

"THE LINE'S GETTING MIGHTY BLURRY": POLITICS, POLEMICS AND PERFORMANCE IN THE NOAM CHOMSKY LECTURES

Lisa Coulthard

So for the strategic solution it will be necessary, tomorrow, to employ a guerrilla solution. What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every page of newspaper). If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will put it like this: The battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives The idea that we must ask the scholars and educators of tomorrow to abandon the TV studios or the offices of the newspapers, to fight a door-to-door guerrilla battle like provos of Critical Reception can be frightening, and can also seem utopian. But if the Communications Era proceeds in the direction that today seems to us the most probable, this will be the only salvation for free people. The methods of this cultural guerrilla have to be worked out. Probably in the interrelation of the various communications media, one medium can be employed to communicate a series of opinions on another medium. . . . To some extent this is what a newspaper does when it criticizes a TV program. But who can assure us that the newspaper article will be read in the way we wish? Will we have to have recourse to another medium to teach people how to read the newspaper in a critical fashion?

(Umberto Eco "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare"
1967, 142-43)

DANIEL BROOKS and GUILLERMO VERDECCHIA are seated at a table as the audience enters. The table is strewn with props and books. BROOKS and VERDECCHIA read, chat, dance, talk to people in the audience. Trini Lopez music plays. After ten or fifteen minutes, the house lights dim, and a tape is played of a Canadian Armed Forces

recruitment ad. When it is over, the stage goes to black. A Slide appears on a screen

SLIDE Citizens of the democratic countries should undertake a course of intellectual self-defense to protect themselves from manipulation and control.

— Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*

(Brooks and Verdecchia *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* 11)

In "The Terms of the Show," Daniel Brooks states the intention of *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*: "*The Noam Chomsky Lectures* is an attempt to bring you some of the ideas present in the political writings of esteemed professor Noam Chomsky, as well as some information you may not be familiar with" (Brooks and Verdecchia 14). This statement of intention delineates the play as a "lecture," as a process of imparting information to an uninformed audience. However, the statement projected at the top of the play indicates more clearly what the focus of this information and "lecture" will be: "Citizens of the democratic countries should undertake a course of intellectual self-defense to protect themselves from manipulation and control — Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*" (Brooks and Verdecchia *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* 11). The play is not only a "lecture" on Chomsky's ideas, but a course in "intellectual self-defense"; it endeavours not only to impart political information, but also to present Chomsky's ideas about thought control in democratic societies, to expose the manufacturing of consent created by the mass media, and to teach individuals to resist manipulation and control.

In this latter project of intellectual self-defense, Brooks and Verdecchia undertake a program that is not much different from the one outlined in Umberto Eco's 1967 essay "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare": to teach the receiver to decode or interpret the message with a degree of cynicism, an understanding of the encoding process and a knowledge of the filters that block out many pertinent aspects of the message or information. This teaching process, Eco argues, is a more effective, sensible and practical way of resisting manipulation and control than any attempt to take over the medium of control. Further, in Eco's formulation, any takeover of the medium would be pointless because the nature of mass media prevents its being used in any subversive or revolutionary way: "Be-

cause, even if the communications media, as means of production, were to change masters, the situation of subjection would not change. We can legitimately suspect that the communications media would be alienating even if they belonged to the community" (Eco 136). A political project of resistance, then, is best aimed at the receiver of the code; the manipulation of the mass media is most effectively attacked not "where the communication originates, but where it arrives" (Eco 142).

In this paper I will explore *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* as a course in "semiological guerrilla warfare." I would like to explore the ways in which the *Lectures* encourages receivers to resist manipulation and control from the mass media, and to consider the translation of Chomsky's notions of the manufacture of consent¹ and thought control into theatrical forms and concerns. *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* is not only a course in political and intellectual self-defense, but in theatrical self-defense; in the same way that the play asks us to question our political assumptions, it asks us to question our theatrical assumptions. The *Lectures* can thus be understood as political theatre in several ways: as a play about politics, a play about the politics of theatre (that is, about the politics of working in the theatre) and a play about the politics of theatrical representation, reception and form. To explore this play as "political theatre," then, I would like to examine the political and theatrical assumptions we are asked to reconsider, and to analyze their implications, effects and assumptions.

In order to discuss the politics and the political import of *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* it is necessary to consider the form of the play, which is precisely and rigidly structured in sections: Introductions, Clarifications, Terms of the Show (and Any Questions), History Part One, A Play Within a Play, History Part Two, Universal Wit Factor, Intermission, Lecture, Manufacturing Consent, Response to Critics, The Auction, Audience Opinion Poll, Silence and Falling, Digression, Marketing Plan, Public Service Announcement, Dramaturgy, Last Part. While the overall structure of the play remains the same for each performance, the content of certain sections is rewritten to consider and comment on current political and theatrical events. These changes are executed "in order to address current world events, changes in the local cultural scene, and the circumstances of production (the theatre in which we perform, the sponsor of the event, etc.) and, ultimately, the connections between all the above" (Brooks and Verdecchia 67).

The re-writes are done in order to make the play more pertinent. According to Daniel Brooks, in his discussion of political theatre quoted by Jason Sherman in the article "The Daniel Brooks Lectures," the greatest failure of Canadian political theatre is its failure to be relevant. For Brooks, it is not significant that political theatre be aimed at an initiated, target, community-based or class-specific audience,² but that theatre must understand the significance of its politics to its audience. The community to which a play is addressed can be as large as a country or even a continent, but to be useful or efficacious a play must consider its audience.

In this framework, political theatre in Canada should set out to be relevant to its intended audience, and that audience should include the entire population. The "popular" theatre to which Brooks and Verdecchia refer when they state that the published version of the *Lectures* is a "transcript of a performance of what we like to think is a popular theatre genre" (Brooks and Verdecchia 67) is not popular in terms of its process or creation, but is so in the sense that it should be understandable and pertinent to everyone, and not simply a select community.³ Thus *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* is not popular in that it is an exercise in community involvement or audience participation, although these elements are occasionally employed, but in that it is an exercise in relevance; it is an exercise in making Chomsky, foreign affairs and politics relevant to Canadians. In accordance with this notion of popular and political theatre, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* links foreign politics to Canadian and local examples (where possible) and attempts to make a connection among media, politics and theatre.

In particular, the "History," "Lecture" and "Manufacturing Consent" sections outline the interconnections among the media and Canadian and world events. The two "History" sections are not necessarily rewritten for each production (although they might be updated) and act as informative "footnotes" to the production in order to create a context in which to discuss the connection among local, country and world affairs; more specifically, the two sections offer "brief, and by no means exhaustive" (Brooks and Verdecchia 21, 25) histories of Latin America and the Middle East in this century. The effect of this contextualization is to provide a wider base for discussion and illustration in a performance situation. While the "History" sections of the play do not deal explicitly with the arts or the media (they offer instead some information on foreign countries), the mass media is an important sub- and inter-text: the

reason we might be unfamiliar with some of the information presented to us in this section is "because the Western Press consistently caters to the interests of Big Business, because the Western Press *is* Big Business" (Brooks and Verdecchia 15).

Similarly, the "Lecture" and "Manufacturing Consent" sections are based upon the dissemination of information and deal with Chomsky's concepts. The "Lecture" is rewritten for each new production and, in any of its forms, offers a close analysis of foreign events, domestic military involvement, the media and big business; it is aimed at questioning the "necessary illusions" presented by the mainstream press and suggests that the audience question political assumptions on a local, national and global scale. The section following the "Lecture," "Manufacturing Consent," operates in a similar fashion but deals more specifically with Chomsky and Herman's theories of media intervention. This section delineates "some of the ways in which 'the media sets the agenda'" (Brooks and Verdecchia 34) and illustrates each point with examples from the media and theatrical demonstrations which reinterpret these points in terms of theatre and theatrical assumptions.⁴ In this section the audience is asked to examine the ways in which the media distorts information and determines our thinking. Although the examples are of foreign political events, the examples use primarily Canadian and often Toronto-based news media and the demonstrations attempt to connect these general, foreign issues to the local and specific, and often to the world of theatre. Further, because of the self-conscious division between "Example" and theatrical "Demonstration," the potential for theatre to comment upon and be involved with foreign political events is exposed and examined. The media influences "consent," whether it be political consent or theatrical consent.

In the analysis of politics and the media's expectations and influences, these sections of *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* can be understood as contributing to a course in political intellectual self-defense and suggest a move towards a course in theatrical self-defense. In terms of performance, the *Lectures* is anti-illusionistic, meta-theatrical and self-reflexive; it is aware of itself as play, lecture and performance and deals very centrally with many aspects of drama, theatre and acting: the authors/actors/characters refer to the venue in which the play is performed; the conditions of the creation and reception of theatre and performance are explicitly discussed; the title of the published version reads *The Noam Chomsky*

Lectures: A Play. Further, the authors/ characters/ performers emphasize the status of this play/ performance as a work in progress:

BROOKS: First let me state that *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* is a perpetual workshop, an unfinished play, a fourth draft, a work in progress; hence, you are a workshop audience, an unfinished audience, a fourth-draft audience, an audience in progress; hence, this is not a real play, you are not a real audience — so let's all sit back and have a whale of a good time. (Brooks and Verdecchia 12)

The Noam Chomsky Lectures is not presented as a perfect piece of finished artistic creation, but as an evolving, unfinished, unreal process; thus the audience is an audience in progress in two ways — each performance meets with a new audience and each performance attempts to change the ideological, intellectual and theatrical assumptions of audience members, and thus it is hoped that the audience is changed in some way by the play. Further, by avoiding the claims to “real” plays and audiences, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* presents itself as imperfect, as a process, and therefore as unconcerned with aesthetic perfection; the emphasis is instead on political pertinence.

This clarification of the status of the play also indicates the interrelationship between audience and play, or audience and performers. Structurally, the play reconfigures the boundaries of beginning, middle and end, the boundaries of spectator and performer, the formal boundaries of “play” and “lecture” and the boundaries of actor and character. While the play obviously functions as play and performance, the signs of a lecture are evident: Brooks and Verdecchia are seated at a table piled with books, and table, slide projector, books and pointer stick indicate the “lecture” that is in the title. The characters and actors are not discernibly separate — that is, there is no “getting into character”: Verdecchia and Brooks are seated when the audience enters, they “read, chat, dance, talk to people in the audience” (Brooks and Verdecchia 11) and when the play “starts,” they introduce themselves to the audience as Guillermo Verdecchia and Daniel Brooks.

Throughout the play the divisions between audience and performer are at once blurred and enforced. The opening, the “Audience Poll” and the “Last Part” attempt to invite audience participation, to change the power operations between active performer and passive spectator. However, the “Auction,” the “Intermission,”

and elements in the "Manufacturing Consent" section enforce audience/ performer divisions and expose that, even with "audience participation," the theatrical apparatus operates very clearly within power divisions. This blurring and enforcing of theatrical conventions is not so much an attempt to change the defining terms of theatre as it is an attempt to make an audience question their own defining terms of theatre. The play makes it necessary to question our assumptions of what constitutes theatre and, further, what constitutes "good" theatre.

These standards of "good" theatre, particularly as they apply to political theatre, are represented in the performance by the "bizarre indigenous" instrument — the "Artstick." This stick is used whenever "one of the performers crosses that fine line between art and demagoguery," (Brooks and Verdecchia 13) effectively silencing the speaker. In the play it is used as an internal aesthetic marker, an internal system of establishing that fine line between demagoguery and theatre, and polemic and performance. In short, the stick is a physical manifestation of aesthetic judgment and represents the critics' ability to silence a production because it does not meet with their aesthetic standards, and particularly their standards as they apply to political theatre. The media's standards for "good" theatre (Brooks and Verdecchia use Ray Conlogue from *The Globe and Mail*, Alex Patterson from *Metropolis* and Robert Crew from *The Toronto Star* as representatives of these standards) are articulated early in the play in the "Clarifications" section. This section considers "Constable Conlogue's" call for the need for an "Aesthetic Police," (Brooks and Verdecchia 13) Alex Patterson's distinction between play and polemic, playwright and pamphleteer, and Robert Crew's "Rules" for good theatre — "communication, honest emotion, engagement, and commitment to the characters on the stage" (Brooks and Verdecchia 14).⁵

The standards, as represented by these critics, are used to illustrate that conservative aesthetics reign over significant content and that, according to this conservative ideology and agenda, the presence of politics creates a polemic rather than a play; in these terms, political theatre, especially as it appears in the present performance, is not "good" theatre.⁶ In addition, Brooks and Verdecchia see these standards of judgment as not working independently of government, corporate and/or media forces; critics work in a medium governed by a corporate elite, their work must pass through the same filters as the news stories and there can perhaps be conflicts of interest in reviews.⁷ Also, Brooks and Verdecchia

recognize the very real effects that critical reception and promotion can have on the type of theatre that is developed, attended and reviewed. The critics do not work in a vacuum, and the implications are potentially harmful to “free” artistic expression:

We of *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* are concerned with the control that Big Business has on the formation and dissemination of information, we are concerned with our own collective moral hypocrisy and cowardice, and we are concerned with the movement in theatre towards a greater and greater focus on market forces. We are concerned with the predictable consequences. (Brooks and Verdecchia 17)

The predictable consequence is that the Universal Wit Factor (“UWF” or “Oof”) will take over and the plays with the greatest “yucks-per-buck quotient” (Brooks and Verdecchia 27) will get the best reviews and the most attention.

The result of these various sections on the theatre, its practitioners and critics, is to create a forum for examining the cultural assumptions of the institution of theatre; the meta-theatrical form and content, the examination of conflicts of interest in both the development and reception of theatre, and the emphasis on specific reviewers work together to question theatrical assumptions, and theatrical “literacy” (that is, how we approach our readings of performances and reviews, how aware we are of the filters, influences and encoding processes). These aspects of theatre are questioned most explicitly in the “Digression”:

Some of you may be thinking that what we have embarked on here is not theatre. Well, that’s too bad. I would like to say this: if the theatre is to survive, it must become something other than an expensive alternative to television. We are going to have to look at the world and the world of theatre without ideological blinders. And I’m not talking about the theatre of gentle psychological manipulation, or mature content, or three-dimensional characters. I’m talking about rolling up our sleeves, diving into the muck, taking a good, hard look at who we are and what we do and goddamn the excuses. (Brooks and Verdecchia 60)

Theatre, like politics, is influenced and determined by certain ideological factors and assumptions, and it is important, in fact necessary, to be aware of those factors and assumptions; the play argues that it is important to understand the “manufacture of con-

sent" and thought control which can be a part of its critical reception.

By examining the "deep interpenetration" of media and big business, and suggesting throughout the play the interpenetration between media and theatre, Brooks and Verdecchia effectively comment upon the manufacture of consent in politics and in theatre. The one is not necessarily less dangerous than the other — if conventions require that theatre does not breach political matters in content, then the one cannot work to influence the other and is therefore complicit in its acquiescence. Further, the play not only asserts theatre's duty to comment upon political events, but its ability to influence change. More importantly, as the last quotation in the "Last Part" (not a conclusion because the play is in progress, and unfinished, or unfinishable) indicates, the active role required of the audience is more than decoding or questioning theatrical assumptions. The conclusion (and closure) is left with the audience, the performers take no credit for their work (there is no applause or curtain call) and the last message of the play is a call for action. The audience members are given power over the performance and are reminded of their power to effect change, not only on a personal, local level but on a national and global level. In the end they are reminded that lack of resistance is acquiescence, and acquiescence is guilt.

In these ways, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* can be understood as a course in intellectual self-defense and as an attempt at "semi-ological guerrilla warfare." The play is a "lecture" in that it seeks to educate its audience and to impart information. In the signs and resonances of a "lecture" the play suggests the potential for theatre to comment upon and consider news, media and the manufacture of consent. Thus the *Lectures* reinterprets the "mighty blurry line"⁸ between news and entertainment, and suggests that if news is becoming entertainment then perhaps entertainment should consider becoming news. In asserting the theatre as an important place for the consideration, criticism, and analysis of the mass media, the *Lectures* fulfills not only Eco's call for a semiological guerrilla warfare, but also his request for "another medium to teach people how to read the newspaper in a critical fashion" (Eco 143).

Finally, however, it seems the semiological guerrilla warfare of *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* is selectively aimed indeed, and I think we have to ask if another "medium" is needed to teach people how to read *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* in a critical fashion. Is the self-re-

flexive and meta-theatrical form of the play an exercise in political theatre, or is it simply "another silly post-modern push-up?" (Brooks and Verdecchia 14) Is the message of a political project of resistance aimed at the receiver/ reader/ audience any more tenable now than it was in the sixties? Certainly, Eco's strategies for semiological warfare have been attacked as naive and simplistic. Most notably, Hans Enzensberger in his 1970 essay "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" questions Eco's theory of the media and characterizes his type of Marxist approach to media theory as a "manipulation thesis" (Enzensberger 101). In particular, Enzensberger criticizes Eco's position for its defensive stance, and argues that any person who espouses the "manipulation thesis" attempts to exculpate him or herself: "To cast the enemy in the role of the devil is to conceal the weakness and lack of perspective in one's own agitation" (Enzensberger 101). Equally critical, Jean Baudrillard, in his "Requiem for the Media," attacks Eco's concept of semiological guerrilla warfare for its suggestion that it is possible to escape ideology, and its dependence on the structural communication grid and code. According to Baudrillard, Eco's offer is neither transgressive nor subversive, but only another "controlling schema of interpretation, rising from the ashes of the previous one" (Baudrillard 183). Baudrillard argues that because Eco's strategies rely upon Jakobsen's formula for communication based on the transmitter - message - receiver or encoder - message - decoder model, his project "obviates the possibility of fundamental change and condemns oneself to fragile manipulatory practices that would be dangerous to adopt as a 'revolutionary strategy'" (Baudrillard 184).

The *Lectures* asks the audience to question theatrical and political assumptions, but does not in fact ask them to question the status of the *Lectures* and its information and truth value. Thus the criticisms often applied to Eco apply to the *Lectures* as well — any discussion of self-defense in decoding mediated discourse implies that unmediated discourse is a possibility, ideology is easily deciphered and sifted out from a message and further, such a discussion of mediated discourse is an unmediated discourse. The messages are clear and the audience does not need to be taught how to interpret, read or view the present text, only other texts, only "mass media" (newspapers, television programs, magazines). In arguing that "we live entangled in webs of endless deceit, in a highly indoctrinated society in which elementary truths are easily hidden" (Chomsky as quoted in Brooks and Verdecchia 64), Chomsky, Brooks and Verdecchia all suggest that "elementary truths" exist and are

easily discovered with a little common-sense and cynicism. Like Eco's semiological warfare, Chomsky's focus on truth and common-sense has been attacked for its "dismissal of ideology as anything more than a 'disguise' to be 'unmasked'" (Jowitt 3). Similarly, Brooks and Verdecchia's "lecture" can be taken to task for its attempt to expose "elementary truths" about politics, theatre and thought control in democratic societies, without questioning those truths or their presentation of them.

Brooks and Verdecchia can thus be accused (along with Chomsky and Eco) of not applying their own standards of critical reading and viewing to the reading and viewing of their own texts. While they expose the codes of audience and performer, transmitter and receiver, encoder and decoder, they do not smash them; while they disrupt the reception or decoding process, the integrity of the transmitter and the message remains unquestioned. Therefore, the use of the signs of "lecture" and the attempts to disrupt, or at least interrupt, the audience's complacency, maintains the power divisions between audience and performer and creates a situation whereby Brooks and Verdecchia (as performers and authors) claim a position of power, knowledge and truth that cannot ultimately be shared by the audience. Brooks and Verdecchia set themselves up "as the scholars and educators of tomorrow," "as provos of Critical Reception," and the result is both utopian and frightening. While codes are exposed, the integrity of Jakobsen's communication formula—which "excludes, from its inception, the reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange" (Baudrillard 179)—is maintained. Although the *Lectures* disseminates information and delineates and depicts the utopian possibilities for revising the critical reception of entertainment, news, politics, theatre and media, it does not apply the standards for reflection and reception to its own message, and in these ways it comes dangerously close to becoming a "fragile manipulatory practice" or just "another silly post-modern push-up"; perhaps in semiological warfare, questioning one's own message is a little too similar to shooting one's self in the foot.

NOTES

¹ It should be noted that the book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* is co-authored by Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, a Professor of Finance at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and that the term the “manufacture of consent” is not Chomsky’s but is taken from Walter Lippman’s 1921 book *Public Opinion*.

² These characteristics are often used as identifying markers for political and popular theatre by writers on Canadian political and popular theatre such as Alan Filewod and Robin Endres.

³ This has connections to Chomsky’s idea that his political writings come down to “common-sense,” an attitude which is attacked for its basis in belief rather than theory: “Chomsky’s belief — there is no theory here; apparently the reality of world politics, unlike linguistics, is readily grasped by any ‘reasonable person’” (Jowitt 3).

⁴ The most obvious example of this is the “Demonstration of Ideological Assumption,” during which Brooks and Verdecchia expose as false the assumption that they, the actors, will not throw things or squirt water at the audience when they turn off the lights.

⁵ Later in the play, Geoff Chapman’s (Robert Crew’s replacement at *The Toronto Star*) standards of “zippy pacing” and plays “on or with words” (Brooks 59) are added to these standard aesthetic criteria.

⁶ This focus on the aesthetic judgments of the media and their relevance to political theatre is in accordance with Alan Filewod’s discussion of political theatre in his 1989 essay “The Marginalization of the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance in the Discourse of Canadian Theatre History.” He argues that standard aesthetic judgments are as ideologically based as the political theatre they are used to reject — it is simply a different ideology.

⁷ Chomsky’s five media filters are as follows: “(1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) ‘flak’ as a means of disciplining the media; (5) ‘anticommunism’ as a national religion and control mechanism” (Chomsky *Manufacturing Consent* 2).

⁸ This quotation is taken from a *SherMan’s Lagoon* comic strip (Creators Syndicate, 1994, J.P.Toomey) in which it is stated that the line between news and entertainment is “getting mighty blurry.” This is illustrated in the comic by the narration of a television news program in which, during the evening news, Connie Chung wears a two-piece and juggles flaming coconuts, while Dan Rather wears a grass skirt and plays the tom-toms.

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