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**MEDITATION IN TWO PARTS AND ONE APHORISM:
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, STATE DIRIGISME,
AND NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT**

Through my years as a theatre practitioner, I have scarcely acknowledged and almost never identified with the *institutions* that funded or supported my endeavours. I simply took them for granted (pun intended). In fact, institutions were about the farthest thing from my mind, preoccupied as I was with the personal, artistic, and business challenges of making theatre and films. My focus, therefore, is on the relationships between and among creators and institutions involved in new play creation, production, and financing, on the one hand, and on the role of institutions in shaping Canadian identity and culture as a whole through organizational policy and action (including funding), on the other. Two problems framed as questions constitute a through line in this discourse. First, what are the possibilities of and limitations on institutional efficacy in achieving (national or individual) artistic and cultural policy objectives? Second, what is the relative importance of *conscious intent* in social and cultural policy-making to *unconscious forces* whether personal, collective, or institutional, that underlie creativity and affect sense of identity in the context of a Global North, elected democracy?

Part I: Me, first; Institutions, second

I begin in the first-person singular for two reasons. First, I grew up in Canada's anglophone and francophone theatre scenes from the late 1960s onward. I have been a participant in theatre since that time and have followed its evolution to the present. The period of my young adulthood constituted an era of phenomenal growth in Canadian theatre, which experienced exponential increase in theatre companies, new plays developed and produced, audience numbers, and diversity of supporting institutions, whether governmental or other. I subsequently also became involved in the heavily-capitalized industries of both film and television, which have followed similar trajectories in the increasing volume of properties developed, produced, and distributed. Second, my involvement in the writing, acting, directing, producing, and criticism of Canadian theatre has become an integral part of my *sense of personal identity*. Asked to name the community wherein I feel

the greatest sense of belonging, the field of theatre springs immediately to mind, with the milieu of film and television running a close second.

Belonging and *appartenance*: Nationality and Beyond

I might also call this sense of personal identity *un sentiment d'appartenance*. *Appartenance* is the word used to translate “being” in “A Sense of Place—A Sense of Being (*Appartenance et Identité*),” the 1999 report to Parliament of Heritage Canada, the behemoth of Canadian cultural institutions and the country’s most prestigious institution with respect to the mass subvention of cultural initiatives. Belonging or *appartenance* is tied by individuals and institutions alike to notions of nationality, to our (imagined or real) place of existence, to identity culture or manner of being, and, finally, to sense of ownership as in the anti-referendum slogan “My Canada includes Quebec.” Why there should be a link between nationality and identity is unquestioned as if a *de facto* part of the human condition,¹ the quest for identity in nationhood a survival strategy of the species.

The question of sense of *identity beyond the personal* is a key problematic, considered in its multiple political, linguistic, economic, psychological, and sociological guises. On the one hand, for example, the individual may identify with his or her role (function) in society in a work-related field such as culture, medicine, or the shipment of goods. On the other hand, personal identity may be linked to notions of *group identity*, other than national or professional, that are delimited in myriad alternative ways such as:

- regional, linguistic, or ethnic affiliation;
- questions of shared taste or sexual preference;
- religious or ideological belief;
- partnership in or renunciation of adherence to a dominant group;
- affiliation with mainstream or alternative aesthetics;
- allegiance to or self-exclusion from confederated or community standards in any regard;
- a sense of belonging rooted in shared heritage or not-belonging based on feelings of alienation related to carnal difference—e.g., skin colour—or to economic privation; and so on.

Part II: A Case of Extreme Cultural Dirigisme

Poets strive either to profit or delight.

(Horace: *The Art of Poetry*, l. 333)

A random Internet reference reminded me of the origins of this study: an international touring production of *The White-Haired Girl* in the 1970s. A long-lived, key work of the Cultural Revolution, this spectacular ballet-opera was an artistic and cultural phenomenon in China before Mao declared his new, socialist regime on 1 October 1949. A prestigious film of the story was created a mere year after the foundation of the new republic.

For a non-Chinese person who had never seen a traditional Chinese ballet-opera let alone a modern Communist one, I can testify to the so-called “high artistic effect” of *The White-Haired Girl* in Toronto’s cavernous O’Keefe Centre (now the Sony Centre).² I was overwhelmed by the combination of dance-acrobatics, music, lighting, and scenery—two of Aristotle’s six embellishments of the drama, song and spectacle, that he considered the least important (Aristotle: VI). I gave no consideration whatsoever to the production’s *dianoia*, idea or thought, second-ranked by Aristotle after *mythos*, plot or action. That is, I did not heed what the presentation was intended to achieve politically or culturally, only ludically, as an entertainment.³

What does *The White-Haired Girl* have to do with contemporary new play development in Canada? Directly speaking, not much; tangentially, a great deal. The Cultural Revolution era of administration-approved theatrical productions demarcates blatant state dirigisme in the performing arts in a totalitarian system seeking to promote a sense of national identity according to intransigent ideological agenda. As such, *The White-Haired Girl* represents the extreme antithesis of institutional praxis in western or “Global North” democracies. Such convention is best described, perhaps, as seemingly (if not genuinely) transparent *laissez-faire* attitudes and practices toward the policies, funding, and production of cultural goods.

The disconnection between democracy’s hands-off, cultural guardianship, on the one hand, and the deeply-embedded, unconsciously ingrained, controlling intent of democratic institutions, on the other, represents the crux of my business with institutions and play development in Canada. Ironies in this regard abound and yet, for all that, we can discern a national identity and a national culture that have less to do with institutional intervention, expectations, and intentions than with personal, psychological

(unconscious) motive and the synchronicity of long-term institutional objectives with the contemporary *zeitgeist*.

The Unexamined Life Not Worth Living

By and large, my perspective is that Canadian cultural policy-making in the period 1970-2000 with respect to new play development, *judged by its own terms*, has proven inefficacious because, first, it countermands its own objective, consciously asserted intentions. Second, it does not acknowledge the role of personal, unconscious forces in nation-building—or in the creation of new works for the theatre.

My goal is not to find fault or to uncover cabals and secret agendas. No individual (bureaucrat) in a broadly mandated, highly capitalized organization can be expected to scrutinize its policies and behaviours from every point of view but *an institution is not a person*—despite legal recognition of a corporation as “a person in law.” The collective wisdom and experience of an institution is meant to surpass both theoretically and practically that of its directors and managers and outlives them, literally, which is the entire point behind the creation of institutions.

A Prefatory Neo-aphorism Seeking a Conclusion

“Global North” democracies and their institutions are, supposedly, non-prescriptive in handling (managing) the artist-creators who explore, define, or countermand extant or ascendant notions of national and personal identity. In reality, this “hands-off” separation exists only rarely, if at all, in cultural policy-making and subsidy. The fact is that institutions and governments in particular view culture as an *instrument* which defines identity and which also effects societal management control—a branch, as it were, of cultural and economic policy both external and domestic. There is nothing organic or personal in this institutionally suppressed view of creativity versus organizationally fostered national identity. In the view of several thinkers, including Canadian social economist John Ralston Saul, as well as Francis Fukuyama, institutional dirigisme has sunk into alignment with systemic unconscious belief in the legitimacy of the “moral authority” of capitalistic societies and their value systems.

Taking a very long view, the history of theatre may be written in terms of contrasting views of the function of drama (its intent or efficacy): to divert or to provide moral guidance. Diversionary or moralizing effect is arrived at through the “goal-less activity” of play (Huizinga) or “serious-minded” story-telling. This historical

dichotomy masks a series of seeming eternal questions:

- what, in general, is theatre's efficacy with respect to promoting the institutional agenda, whether open or tacit, of the socially dominant group?
- what is the purpose and effect of mythopoesis (myth-making or myth-revival) in dramatic story-telling?
- what is the utility of theatrical exposition to its creators or to the nation, however defined, in expressing identity?
- what is one to make of the ethno-sociological conundrum of universalism versus difference in cultural identities and experience—both extant and having play in institutional behaviours as in the sciences dedicated to their analysis?

and so on.

These questions exist in the ever-changing contexts of a struggle for dominance. Looking playfully on the sunny side of things, this means that sociologically minded, historically inclined, or ethnographically leaning theorists of the theatre can never be unemployed. Conversely, they may never find peace in a world devoid of a *unified field theory* of theatrical efficacy. Ours is an era of questioning all tenets about canonical and unfledged cultural artefacts through hyphenated manoeuvres such as re-positioning, re-framing, re-visioning and re-versioning, de-coding and re-coding, re-constructing and de-constructing, and so on—in short, re-thinking those beliefs and truths so often mis-taken as inalienable, immutable, and naturally-ordered. This is the methodological torment of the contemporary interpreter—his or her transnational, cross-cultural, and cross-disciplinary *devoir*, the millennial annoyance or risible entertainment, perhaps, of those who will follow, just as we have followed in direct lineage Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Put this way, post-modernism, deconstructionism, and so on, are modern spins on the Socratic meta-quest.

As a common-sense practitioner of contemporary tentativeness, I propose an unambiguous motto for my investigation in the form of aphorism: “laws can't make art”—nor culture, nor identity. Without declaring absolutely the absolute ineffectiveness of institutional incursions into identity—a fact of which I have sometimes been acutely aware as a practitioner of home-grown theatre and cinema—my general view is that the mimetic arts have not, in the Canadian instance, been the tool of instrumentality in nation-building which modern institutions have sought.

NOTES

- 1 On this whole question, see Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
- 2 *The White-Haired Girl* was presented by the Shanghai Ballet of the People's Republic of China at the O'Keefe Centre, opening 25 May 1977, and returned to O'Keefe, opening 14 March 1989. I am grateful to Lee Ramsay, Paula Sperdakos, and Alan Filewood for this information. (MOK)
- 3 The production was officially meant to promote post-revolutionary values and a vision of the longevity of Maoist society expressed in the maxim, "the old society turned a person into a ghost and the new society turns a ghost back into a person."

WORKS CITED

- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens; a study of the play-element in culture*. Boston: Beacon, 1955. Print.
- Smith, Anthony D. *National Identity*. London and New York: Penguin, 1991. Print.