière should have named names in his safe and veiled open letter – including Donnelly's².)

Two other voices stand out. Robert Lalonde stood up and said he had wished 80 of his colleagues had been there to see *Letter Two*. He said a lot more, but *THAT* said it all. Evelyne de la Chenelière was surprised at my comment that theatre, however great and relevant, is ultimately *irrelevant* (as proven by the many great playwrights throughout history and man's growing inhumanity to

man). My comment, according to her, undermined the relevancy of theatre and apologized for *Letter Two* (which she had liked). I disagreed. And suggested she was perhaps projecting. I have no problem living and sleeping with a paradox, I added. *She* might. Theatre is not the cure for cancer but we should execute our craft and make it relevant as if it were the cure (with the firm knowledge that it can never be). To the end, de la Chenelière insisted that she was being misunderstood and hadn't been given the chance to explain. Though I gave her a number of opportunities, even after the Q & A, she left, dissatisfied with our exchange, and I dissatisfied with her dissatisfaction.

Another anarchist, Rocco Galati, a constitutional lawyer and frequent *Letters'* moderator, unfortunately missed the Espace Libre presentations, busy confronting similar problems of *reasoning* and *rigour* within the Federal Court. Like few in the theatre, he immediately recognized the diseased template the *Letters* address (and subsequently produced, single-handedly, the filming of all three, supporting, mainly, the voice behind the *Letters* and not always their content).

The many presentations in Toronto were varied. Some were exceptional (even magical), but mostly attended by a handful. Each *Letter*, seemingly attracting a different audience from different communities, had strong supporters and equally intense detractors (usually more of the latter). The presentations were memorable mainly on account of those who *didn't* attend or who *did* attend but didn't *engage*. Overall, people *not* in theatre (or the arts) were more open and responsive

2. Voir Olivier Choinière, « Très cher critique de théâtre à Montréal », dans *Jeu* 131, 2009.2, p. 8-10, et Pat Donnelly, "Cannibalism in *Van Diemen's Land*, Tony Nardi's *Letter Two*, and *Coma Unplugged*", *The Gazette*, 5 septembre 2009. NDLR.

to the issues, proving that theatre artists are behind the times.

Many Q & A's began with a silent, prolonged thud, like I'd landed from outer space, or had killed their first-born, reflecting the serious effects of cultural and political colonialism: arrested development and an inability to think (critically) for oneself. A far cry from the pre-Socratic philosophers spawned by the Greek colonies in southern Italy. Intuitively, the idea of moderator was born from my fear of having to dialogue with that silence. The moderator was a necessary broker, social laxative and cattle prodder (and free to prod me, as well).

Members of the so-called Italian-Canadian community (in Toronto and Montreal) were perhaps those least present at the *Letters*. When they did show up, their critical comments, attitudes and indifference were – for the most part – an accurate reflection of a lost and largely irrelevant community, where creating and producing authentic culture is concerned.

In Spring 2008 a Toronto-daily theatre critic who hasn't seen the *Letters* said it best, in an e-mail: "In the last two decades, I can't remember too many things that have generated as much ink – and as much discussion as your shows (*Letters*). The irony, of course, is that my editors insist that, while I may be very interested in what you have to say on theatre, the whole thing is too much of an insider's point of view for it to be of general interest to our readers... And you say that insiders are staying away." The ultimate irony? A largely silent and invisible theatre community gave *Two Letters* a Dora nomination for outstanding new play.

Who needs theatre?

Only those who work *in* theatre seem to need it. For what purpose? That's a question many shy away from, like criminals at a border crossing, afraid it might expose their crime. The question is primarily for those *in* the theatre. It doesn't diminish the art form or the effort. It's meant to demand more from both.

English-Canada doesn't have theatrical heralds like René-Daniel Dubois. Only in its dreams and nightmares. I separate him from the rest not as a slight against the others (Evelyne de la Chenelière, Olivier Choinière or Raymond Cloutier), but because he is presently a standard – like no other. Is Québec better off for having them? In its dreams, it seems. In the end, their effect, overall, is relative. They are "heroes for sale" in a 'nation' that likes heroes and celebrates them. But mainly a showpiece, convenient clowns, where "tout le monde en parle" for one day, and then on to the next. And when they walk the street, people who know them (peers) cross the road to avoid them, ignore them or throw them a smile with too many teeth, that confirms how petty, meaningless and dead this 'beautiful' theatre milieu and culture really is.

The power of theatre (art) as a call to humanity is crucial and grossly overrated. Quality aside, theatre will never be central to our modern life. As practiced, it's mostly cheap film on stage, increasingly becoming a 'fashion runway', with characters and personalities talking to each other, in-flesh whores with emotions for sale, and a lab-window wall between audience and actors, leaving little oxygen for both. A well-manicured zoo – with keeper. And those who spend their lives

caged in one eventually forget they have little in common with those who roam free in the (wild) natural world. The transaction between actor and audience is the *only* element worth defending and fighting for in the theatre, whatever the form or style. And if and when theatre dies, completely, the last standing theatre artist will be an actor (the one that started it all), not a writer, director, or critic.

The signs show that it won't be a Canadian or Québécois actor. Sure, one can argue that an actor would sooner die in Québec than in English-Canada. But as a victory it's so relative and meaningless, and would look fittingly ridiculous on a c.v. – or on a tombstone. I thank Michel Vaïs – and *Jeu's* editorial staff – for resuscitating Voltaire's maxim (defending an opinion one disagrees with) in a time when most people have forgotten it (especially those in the theatre). ■



GRAPHISME ET ILLUSTRATION : Folio et Garetti.