

MIXED COMPANY THEATRE'S ROLE IN PERFORMANCE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

by Luciano Iogna and Simon Malbogat

To examine Mixed Company Theatre's role in working with communities on the issue of civic engagement, we must first put Mixed Co. in an historical context.

Mixed Company Theatre: A Brief History

Begun as a collective (Steven Bush, Allan Booth, Simon Malbogat and Nancy Hindmarsh) in Toronto in 1982, Mixed Company Theatre was created to present plays dealing with contemporary social issues (male violence in *BOYS WILL BE...*, unemployment in *LIFE ON THE LINE*, education in *BAD APPLES*, the Canadian labour movement in *JOE BEEF*, etc.). When the collective dissolved, Simon Malbogat stayed on as sole Artistic Director, keeping Mixed Co.'s status as a not-for-profit theatre with its focus on social issues – but also beginning to explore the potential of Forum Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed methodologies as a tool for social change. By 1991, the vision was clear: to fully integrate arts into communities, though not exclusively with Forum Theatre.

Although Mixed Co. has always taken part in organizations representing the theatre community in Toronto (Theatre Ontario, the Toronto Association for the Performing Arts and the Theatre for Young Audiences Association), it has not always been readily accepted by other groups that represent mainstream theatre, such as the Canadian Actors Equity Association and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres or even at times by certain arts-funding bodies like the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. In its attempt to redefine the role of theatre, Mixed Co.'s work was labelled as 'Community Development' or 'Community Animation' or 'Social Animateurs'. This distanced Mixed Co. from the rest of the Canadian mainstream. It was a catch-22 because while Mixed Co. felt they were a part of the theatre community the perception was that they didn't

belong. Despite Mixed Co.'s innovative development of a unique working model and increasing international profile, the model just didn't fit the structure demanded by its peers and funding organizations. The lesson: if you are looking to take theatre outside the traditional mainstream definition, you'd better be prepared to grow a thick skin and expect funding challenges!

Due to the very nature of Forum Theatre (see: A Note on Forum Theatre below), it was impossible to be separate from the community when creating plays of social import. We worked with the homeless on issues of poverty, with women's organizations and shelters on issues of domestic violence, within various communities on issues of alcohol and drug addiction, with unions on issues of harassment in the workplace, with schools and students on issues of racism, etc. By the mid '90s Mixed Co. Theatre had established itself as a leading Forum Theatre producer and gained a reputation within local and regional communities for using theatre as a tool to examine complex issues. It was also recognized for helping to find some answers to the problems communities were facing and to effect positive changes. In 1992, Mixed Co. became the first Canadian official Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO), an authorized centre to teach Forum Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. In 1997 Mixed Co. hosted the Ripple Effect Festival, the 8th International Theatre of the Oppressed.

A Note on Forum Theatre:

Originally developed as one technique from a methodology called Theatre of the Oppressed, by legendary South American theatre icon Augusto

Boal and the Arena Theatre of Brazil in the 1960s and '70s, Forum Theatre is a performance format that removes the figurative fourth wall between the audience and the stage. It integrates the audience's 'real' reality with that of the play. The play, or certain scenes within the play, are created, fully scripted and rehearsed, as anti-models: scenarios where the protagonists face obstacles or choices that prevent them from achieving their desired intentions.

These anti-models are performed once without interruption for the audience (usually a community with the same issues as faced by the protagonist) so they can see the entire story in context. Then the anti-models are played a second time. This time the audience is encouraged to stop the action at any point and to replace the protagonist (actually enter into the scene to take on the protagonist's character and interact with the other actors/characters). These substitutions are called interventions – the spectators now become spect-actors. This active role-play between audience and actors has made Forum Theatre an extremely popular tool for Theatre-In-Education practitioners as it is an excellent device for peer education. And it has been accepted, albeit slowly, into school systems and institutes – even adopted into some drama programs as part of their teaching curriculum.

The Forum Theatre format allows the spect-actor to intervene at crisis moments and to attempt alternatives and practice different strategies compared to the original choices made by certain characters when facing problems/obstacles. In other words: to rehearse for reality. The purpose of getting the audience into the scene and interacting with other characters on the stage – to physically participate and improvise – is that talking about solutions is very different from putting them into practice. Other elements such as attitude, emotions and timing all play factors often overlooked in objective discussions. Interventions must be as real and visceral as possible if the actions demonstrated by the spect-actor are to be considered viable options.

To facilitate this rehearsal-for-reality in

community-created Forum Theatre plays, the antagonists, or other characters enforcing and/or endorsing the obstacles and oppressions, are usually performed by persons within the community who experienced the negative effects of the oppressions/issue (i.e. a female student will play the role of the misogynistic male teacher). This is done because this performer will recognize – and thereby use – all the excuses originally employed against them by the person on whom their own character is based. And it becomes the responsibility of the actors playing the manipulator/oppressor characters to use all the same arguments and emotional manipulations at their disposal so that it is as difficult/real as possible for the spect-actor to get what they intend. The more obstacles there are, the more opportunities are presented for creative improvisation and exploration.

The scenes, as written, may appear extreme, but there will always be audience members who will testify that these exchanges ring true for them. Also, the presentation of these worst-case scenarios catalyzes audience participation. This is where the facilitator, or 'Joker' in Forum Theatre terminology, comes into play. The Joker not only instructs the audience in the rules of this theatre 'game' but also facilitates the audience interventions, stimulating further analysis of situations through relevant questions (Does this seem real to you? What would really happen here? Can you show us? Why don't you believe them? What are they really thinking? What factors made them think/do this? Do you believe this choice is going to work in the long run?). The Joker literally becomes the 'wild-card' in a process that is impossible to script.

Because of its unique quality, Forum Theatre is not an easy artistic discipline to master. Many of its techniques bear a great resemblance to, and are exactly like, techniques practiced in Drama Therapy and Psycho Drama. But, whereas the goal of using drama in therapy is to help heal an individual, Forum Theatre is used as a tool for social change – whether by professionals or by a community or in projects engaging both – to heal communities and societies. The

objective of a Forum Theatre play is to theatrically present the 'reality' of the issue facing a specific community and to catalyze that community, audience and spect-actors into wanting to create positive change.

It is when personal boundaries are not respected in the creation and performance of Forum Theatre, that adverse repercussions ensue. There are examples and horror stories from Canada, and around the world, of theatre practitioners who range from earnest initiates to seasoned artists and tenured academics who have read explanations or descriptions of Forum Theatre, maybe from Boal's books, then, without practical experience, attempted Forum Theatre projects which resulted in disastrous consequences for both producers and participants. Without trust and honesty between the community and the participants and producers, Forum Theatre is likely to fail.

What makes Mixed Co. so different from other Forum Theatre practitioners is its application of Sweet Medicine Teachings (SMT) to its methodology. SMT are a series of ancient philosophies and belief-systems which include ceremonies and teaching rituals in the form of medicine wheels and keys as practiced by the Deer Tribe Metis Medicine Society.

Struggling with the general definition of oppression, as used in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Simon Malbogat, Mixed Company's Artistic Director, began to explore the Tyrant Oppressor Wheel from SMT. The Wheel explains oppression in terms of different energies that the oppressor/manipulator will use (i.e. the Sly, Cunning, Devious behaviour of con artists, politicians, salespeople, gigolos and flirts, etc.). These revealed manipulators are easily recognized by every community, audience and spect-actor. And by defining the specific manipulator, any actor playing an antagonist will have a clearer idea how to play their character – ergo, making it much easier to rehearse and prepare for the improvised portion of Forum Theatre.

This blend of Forum Theatre and Sweet Medicine Teachings has been refined into a brand with which Mixed Co. has worked in communi-

ties locally and internationally (Brazil, Finland, India, Israel, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine and the USA), thus establishing Mixed Co.'s reputation as a Forum Theatre pioneer across Canada and around the world.

Mixed Co.: working with communities determined by issue

In the late 1980s, Scat Cabaret was created by Mixed Company and Scadding Court Community Centre to organize a performance outlet (singers, musicians, dancers, writers, poets, etc.) for local unemployed and homeless, from which a group called Skidbourn Theatre developed – a group of homeless people who wanted to tell their stories about how and why they wound up living on the streets, and the conditions under which they were presently living. This initial group went on to become a branch of Mixed Co. entitled Cobblestone Theatre – an ongoing (once a year) theatre project. Mixed Co. vowed that if participants were going to contribute their time and energy to such projects, they should each be paid an artist's honorarium, and not be considered volunteers. Mixed Co. continues to honour participants to this day.

Cobblestone Theatre was a core of ten people who were homeless, or had experienced homelessness, who would continue to work using theatre as a means of creative expression and way of educating their community. Cobblestone shows began by touring hostels, shelters, drop-ins, community centres, church basements – anywhere homeless people would congregate. Cobblestone's reputation grew and they also began performing at colleges, conferences and for NGOs and international poverty organizations. They were using Forum Theatre to reach into the homeless community to make people aware of the consequences of different actions that people take. These multiple perspectives and this 'rehearsal for reality' make effective analysis much more likely.

The Cobblestone program grew, especially in the late 90s when homelessness became

a major media issue and the Federal government even had a homelessness Minister, Claudette Bradshaw. Mixed Co. was able to secure funds from the Human Resources Development Council and the creation of new Cobblestone plays was tied to programs which not only trained Cobblestone participants with theatre skills (Michael Connolly: voice, Peter Jarvis: music, Sue Morrison: clown, Fiona Griffith: movement, Luc Iogna: playwrighting, etc) but also connected participants to outreach organizations to help with housing issues, lifeskills and finding gainful employment.

The funding for our program culminated with a millenium grant which, unfortunately, only comes every thousand years. The projects are now reduced to less than four weeks, relying almost solely on municipal Homeless Initiative funding and whatever other funds Mixed Co. can raise.

On the positive side, many of the original core members of Cobblestone Theatre had found other work or had moved on to perform and find creative outlets with other arts and theatre organizations more specific to their community (such as the Workman Theatre, and the community of psychiatric survivors). This meant that although the mandate and focus of Cobblestone was still the same, creating shows with and by the community at risk of homelessness, the process would slightly change. Now, instead of depending on the same half dozen actors, each new yearly project would be developed with a new troupe – four or five new members each year, so that these people could be taught new skills and given the experience and opportunity to express themselves creatively.

During the early years of Cobblestone Theatre, it became evident that specific issues of homelessness within the projects varied widely depending on the age and experience of the project participants: youth living on the streets had different reasons and experiences from 'veteran' homeless adults. Simon then resolved that a separate group/project should be established – one that dealt specifically with street youth and their

issues (drugs and addictions, gender-alienation, sexual abuse, family violence, etc.). Hence, Cobblestone Youth Theatre was created in 1995, primarily supported through funding from the city of Toronto's Community Investment in Drug Prevention Program (once called the Drug Abuse Prevention Program).

When the issue of squeegee kids and homeless youth became a flashpoint and issue-of-the-year in the Canadian media, Cobblestone Youth Theatre became the poster-child for Toronto's efforts to combat child poverty. Between 1998 and 1999, over 80 performances of WILD CHILD were presented in their usual venues, as well as for faculties of Social Work in colleges and universities, at local, regional and internationally sponsored conferences, and for government policy meetings. As the media's fickle attention was drawn to other issues, so was funding for the homeless reduced over the past several years. Cobblestone Youth Theatre has suffered the same attrition as its elder namesake – yet it still persists. Despite these years of success and acclaim for both Cobblestone projects, funding is perilously close to disappearing: the return on fundraising efforts is minimal due to the lack of media attention and the lack of 'sexiness' and appeal which homelessness once drew (Millenium funding and even a Ministry of Homelessness which no longer exists).

Like Cobblestone Adult Theatre, the Cobblestone Youth Theatre went through the same creative process: outreach into the street youth community through youth agencies and support groups to find participants. And like their adult counterparts, Cobb'Youth members worked with Mixed Co. facilitators experienced in Forum Theatre techniques to develop their own shows and then performed them back in their communities – shelters, hostels, drop-ins, alternative schools, job training centres, etc.

2006 will see the 16th anniversary of Mixed Company Theatre's Cobblestone Adult Theatre project and the 11th year for Cobblestone Youth Theatre – creating theatre with and for the homeless in Toronto.

Mixed Co.: working with communities determined by geography

Cobblestone Theatre is only one example of Mixed Co.'s work within communities using Forum Theatre. As mentioned, Mixed Co. has used Forum Theatre within numerous communities on a multitude of issues. But Mixed Co. is no stranger to traditional methods of theatre presentation and to 'community plays' – community plays as defined and practiced by Canada's Everybody's Theatre Company and originally developed by England's Colway Trust.

In 1999, Mixed Co. was approached by Lakeshore Arts to create a theatrical event (not using Forum Theatre) to celebrate the opening of a new structure which was to become the Assembly Hall. Simon and the organizers felt that a community play celebrating the two hundred years' history of the Etobicoke lakeshore region (once separate towns and villages) would benefit the centre and provide an educationally historical backdrop to the new amalgamation. So, Chalmers Award-winning playwright Rex Deverell was contracted (along with experienced theatre professionals such as Assistant Director Heather Dick, Production Manager Vanessa White, Choreographer Rosemary James, soundscape artist Peter Jarvis and actor Steven Bush) and the two-year creative journey of SWIMMING FOR SHORE was underway.

Over five-hundred residents of Etobicoke lakeshore were involved in the development of the production – eighty of whom actually participated in the production and/or performed in the show! Dozens of local citizens were organized to work in tandem with professional artists to develop scenes, rehearse, work on their performance techniques, build costumes, props and settings and market the show. As with most community plays, generations of families and guilds of local trades were all represented in the production and portrayed on the stage.

The success of the 2001 production (SWIMMING FOR SHORE won Ontario's Community Best-Practice Award) galvanized the community and launched an era of art and

creativity that the ASSEMBLY HALL can barely contain today. There have been yearly demands to develop another community play for the lakeshore, or to at least remount/renew the tremendously successful SWIMMING FOR SHORE (all shows were sold out). Excerpts from the show are being planned for presentation in June '06 at the upcoming 5th Anniversary celebration commemorating the Assembly Hall's opening.

An example of how theatre can contribute to community healing is that after SWIMMING FOR SHORE took place, Rex Deverell, the playwright, was told by a woman and her mother who had attended the show that a huge load had been lifted from their shoulders. The woman's grandmother had been a patient at the Lakeshore psychiatric hospital, depicted in the play. Rex had interviewed a number of nurses from the hospital and the woman and her mother were able to hear what good care had been given while their grandmother (and mother) were in the hospital.

The excitement and energy drawn from this community is another example of the kind of community spirit which Mixed Co. and its projects have generated. Negotiations are underway for a new partnership between Mixed Co. and Etobicoke's Lakeshore Arts to develop a pilot project entitled Democracy Theatre: to catalyze audiences to design action plans and make recommendations to regional councillors around issues of violence.

Mixed Co.: working with civic engagement - READY, SET, CIVIC ACTION!

On June 1st, 2000, Mixed Company Theatre, in conjunction with the City of Toronto, presented Luciano Iogna's innovative Legislative Theatre play, READY, SET, CIVIC ACTION! at the St. Lawrence Centre. This play, specifically created for the event, was one of a five-part series entitled: Building the New City of Toronto: Reflections on Civic Engagement – a series created by the City of Toronto to educate its citizens in response to Premier Mike Harris' Conservative

Government's forcible amalgamation of seven Toronto municipalities into one single Mega-City in 1998.

Recognizing the influence globalization was having on municipal governance, then Councillor David Miller (presently Mayor of the City of Toronto) initiated this series to see what could be done to maintain ordinary Toronto citizens' involvement in the daily affairs and running of their own city. The following year, Councillor Miller began this investigative series into civic engagement based on four key principals of civic participation: collaborative decision-making, accessibility, continuous improvement in citizen participation and community capacity building. The result in 2000 was a series of community seminars and the performance of READY, SET, CIVIC ACTION!

In a letter of thanks afterwards, Councillor Miller wrote:

"... This event and script were excellent tools for eliciting from people what they can do to enhance civic engagement in their community. Furthermore, the talented cast of Mixed Company did a great job at challenging the audience through the improvisational format. I was very encouraged by the level of audience participation and the general willingness to interpret thoughts and ideas into performance.

... This event added a fun and lively yet educational alternative to the academic events that have been organized to date. It is my hope that Mixed Company may be able to work with the City of Toronto in the future to bring this type of event to new venues and a broader cross-section of the community."

Mixed Co.'s involvement in the series began with an initial meeting with Councillor Miller's office in mid-March of 2000. Artistic Director, Simon Malbogot, along with then General Manager, Anne Frost, proposed several community research and development (R&D) sessions to assist playwright Luc Iogna in gathering specific and necessary information, issues, images and phraseology which the community itself wanted to include

regarding the subject of civic engagement.

Participants attending these information-gathering sessions included officials from several City of Toronto departments (Public Health, Access and Equity Centre, Strategic and Corporate Policy, City Planning, Works and Emergency Services) along with representatives from various community groups such as West Don Initiative, Etobicoke Barrier Free Committee, Culturelink, Mississauga Community Leadership Alliance, Scarborough Citizens Community Association, Toronto Youth Cabinet and numerous independent citizens (including artists!).

After a few weeks and R&D sessions within the community, a rough draft was scripted and presented for feedback to a committee comprised, once again, of representatives from the City of Toronto and community organizations. Since the format of Legislative Theatre, similar to Forum Theatre, is very different from traditional theatre and the descriptive or narrative writing to which most people are accustomed, the feedback session required facilitation. Having encountered this situation in the past – Forum Theatre is a difficult style of performance to explain (again see: A Note on Forum Theatre) – Simon and Luc not only had the feedback committee hear a reading of the draft, but led an impromptu presentation and also improvised interventions so that the committee could get a clear sense of the participatory nature of the format.

The script was unanimously approved with practically no amendments required. This was due not only to the fact that the script accurately reflected what the community wanted the play to say – a testimony to Mixed Co.'s ability to listen. The R&D and feedback sessions also helped the script writers sense and understand the needs and desires of the community. Multiple levels of different communities had to be engaged in the process of creating a civic engagement play, if the play was to honestly reflect the many communities and their complex relationships to City Hall. It was at this time that Simon decided to make the production itself an example of the complexity of civic engagement.

While the civic engagement project was being developed, Cobblestone Youth Theatre was engaged at that same time in creating a new show. Simon thought: Why not combine both projects? Why not involve Cobb'Youth and bring them in to learn from a cast of professional actors and technicians and give them a chance to perform on a large stage? Why not show the youth how art and social activism could come together in a project about civic engagement – in which they themselves, an alienated community, could participate and help contribute to making changes to municipal governance which would positively affect them?

The script was adapted to include the larger cast. A musical band with singers (The Apathetics!) was added to back up and manipulate the central oppressor-character, Mr. Apathy, a giant puppet requiring three persons to control its arms and actions. Extra 'bits' were added in rehearsals to fit the additional members of the project and the play was ready and set to perform.

The following excerpt is from one scene of READY, SET, CIVIC ACTION! :

A LARGE SIGN ACROSS THE BACKDROP READS, "COMMUNITY MEETING".

FOUR CHAIRS AT A LARGE TABLE WITH SIGNS/LABELS AT EACH PLACE DEFINE EACH OF THE CHARACTERS: 'CITY COUNCILLOR', 'PUBLIC' (RATE PAYERS), 'BUSINESS INTEREST' AND 'SPECIAL INTEREST' (COMMUNITY GROUP).

THERE IS ALSO A LARGE METER LABELLED, "APATH-O-METER", AT THE SIDE OF THE STAGE. THROUGH THE SCENE, THE METER WILL BE MANIPULATED BY THE APATHETICS – ALWAYS UPWARDS – UNDER THE DIRECTION OF 'MR APATHY'.

THE GROUP IS ALREADY ARGUING WHEN THE SCENE BEGINS. THE 'COUN-

CILLOR', SEATED BEHIND SEVERAL STACKS OF FILES, IS TRYING TO CHAIR THE DISCUSSION.

COUNCILLOR (OVERLAPPING) ... I understand that this is a hot topic and everyone needs to speak, but we can't continue without some semblance of order. So, may I please have some order? Order, please? Ladies and gentlemen? Please... ?

(YELLS) Ladies and gentlemen! Quiet!!

EVERYONE QUIETENS.

COUNCILLOR Thank you. Once again, I understand this is an important and emotional issue for everyone involved. That's why I'm holding this series of community meetings. As your Councillor I want to make sure we have all the information before I go to City Council.

PUBLIC As Rate Payers, we don't want this development in our neighbourhood. We've been saying that for years.

SPECIAL And we've been saying that we need more affordable housing in this community. Especially with our population growth the past few years.

BUSINESS That's what this development project is all about. It combines subsidized housing with single family homes and park space. Our three studies have shown it'll work. Councillor, you have all our documentation.

COUNCILLOR Yes, they're very thorough...

THE APATH-O-METER RISES.

PUBLIC Councillor, our three studies have shown that there'll be a negative impact on the community. Too many people for the water, sewer and electrical infrastructure that presently exists.

COUNCILLOR Yes, that was also made very clear in your deputations...

THE APATH-O-METER RISES AGAIN.

BUSINESS Adjustments always have to be made.

PUBLIC And who's going to pay for those adjustments? We, the Rate Payers, that's who!

SPECIAL Tenants, too! The rent money which goes to landlords becomes tax dollars which is in turn...

COUNCILLOR People, people! We've heard this all before.

PUBLIC Yes, and we're tired of constantly having to repeat ourselves.

SPECIAL & BUSINESS (TOGETHER) You can say that again... You're not alone there...

THE APATH-O-METER RISES AGAIN.

COUNCILLOR It's going to take time if we don't want mistakes.

BUSINESS But the longer it takes, the costlier it's going to be. The price of labour and materials has practically doubled since this project was first proposed four years ago. The delay is costing our firm money.

PUBLIC (OVERLAPPING) You're just losing money. We'd be losing a community.

BUSINESS (OVERLAPPING) You'd be improving the community.

SPECIAL (OVERLAPPING) Not with these plans. There's not enough affordable housing.

BUSINESS (OVERLAPPING) You need a mix of incomes for businesses in the area to survive.

PUBLIC (OVERLAPPING) And we're not paying taxes to subsidize private businesses and welfare bums!

BUSINESS (OVERLAPPING) Well, we're not going to make anymore changes until the next stage has been approved by City Council.

COUNCILLOR And I'm just waiting to gather all the facts.

PUBLIC & SPECIAL (TOGETHER) It's been four years!

THE APATH-O-METER RISES AGAIN AND AGAIN THROUGH TO THE END OF THE SCENE UNTIL IT BURSTS ITS ENCLOSURE.

THE CHARACTERS POINT ACCUSINGLY AT ONE ANOTHER AS THE ARGUMENT BUILDS IN VOLUME AND INTENSITY.

READY, SET, CIVIC ACTION! was presented in the Jane Mallet Theatre at the St. Lawrence Centre to an almost capacity house. As with the consultations, R&D sessions and meetings throughout this project's process, individuals and representatives from City Hall and Toronto's community groups were present. Almost a dozen interventions took place in scenes dealing with youth relations with police, business, community and the environment. And as with all Mixed Co.'s Forum plays, the event was forced to end due to time constraints, with more audience members wanting to intervene, and with a standing ovation.

Regrettably, despite the whiff of hope for more similar events in Councillor Miller's letter of thanks, READY, SET, CIVIC ACTION! was only presented that single time. Mixed Co. continued to work on projects within other communities in Toronto (Thornecliffe Neighbourhood

House, Dovercourt Boys and Girls Club, etc.) but never on a civic engagement project of this scope. Perhaps the municipal elections that took place the following year had an effect on this decision – the re-election of the narrower-visioned Mel Lastman, whose apparent priority was ensuring that businesses and corporations in Toronto were satisfied!

Over the years, Mixed Co. has won nu-

merous awards and citations for artistic excellence and for its involvement in communities, including: the Mayor's Award for the Arts, the Pauline Julienne Award, nominations for Dora Mavor Moore Awards – along with the Safe City Award and a Mayor's Commendation for Dedication to Social Justice.