

# Hospitality Matters: Un entretien avec PME-ART

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The first time I saw PME-ART—a Montreal-based bilingual (French/English) interdisciplinary performance collective—was, I think, in Montreal in 2011; it was in the bilingual show *Le Df qui donnait trop d'information*, where the performers took turns playing vinyl recordings as they recounted an anecdote related to each disk. A few years later, when PME-ART took over the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery with *Adventures can be found anywhere, même dans la mélancolie*, a show where they transcribed and rewrote Fernando Pessoa's unfinished work, *Livro do Desassossego*, from its English and French translations (*The Book of Disquiet* and *Le Livre de l'intranquillité*), I saw in PME's multilingual rewritings of the book the melding not only of the language of the visual and the literary arts but something of the work of the translator as well.

Fascinated by this lieu de rencontre—between languages, versions of the book, and the overlaying of Pessoa's Lisbon over Montreal—I was struck by the way, in their creative echoes of the original, the performers made palpable a quality not necessarily new, but one already inherent in the work itself: its defiant nature. Described as an anti-book of sorts, *The Book of Disquiet* was never finished in Pessoa's lifetime (1888–1935). To offer a sense of its unwieldiness, four different editions and translations exist in the English language alone. Pessoa signed his work using the names and identities of various fictional authors he called heteronyms. Heteronyms differ from pseudonyms in the intricate back stories, biographies, and writing styles that Pessoa invented for each new author-character—many of whom interacted with each other in the form of letters, interviews, even reviews. Given the book's unique history, the insertion and mutation of PME's scribes (Claudia Fancello, Marie Claire Forté, Nadège Grebmeier Forget, Adam Kinner, Ashlea Watkin, and Jacob Wren) into Pessoa's collection of heteronyms seemed less a gesture of appropriation of a found object than a manner of activating, and of being hospitable to, the book's open-ended, plural, and elusive nature.

Hospitality, in fact, is a theme that comes up often in PME's work. So much so that it even becomes the company's umbrella term for a series of ongoing collaborations that explore the tensions between life and art by blurring the divide between performing and “playing” one's self, or between using language for expository and artistic purposes.

I interviewed co-Artistic Directors Sylvie Lachance and Jacob Wren over the course of several email exchanges, hoping to read across what I saw as recurring concerns in their performances—authenticity, intimacy, and vulnerability, to name a few. What follows is an edited and abridged version of our exchange.

**Geneviève Robichaud (GR):** Let's start at the beginning. When/how did PME-ART originate? Who is PME-ART?

**SL (Sylvie Lachance):** Au tout début, en 1998, le groupe avait deux origines vraiment distinctes, la compagnie montréalaise de Sylvie Lachance et de Richard Ducharme d'une part et, d'autre part, le travail artistique de Jacob Wren, originaire de Toronto.

**JW (Jacob Wren):** In 1996, I performed the last show I made in Toronto—I *Cut, You Bleed*—at Sylvie and Richard's festival *Les 20 jours du théâtre à risque* in Montreal. After that they asked



*Adventures can be found anywhere, même dans la mélancolie; Photo: Paul Litherland*

me to join an already-in-progress exchange in Bergen, Norway. As part of this exchange, the Norwegian conference TheatreTextConText commissioned me to write a text; more specifically, I was asked to write something that challenged the role of text in contemporary theatre (this text later became the book *Unrehearsed Beauty*). I travelled to Bergen with Carole Nadeau where Carole directed a staged reading of this text. I believe the Bergen performance went quite well and Sylvie, Richard, and I decided to continue working together on a project that eventually became *En français comme en anglais, it's easy to criticize*.

**SL:** En 2003 et encore plus précisément en 2008, nous avons refondé ensemble—Jacob, Richard et moi-même—le groupe PME-ART pour réaffirmer sa démarche interdisciplinaire et inviter des artistes à travailler en collaboration pour créer une œuvre. PME-ART est une structure qui les soutient dans ce travail en aplanissant les difficultés concrètes, du mieux qu'il peut.

**GR:** Given the ubiquitous role collaboration plays in your work, the question “who is PME?” might be less pertinent than the company and exchanges you keep (and stage). Does that sound accurate?

**SL:** Toute question sur l'origine ou l'essence de PME-ART peut nous mettre dans un état proche de la crise existentielle! (Et cela peut durer quelques heures.) Notre travail se fait en collaboration et nous générons tout nous-mêmes : les contenus autant que la forme.

**GR:** Can you expand a bit on this aspect of collaboration?

**JW:** I have such a strong belief in collaboration: as something thematically essential, as a place to make artistic breakthroughs that are simply impossible to make on one's own, as a way to attempt to break our culture's (and art's) incredible over-emphasis on individualism and the individual artist, as a way to be a little bit less alone in the world. At the same time,



*Adventures can be found anywhere, même dans la mélancolie; Photo: Geneviève Perrault*

I generally find the actual lived experience of collaboration to be incredibly difficult. Perhaps psychologically I'm not really made for it. I guess there's a lot of tension in this paradox, and some of that tension must be what energizes the work. As I was writing this, a strange sentence suddenly popped into my head: the work of PME-ART is both too collaborative and not collaborative enough. There is something off-kilter about our way of collaborating with others, and out of this something I believe a different kind of performance might emerge.

**GR:** Et votre processus de création?

**SL:** Nous ne partons pas d'un texte ou d'idées préexistantes mais de concepts et de principes qui se mettront en action. Chaque artiste parle en son nom personnel. Ainsi, le sable sous nos pieds est toujours mouvant, même si on travaille fort pour préciser notre démarche, les concepts que nous développons et l'objet de nos recherches, le type de relations que nous voulons établir entre nous et avec le public. Mais cette approche a du bon, je pense, car ça nous garde sur le qui-vive, à l'affût.

**GR:** Menant de front plusieurs projets avec des préoccupations linguistiques et culturelles, PME-ART crée souvent des performances qui superposent différents rapports entre la communauté et l'individu. C'est important pour vous?

**SL:** Dans PME-ART, nous ne jouons pas, nous n'avons pas de rôles et nous ne travaillons presque jamais avec un texte préparé; les artistes parlent en leur noms. Ils décident ensemble et discutent longuement de ce qui sera créé, du contenu qui sera amené (social, politique, personnel, etc). Naturellement, aussi parce que nous travaillons à Montréal, le bilinguisme est un état de fait dans notre travail et ce, depuis nos débuts. Et bien sûr, cela nous intéresse beaucoup mais c'est un choix naturel, par la force de la réalité qui nous entoure.

**JW:** The absolutely insane thing is that PME-ART is a bilingual group but I'm co-Artistic Director and I don't speak or understand French. I believe this is something utterly unique

and also very much not consequent. I find it a bit difficult to even imagine that such a thing is possible, much less that it has already existed for eighteen years.

**GR:** What about hospitality? Voilà plusieurs années que vous travaillez avec le thème de l'hospitalité. Est-ce que PME en a encore beaucoup à dire, à explorer?

**SL:** Avec le projet *Hospitalité* de PME-ART, nous avons voulu aller plus loin. Cette notion permettait justement de travailler d'une façon vivante les relations complexes et contradictoires entre l'individu et la communauté, ce qui nous apparaissait urgent à faire. Créé par Caroline Dubois, Claudia Fancello et Jacob Wren, en 2008, le projet *Hospitalité* a des composantes en dormance et d'autres encore bien vivantes. Pour des raisons plus logistiques qu'artistiques, nous ne pensons pas reprendre prochainement *Hospitalité 3 : l'individualisme est une erreur* ou *Hospitalité 2 : peu à peu, une vue d'ensemble*, même si nous aurions probablement encore beaucoup à dire sur ces sujets. Par contre, *Le Dj qui donnait trop d'information (Hospitalité 5)* et *Amenez votre disque/Listening Party* (Hospitalité sans numéro!) sont encore souvent présentés ici et ailleurs; nous avons même décidé d'intégrer deux autres DJs, Marie Claire Forté et Adam Kinner, qui refont le processus de création et de diffusion avec nous, car la création et la diffusion se font dans un certain continuum chez PME-ART puisque le travail demande à être « testé devant un public ». D'ailleurs, *Le Dj ...* et *Amenez votre disque ...* ont de plus en plus de succès, au fur et à mesure que nous les diffusons (depuis 2011!), ils provoquent des réactions spontanées du public qui écoute calmement, crie, danse, ou s'emporte, comme purgé d'une pression, comme possédé par une liberté soudainement accessible. Que ce soit à Montréal, Québec, Toronto, Austin, Fribourg, ou Düsseldorf. Nous voulions faire un travail performatif qui nous permettrait d'amener des idées et des contenus qui se développent et changent avec le temps et il semble bien que cela réponde à des préoccupations de gens autour de nous. On a le sentiment de maintenir un dialogue avec beaucoup de gens, dans divers endroits, une conversation qui ne peut que s'ouvrir, ne jamais vraiment se fermer.

**GR:** Hence the emphasis on collaboration?

**JW:** I think, for me, when collaborating, it's extremely important that each of our distinct personalities doesn't get lost. That the group doesn't become a group-identity, but rather that each of us bring to it as much difference and autonomy as is possible. There is not a PME-ART way of performing. Rather, each of us finds our own way to be ourselves within whatever larger structure the collaborative process generates. I hope it's very much the same for the spectator: that the performance doesn't dominate them or their understanding of it, but rather they are able to bring their own unique perspective to it, that it is open enough for its meaning to be a fully collaborative process between the work, each of us who is making it, and each person who attends.

For me *The Dj Who Gave Too Much Information* is a lot about how it's possible to speak about the entire world—about love, work, politics, friendship, emotions, thoughts, etc.—using only a pile of records as your starting point ... how songs can be an opening to so many completely different aspects of life and everything within it.

**GR:** Jacob, you've also mentioned in interviews that PME is interested in making work where the challenge is to be yourself, to speak as you would with friends. Why is intimacy in the performance context important to you?

**JW:** For me, I think this desire for intimacy began as a reaction against more traditional forms of theatre, which I mainly experienced as alienating, especially when I was younger.



*Adventures can be found anywhere, même dans la mélancolie; Photo: Mathieu Chartrand*

Watching theatre I had this feeling: we're all here in a room together, why isn't it possible to create a more productive engagement out of this particular situation? For me that productive engagement would most likely have something to do with being yourself, with honesty, with authenticity (which, as I always say, is a feeling), with vulnerability and, yes, with intimacy. If people are sitting a few feet away from me I have a desire to speak directly to them in a manner that can hopefully create some sense of opening, though I am not always able to say just what this opening might be an opening towards or what, if anything, it might eventually accomplish.

Over the years my feelings about such intimacy have naturally become considerably more conflicted and complex. I'm not sure intimacy in a performance situation ever quite does what I originally hoped it would. But nonetheless, it definitely does something, and I'm now more likely to classify what it does as being in the realm of paradox, in that it generates almost endless questions: why are they on stage while I'm in the audience? Do they somehow have more to say that I do, or more right to be on stage? What kinds of experiences and feelings are and are not possible together in a room full of people, many of whom may be complete strangers to each other? Do I believe in this intimacy or do I experience it as a lie? Why or why not?

**GR:** What do you let go in performance?

**JW:** My memories of all the previous times I've performed. Each time I try to somehow trick myself into doing it as if for the first time. But this isn't actually so important. Just another fantasy in my artistic world of the same.

**GR:** Is there something about a live performance, the immediacy of it, or about connecting with people, with an audience, with a public, or even the idea of a public life that appeals to you?

**JW:** There are so many different ways I could answer this question. I have now been making performances, and performing, for almost thirty years. I'm forty-five so I've been doing it for quite a bit more than half of my life. And I've always had such a difficult,



*Adventures can be found anywhere, même dans la mélancolie*; Photographer: Christian Bujold

conflicted relationship with performing. All of the things you say are true: I do like the immediacy, connection, and the idea of a public life that are embodied in the act of performance. And, at the same time, I'm disappointed that I haven't been able to find or create even more immediacy, connection, and public life in art and in performance. There is a sense of ongoing failure that makes the real moments of immediacy and connection in performance all that much more precious. I feel that I've wasted my life and I also feel that I haven't. In a way, for me the act of performance is embodied in this sentiment.

**GR:** What routines do you like to keep? For work or otherwise.

**JW:** I'm a creature of habit who is utterly afraid of falling too deeply into routine.

**GR:** It seems to me that your performances are also about escaping performance, or finding ways to make performances incapable ... You're talking to people, telling a story or asking them to do the same. Is that still performance or something else?

**JW:** Yes, I like that way of putting it, our "performances are also about escaping performance," but I think for me this is almost true of everything that has value, that it somehow needs to attempt to transcend previous conceptions of what it might be or become. I believe somewhere Alain Badiou says philosophy must also embrace anti-philosophy, and that has something to do with my approach as well: performance must also embrace anti-performance, and also embrace everything else as well, everything that's outside of performance, so much of life that most performance so casually ignores. I want something unexpected to happen, to be surprised, and to surprise myself.

"Finding ways to make performances incapable" is also a formulation I'm very much attracted to. I think, for me, this also has something to do with life: I don't feel I'm able to live and yet I somehow continue to live anyway. Sometimes I say that I'm good at art, bad at life. And this feeling forces me to live my struggles with life within art, within

performance. So the performance can never feel okay, there is so much conflict, difficulty, ambiguity, uncertainty in my relations towards it, and in the act of performing it in public, in front of people who might very well find life so much easier than I do. On the other hand, perhaps many of them find it just as difficult. Performance (or whatever we wish to call it) might be one of the places where we can find out.

**GR:** Thank you both so very, very much.