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STEPPING ON STILETTO: KALEIDOSCOPE, CAPP, AND CONTROVERSY

Cet article s'intéresse aux circonstances d'une production en 1996 au Kaleidoscope Theatre de Stiletto, un cabaret destiné aux élèves du secondaire dont le contenu a entraîné des réactions d'outrage auprès de parents et du milieu scolaire. Kaleidoscope participait à l'époque au programme de planification de la carrière et de la planification personnel, ce qui avivait certainement les réactions; le programme venait d'être intégré au syllabus à Victoria et avait sa propre part de problèmes. L'histoire de Stiletto illustre les rapports complexes que peuvent entretenir des compagnies de théâtre jeune public, le système d'écoles publiques et les groupes de parents. Elle met également en relief les défis que devaient surmonter les compagnies de théâtre jeune public en Amérique du Nord pendant la récession de la fin des années 1980 et des années 1990.



In late April 1996 a camera crew from local Victoria news station CHEK 6 parked outside the Herald Street Theatre hoping to interview students emerging from Kaleidoscope Theatre's controversial production of *Stiletto*, a "cabaret" for high school audiences. Written and developed by Kaleidoscope artistic director Elizabeth Gorrie and composer David Rimmer, the production used song-and-dance to explore issues of racism and sexism in a bold, provocative manner. The show opened on April 16 to an enthusiastic audience, but when a review by theatre critic Adrian Chamberlain appeared in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, *Stiletto* became the target of an aggressive boycott campaign. Angered by Chamberlain's description of two of the production's most graphic scenes, parents refused to allow their children to attend the production and wrote letters to local schools and media to express their outrage. Within days, twelve schools had canceled their bookings to the show and the Greater Victoria School District (GSVD) had formally withdrawn its support. Already beleaguered by financial difficulties, Kaleidoscope found itself in the midst of a public relations nightmare. Meanwhile, the CHEK 6 crew kept its vigil outside the theatre, waiting with vulture-like patience for a juicy soundbite.

Complicating matters for Kaleidoscope was the fact that it had developed *Stiletto* to complement a program that had recently entered the school curriculum and was experiencing problems of its own. The Careers and Personal Planning (CAPP) program was designed to help students develop their personal, career, and educational goals, and included sections on Healthy Living, Family Life Education, and Mental Well-Being. Instituted in the fall of 1995, the program was admirable but a cause for concern with some parents, who felt that it asked students to reveal information that could result in an invasion of their privacy. These concerns eventually led to an external investigation by the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner in the summer of 1996. Although the reaction to *Stiletto* was perhaps only indirectly fueled by the CAPP controversy, a connection between the two is nevertheless highly probable.

The *Stiletto* controversy not only offers a textbook example of the complex relationships that can exist between young people's theatre (YPT) companies, the public education system, and parent groups but also illuminates the difficult challenges that confronted many North American YPT companies in the late 1980s and 1990s. During this period of economic recession and curriculum change, the need to balance creative aspirations and political goals with fiscal responsibilities and parent concerns became an almost-impossible mission for many YPT companies. A consideration of the motives behind the selection of subject matter for young audiences is therefore central to my analysis of *Stiletto*. Despite the best of intentions, Kaleidoscope's decision to forge an alliance with CAPP and create a provocative and challenging theatrical piece ultimately proved disastrous. While no one challenged Kaleidoscope's right to produce *Stiletto* or attempted to close the production, the resulting boycott not only damaged the company financially but also limited its ability to reach its target audience. An examination of the *Stiletto* case also offers compelling evidence to suggest that public reaction to a controversial production is often about more than the production itself. As I will argue, the initial outcry and subsequent boycott of *Stiletto* were as much about the tense relationship between parents and the (GSVD) in the mid-1990s as it was about the controversial subject matter explored in the play.

Education, Controversy, and Young People's Theatre

YPT has been defined as "the umbrella heading for all work done by professional actors for young people and children with an

educational purpose” (Whytbro, “Young People’s Theatre” 267).¹ Although it serves some of the same functions as Drama in Education (i.e., drama in the classroom), YPT is theatre created for rather than by young people (267). For that reason, most YPT companies exist independently of the school system and either tour from school to school or bus school groups to a performance space. Maja Ardal, former artistic director of Toronto’s Young People’s Theatre, notes an important difference between YPT companies that perform in schools and those that perform in their own spaces: “In the school the artist is a guest of the educational world. In the theatre, the educational world is a guest of the artist” (192). Touring YPT companies frequently design their productions to correspond with the school curriculum, whereas YPT companies operating out of a theatre are free to explore subject matter that they consider appealing and appropriate without any concern for curricular needs (in theory anyway). However, as the *Stiletto* example suggests, other factors can limit the artistic choices available to home-based YPT companies.

YPT companies aim to provide their audiences with an enriching, thought-provoking experience, often as an antidote to other forms of popular entertainment. In a 1995 *American Theatre* article, Marilyn Raichle, director of the Seattle Children’s Theatre Festival, criticized parents for not engaging their children’s imaginations beyond the basic stimuli of television. “As a rule,” she explained, “American kids are used to more abbreviated versions of things, especially on television. But it’s not the kids’ fault that they aren’t challenged more—it’s the fault of the adults” (Berson 28). Unlike most movies or television, YPT companies attempt to encourage youth to explore their own emotions and ideas. According to Ted Sod, director of the Mobile Outreach Branch of the Seattle Repertory Theatre, “[I]t’s a fundamental responsibility of an artist to get people to think. And kids are people [...] [W]e’re competing with MTV, with videogames, with movies. What do we have to offer that’s different, except heart?” (Berson 29).

Ironically, it is this emphasis on getting students to think for themselves that often disturbs parents and concerns educators fearful of controversy. As a result, plays that address difficult issues—especially those dealing with questions of sexuality—are often censored or subjected to heavy editing (Berson 29).² Other companies face an altogether different form of censorship. In the late 1980s Theatre Direct, a Toronto-based YPT touring company, encountered censorship in a number of guises that included “canceled performances, withdrawn contracts and conditional

advance bookings” (Serran 4). Despite widespread acknowledgment by administrators and teachers that the company’s work was exciting and provocative, productions such as *Getting Wrecked* (about alcohol abuse) and *Thin Ice* (about date rape) received chilly receptions. According to company member Susan Serran, Theatre Direct’s work was “greeted with a form of censorship that manifests itself in an ‘attitude.’ It is vague, hard to pinpoint, but something that usually means disapproval” (Serran 4).³

But is this censorship? If we understand theatre censorship to be the legal prohibition of a specific production or performance, the attitude Serran identifies does *not* qualify as such. However, because this attitude “interferes with the research and development of new work, and inhibits the growth of individual artists attempting to create a theatre that is based on a clear and reverberating dialogue with [an] audience,” it certainly restricted the company’s artistic voice (Serran 5). No one banned Theatre Direct from performing their plays or arrested the actors for performing indecent acts onstage. And yet, because Theatre Direct “transcend[ed] the ‘traditional’ curriculum in order to pose questions about our society and all of its components,” it experienced great difficulties in trying to reach its audience (Serran 5). Teachers, principals, and school boards nervous about booking the company often placed limitations on the kind of work it could present, and Theatre Direct found itself in a catch-22 situation. If it changed its material to please the administration, it was not respecting itself or the student audience; however, if it refused to acknowledge the schools’ concerns, its entire future was at stake.

Theatre Direct’s situation illustrates two interrelated problems that many other Canadian YPT companies faced in the late 1980s and early 1990s: 1) quest for identity and 2) funding. During a period of economic recession and political conservatism, it became increasingly difficult for YPT companies to define themselves and assert their right to exist.⁴ In the boom years of the 1980s, YPT companies were able to maintain “independence through the specialized and relatively ‘invisible’ nature of [their] work, occurring as it does in the particularized arena of schools and youth clubs,” theatre educator Nicholas Whytbrow explains (Whytbrow, “Young People’s Theatre” 268). In the 1990s, however, government cutbacks, new education policies, and funding shortages forced many YPT companies to relinquish their independence and develop projects that were not necessarily in keeping with their original artistic mandates. These companies recognized that schools and youth service organizations were more likely to give

money to projects that “correspond[ed] to their policies on the content of youth work” or contained a message compatible with curriculum guidelines (Whytbrow 277). Desperate for financial support, many companies opted to develop plays that “fit” into the educational system rather than pursue their own artistic goals. According to Whytbrow, the “potential opportunism involved in producing, typically, an anti-racist play and workshop, may well belie the company’s real interest in the matter, and as such, does not form a sound basis for its development and implementation” (Whytbrow 277-278).

I do not wish to suggest that all companies producing issue-oriented work in the 1990s were simply succumbing to the latest fashion. Nevertheless, within a climate of economic instability, many touring and “home” or theatre-based YPT companies found it difficult to remain faithful to their artistic ideals. Rather than risk losing school support and government funding, a number of companies opted to edit objectionable material from their productions and sought a broader audience by creating “tailor made” plays.⁵ However, as the *Stiletto* case suggests, aligning oneself too closely with the school curriculum could have disastrous results.⁶

Kaleidoscope Theatre

Elizabeth and Colin Gorrie founded the Kaleidoscope Theatre for Young People in 1974. Although based in Victoria, the company earned its reputation touring throughout British Columbia, playing in school gymnasiums to thousands of elementary school students.⁷ Elizabeth Gorrie identifies the type of work developed by Kaleidoscope as “the theatre of imagery,” a style that uses music, visual imagery, movement, and mask work to create a visually impressive piece (Gorrie, personal interview). As *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* explains, Kaleidoscope “work[s] with the barest essentials in set, costuming, and props, and rel[ies] on movement, transformations, and imagination [to] create productions of great beauty and power” (Doolittle 95).

In the spring of 1996, Kaleidoscope found itself on the edge of financial ruin. It still owed money on its Herald Street theatre facility, which had opened in July 1991, and was trying to recover from several recent box office failures.⁸ Although the company received support from several parties, including the Federal Employment Grant program and professional money-raiser Stephen Andrew, it was \$400,000 in debt and on the brink of collapse (“Facing the Music” 3). In January 1996 Victoria weekly *Monday Magazine* reported that “landlords, banks and creditors have been patient

[with Kaleidoscope], but lately they've been pounding on the door of the company's 276-seat Herald St. playhouse" (3). According to Colin Gorrie, "most of the money owed is for building upgrades and renovations. You can't get mortgages based on tenant improvements." Kaleidoscope's precarious financial situation was further challenged by a 33% decrease in the grant from the City of Victoria (3). In early April, Kaleidoscope laid off three out of six members of its administrative staff in an attempt to cut costs ("Snippets" 4).

On the brink of financial collapse, Kaleidoscope's hopes rested with *Stiletto*, which, as noted, was designed to complement the educational objectives of CAPP. Although, as Ardal suggests, home-based theatre companies have fewer obligations to create plays that conform to curricular guidelines, Kaleidoscope clearly felt that a strong link to CAPP would be beneficial for the company. As the production program emphasized, "many of the issues in *Stiletto* relate directly to the Personal Development section of the new CAPP curriculum" (*Stiletto* program). CAPP subject areas such as Mental Well-Being, Child Abuse Prevention, Family Life Education, and Substance Abuse Prevention were identified as points of convergence. A comprehensive teaching/resource package was also available for teachers and included "activities and handouts that connect the issues addressed in *Stiletto* with specific outcomes in the CAPP curriculum" (*Stiletto* program). Although CAPP was not an official sponsor, Kaleidoscope went out of its way to highlight connections and encourage CAPP teachers to bring students to the theatre.

This is not to suggest that Kaleidoscope "sold out" with *Stiletto*; however, given its precarious financial situation, the company may have felt pressured to establish a strong connection with CAPP without considering the full implications of that association.⁹ And yet, in the days before *Stiletto* opened there was every indication that the production would be a success. Government agencies supported the project (Multiculturalism BC and the federal heritage ministry contributed \$20,000 to help fund the production) (Moss) and a number of Victoria schools had already booked tickets for the play, planning to use the show to cover material outlined in the CAPP program. Ironically, the *Stiletto* controversy was due, at least in part, to the fact that it fit too well into what was an already controversial aspect of the curriculum.

CAPP

"The recent history of the censorship movement coincides with major changes in school curricula," education expert David Booth

observed in his 1992 study of censorship in Canadian schools (Booth 12). Parents often feel threatened by curriculum changes, believing that decisions affecting their children have been made without their awareness or approval, and oppose the introduction of material that they consider objectionable for moral or religious reasons.¹⁰ This tendency to censor controversial or challenging material is often at odds with the education system's desire to prepare children for the changing world around them. As such, the censorship debate between parents and schools is not only a struggle over morality; it is also a fight for control (Booth 48).

The Career and Personal Planning program entered the BC high school curriculum in the fall of 1995. A graduation requirement for all students, CAPP "focuses on students' personal development and how their schooling and extra-curricular activities relate to future plans and 'life after school'" ("Career and Personal Planning"). As such, the curriculum was (and continues to be) divided into three sections: Planning Process, Career Development, and Healthy Living. This last section includes several delicate subject areas ranging from Family Life Education and Child Abuse Prevention to Substance Abuse Prevention and Mental Well-Being. Under the heading of Cross-Curricular Interests, the CAPP curriculum also includes a section on Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism Education, which is intended to "promote the elimination of racism through identifying changing institutional policies and practices as well as identifying individual attitudes and behaviors that contribute to racism" ("Multiculturalism and Antiracism Education").

While CAPP was created with the interests of students in mind, its integration into the school system was highly controversial. In late 1995 the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner received thirteen written complaints (plus another sixty names in a petition) from parents about the CAPP curriculum ("Investigation Report" 3). According to the March 1997 Investigation Report, parents were concerned about "some of the 'Suggested Activities' found in the curriculum materials, which involved the students collecting and recording personal information about themselves, their families, and friends" ("Investigation Report" 1). In the spring and summer of 1996, the Office investigated these potential privacy issues, interviewing CAPP teachers, parents, and students in the Greater Victoria area. Although the Office learned that many of the objectionable "Suggested Activities" were not in fact used in the classroom, it nevertheless made several recommendations to the Ministry of Education

(“Investigation Report” 1). In August 1996, the Office sent a first draft of its report to the Ministry, which coincided with the Ministry’s own review of the CAPP curriculum. By early February 1997, the Office had completed its review and was preparing to make revisions to the CAPP program, based largely on student comments and observations (“Investigation Report” 3). The revised curriculum was implemented in the fall of 1997.

Stiletto

Elizabeth Gorrie was inspired to create *Stiletto* after reading *Zlata’s Diary*, a young girl’s account of the horrors of the war in the Balkans. Although *Stiletto* was a departure from the kind of work Kaleidoscope normally develops for young audiences, Gorrie was “becoming more and more aware of violence among teens and in society” and felt a need to address the issue in a theatrical format (Gorrie). She contacted composer David Rimmer, perhaps most well known for his work on the controversial One Yellow Rabbit production *Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp*, feeling that his lyrics and sense of cabaret were ideal for the type of show she hoped to create.¹¹ As she explained in a personal interview, “[With cabaret] you can get away with a lot more without preaching, because of its tongue-in-cheek approach” (Gorrie). The teacher’s guide for *Stiletto* likewise emphasized that, “[The cabaret] style was chosen [...] primarily because music speaks more directly to all of us and because the subject matter is so volatile, it allows questions to be raised through shock value and black humour. It allows the audience to draw their own conclusions” (“Note for *Stiletto* Teachers’ Guide” 4). This last point is key because it relates directly to the goals and functions of YPT. Gorrie was not interested in presenting the student audience members with answers, but instead sought to stimulate them critically. As she told the *Victoria News*, “We’re not trying to offer solutions—we’re saying let’s look at it. We’re leaving it up to the audience to think about it” (Sibley, “There are no happy endings”). Three years later she reiterated this point, explaining, “[W]ith *Stiletto*, the whole thing was about asking questions” (Gorrie).

Gorrie’s emphasis on raising questions and her use of cabaret with *Stiletto* highlight the Brechtian techniques used by many YPT companies. Whytrow observes that for companies interested in creating political theatre, finding the right approach is a crucial factor in the production’s “success.” Effective political or issue-oriented theatre asks questions rather than confirms what is already known: “[T]he real questions emanating from a piece of

theatre should, therefore, reflect a quality of searching based on what may be said to exist, rather than what one would like to exist. Roughly speaking: ‘Why is the world like this?’ and ‘What sense can be made of it?’” (278). “Good” political plays do not merely reveal racism, sexism, violence, etc. as “bad” or offer simple solutions, but rather require spectators and performers to look inward and examine their own roles in the creation of social situations. Successful YPT does not preach; instead it encourages discussion and self-analysis.¹² Apparently, however, for some parents the questions posed by YPT productions are better left unasked.

In the process of developing *Stiletto*, Elizabeth Gorrie was motivated by a desire to create a provocative, challenging piece. Working with Rimmer and a cast of three actors (Katya Gorrie, Colin Legge, and Jimmy Tait) she conducted six months of research and exploration, interviewing victims of violence, teachers, counselors, and students, visiting the local immigration centre, and watching videos on local and international violence. The research period culminated in a workshop performance, which led to several more months of editing and reworking until the group felt it had achieved its goal (Gorrie).

Consistent with its cabaret format, *Stiletto* featured a series of songs, dances, and vignettes. Victoria choreographer Linda Raino orchestrated the movement, which included a sultry tango and several traditional Broadway dance numbers. Consistent with the episodic nature of cabaret, the entire production was divided into over twenty separate scenes. Act I featured a game show called “Fear and Denial,” in which “two contestants answer[ed] questions about society’s fears, and den[ied] the truth about violence” (“There are no happy endings”); a segment in which an arms dealer engaged in phone sex using military terminology; a tango-like dance of violence in which two men fought over a woman; a scene entitled “Argument on the Merits of Tradition,” in which a woman shot up heroin while describing female genital mutilation; and a stand-up comedy sketch delivered by a racist Aryan. The act ended with a song that called for enlightenment and awareness. Act II featured a satirical take on the Evening News; a song entitled “Just Say No to Gun Control”; and a dinner table scene in which a mother and father passed racial prejudice to their son along with the corn and mashed potatoes. Like Act I, Act II ended with a plea for understanding and education (*Stiletto* production video). *Stiletto*’s broad range of topics was intended as a jumping-off point for discussion with students, not only in the talk-back sessions that followed each performance, but also in the classroom.

The Controversy

Stiletto opened Tuesday, April 16 to an enthusiastic audience. One teacher told Gorrie that “it was the first time he’d seen his students sit mesmerized through something” (Sibley). The following day a review of the production appeared in the *Times-Colonist* written by theatre critic Adrian Chamberlain. While his comments were generally positive, he also expressed his reservations about some of the racier scenes. “The subject matter is strong stuff given this new 90-minute collection of songs and vignettes is primarily intended for young adult audiences,” he wrote. “Imagine, if you will, a young woman discussing the practice of genital mutilation as she mimes shooting up heroin. Imagine an arms dealer who, back to the audience, appears to masturbate as he makes a phone sex call in which military lingo replaces risqué dialogue” (Chamberlain, “Perky song and dance routines”). Although Chamberlain called the production “a qualified success,” and complimented the performers for their skillful work, his initial focus on the two most controversial scenes potentially gave the impression that *Stiletto* was all about sex.

Two days after the review appeared, the *Times-Colonist* reported that “seven school groups representing six schools had canceled their plans to see the show, citing concerns over content.” The article (written, somewhat ironically, by Chamberlain himself) explained that Kaleidoscope held “a ‘sensational’ [Kaleidoscope’s term] *Times-Colonist* article detailing *Stiletto*’s content” responsible for arousing parental concerns that led to the cancellations (Chamberlain, “Educational show”). From Elizabeth Gorrie’s perspective, “Adrian Chamberlain [in the initial review] was doing exactly what the play was about: glamorizing and sensationalizing violence” (Gorrie). The company was also frustrated with parents for basing their opinion of the show solely on the review. Colin Gorrie argued that “the parents are doing exactly what the show is about, which is denial [that violence exists]. They’re saying, I don’t want my kid to see that sort of stuff, thank you very much” (Chamberlain, “Educational show”).

If an April 28 “Letter to the Editor” published in the *Times-Colonist* offers any indication of the typical parent response, Kaleidoscope’s point is well taken. In her letter Audrey Smith wrote,

Imagine my surprise to read a review about a play about violence in some of its most disgusting forms. Halfway through I was sure this was a play I would avoid. Then I read that schools were having the play performed for

their students under the Career and Personal Planning program. My kids don't plan careers in the fields of mutilation or phone sex. Their personal lives don't need that kind of planning." ("Why give youth what adults avoid?")

Smith's letter reveals that while she had not seen *Stiletto* she nevertheless felt the need to express her horrified reaction to *the review*. While conceding that "the arts should have a place in school," she asks "if it's a play that most adults would find revolting and not worth their time or money, why force it on our youth?" Based on the description of two decontextualized scenes, Smith assumed that the play was disgusting and pointless. The number of school cancellations indicate that she was not alone in this assumption.

In the wake of the cancellations, many of the schools that had actually seen *Stiletto* rallied around Kaleidoscope. Victoria High School principal David Harrington told the *Times-Colonist* that the show was consistent with the goals of the CAPP curriculum and expressed his belief that it was "'appropriate' as long as adequate pre-show preparation is done and there is a discussion after the performance" (Chamberlain, "Educational show"). Sue Hodgkinson, a counselor from the Girls Alternative Program, which provides small group instruction to teenage girls, including those who are pregnant or raising young children, revealed that her students had enjoyed the production and offered her support to Kaleidoscope, explaining, "I have a hard time with adults censoring information for students" (Chamberlain, "Educational show"). Other schools and community organizations, including the New Dimensions Alternative Program, the Cowichan Valley Alternative School, and the Victoria Native Friendship Society, sent Kaleidoscope letters of support, praising *Stiletto* for addressing real issues and expressing their concern over the boycott (Letters, Kaleidoscope archives). As New Dimensions counselor Jim Oliver concluded, "The message of this play was not lost on the teen students in this school; too bad it is lost on many adults making decisions for them" (Letters, Kaleidoscope archives).¹³

Despite this show of support, the *Stiletto* boycott continued to grow. By April 26 twelve schools had canceled their bookings and the Greater Victoria School District officially withdrew its support from the production. School board chair Donna Jones explained that while *Stiletto* addressed some of the issues covered in the CAPP program, the district felt that it had been "misled" about the manner in which these issues would be addressed (Sibley, "School district steps on *Stiletto*"). In an interview with *Victoria News*

reporter Kathleen Sibley, Jones denied that “the most vocal opponent to CAPP, the 200-strong group called Parents for Healthy Children[,] put pressure on the district’s superintendent to withdraw support from the play” (Sibley, “School district”). Elizabeth Gorrie believes otherwise. “The pressure was on,” she explained, and the members of Parents for Healthy Children knew how to infiltrate organizations like the (GSVD) to make their demands known (Gorrie). The Ministry of Education, Skills and Training also may have influenced the board’s decision to withdraw support. In April 1996 the Ministry was continuing to field complaints about CAPP, and the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner investigation had just begun. The Ministry likely feared that another CAPP-related controversy would strengthen the case for those who wished to terminate the program.

The subsequent school cancellations meant that approximately 500 students would not be attending *Stiletto*, which translated into a significant loss of revenue for Kaleidoscope. “[I]t means \$3500 we’re not seeing,” publicist Kera McHugh told the *Victoria News*. “It means that what we’ve spent eighteen months researching (with teachers, parents, students, counselors, etc.) means nothing.” McHugh also added that not one of the parents calling to complain about *Stiletto’s* content had seen or would agree to see the play (Sibley, “School district”).

The *Stiletto* controversy occupied the media’s attention for the length of its run. Elizabeth Gorrie reports that local television station CHEK 6 was at the theatre everyday interviewing parents, teachers, and students about their reaction to the play (Gorrie). The show also inspired numerous editorials in Victoria’s local papers. On April 26 the *Victoria News* published an editorial siding with Kaleidoscope. Zeroing in on the hypocritical nature of the boycott, the anonymous writer hoped

[...] that these same parents that are so outraged over what they perceive *Club Stiletto* [sic] to be—through brief media accounts, not through having seen it themselves—are equally rigorous about the kinds of movies their kids see at the cinema or rent at the local video store [...]. But for the school boards and individual schools to back out of their support of the show, again, with nothing but short clips on the nightly news and parental complaints to back them up, seems somewhat spineless. (“Opinion and Comment”)

While acknowledging that the material covered in *Stiletto* was “too mature for elementary students and perhaps even some secondary school students,” the writer argued that protecting children from harsh reality is not the answer to society’s problems (“Opinion and Comment”).

Two days later *Times-Colonist* editorial writer Paul Moss examined the controversy from a broader perspective, taking into consideration Kaleidoscope’s financial motives for producing *Stiletto* and the strained relationship between parents and the CAPP program. Without completely validating the parents’ response, he pointed out that “some parents resent what they view as an undermining of their authority to veto, approve or simply monitor what their children see” (Moss). Moreover, he explained, “[T]heatre is an intimate experience, and although most of the students have probably seen much worse on television and in the movies, the impact of seeing a real person standing a few metres away hurling racial invective your way or engrossed in a phone-sex call, [sic] can be intense and unnerving.” Ironically, this kind of visceral response was the very reaction Kaleidoscope was hoping to elicit from its audience. While Moss stopped short of blaming Kaleidoscope for producing such a controversial show, his presentation of the issues suggested that he was more sympathetic towards the parents’ point of view. For him, the controversy was “not simply [...] narrow-minded people short-sightedly trying to protect their children from the unpleasant facts of life, [but] an example of parents who are uncomfortable with the authority of a school to show their children anything it deems appropriate” (Moss). As discussed earlier, this struggle for control can prompt reactionary responses from some parents who feel that the education system has shut them out of their children’s lives.

Not surprisingly, the student audience was the group least represented in the media. And yet, many of the young people who had actually seen *Stiletto* considered the show a success. At the post-performance discussions students were extremely open and receptive to the material. “The Question and Answer session is amazing,” McHugh told the *Victoria News*. “The kid’s are so bright. They’re getting it” (Sibley, “School district”). Elizabeth Gorrie also reported that many of the students were excited and relieved to be given a forum for discussing controversial issues (Gorrie). For the majority of students who did find a way to communicate their opinion, either through the media or in a letter to Kaleidoscope, *Stiletto* was important. Their comments emphasized the need to address issues of violence and racism and called for increased

awareness and understanding (Letters, Kaleidoscope archives). In a sad irony, one of *Stiletto's* student advocates, Jared Fraelic of the New Dimensions Alternative School, was killed in an accidental shooting only four days after sending Kaleidoscope a letter of support. The *Times-Colonist* published a section from the letter, in which he wrote, "If we are kept in the dark about important issues like this, how are we supposed to deal with them when the responsibility and problems of society are handed on to our generation?" ("Victim of gun accident honoured").

And yet, there is also evidence to suggest that students found certain aspects of the performance disturbing (particularly the phone sex and heroin/genital mutilation scenes). In their letters to Kaleidoscope, several Grade 11 and 12 students from Victoria High School wrote that they had been offended by the controversial scenes and suggested that the production might not be appropriate for younger students. Interestingly, these students were not concerned about themselves as much as they were worried about the material's suitability for others. Their letters indicate that some students did, in fact, feel nervous about the material and, like the angry parents, were concerned about the effects that graphic depictions of sex and violence might have on younger, more impressionable students. While most of these students agreed that *Stiletto* was an excellent production, their hesitancy about the material suggests that overall student reactions to *Stiletto* were perhaps more varied than Kaleidoscope wished to acknowledge at the time (Letters, Kaleidoscope archives).

The *Stiletto* Fallout

The *Stiletto* controversy offers a prime example of the kinds of challenges that many Canadian YPT companies faced in the 1990s. Adrian Chamberlain's *Time-Colonist* review triggered an alarmed response from parents who were already upset about the implementation of CAPP. Unwilling to risk another attack on the program, the (GSVD) had little recourse but to withdraw its support from the production. As Moss suggests, this was the real issue behind the *Stiletto* controversy: the power struggle between parents and the (GSVD). The explosive reaction to *Stiletto* was therefore fueled, in large part, by parents' anxiety about the new curriculum, over which they had little control.

And yet, while my sympathies lie with Kaleidoscope, I am wary of representing the company as an unwitting and totally innocent victim of circumstance. Certainly the reactionary boycott and vulture-like media coverage would be enough to make

any company feel victimized, but in choosing to produce such a provocative piece, Kaleidoscope should perhaps have been more aware of the risks involved. I am not suggesting that the company had an obligation to cut the offensive masturbation and heroin shooting scenes, but rather that they should at least have anticipated some kind of negative response. By blaming parents for being too reactionary and Chamberlain for offering his own reservations about the suitability of the subject matter for young audiences, Kaleidoscope diverted attention away from its own motives for producing the piece and from its unwillingness to accept responsibility for upsetting the (GSVD). Yes, the company had every right to be angry about the public reaction to *Stiletto*; but it also had a responsibility to acknowledge that *Stiletto* was a risky, challenging piece.

The public backlash against *Stiletto* had both short- and long-term effects for Kaleidoscope. In the short term, the boycott prevented the company from communicating with student audiences, which also resulted in a significant loss of much-needed revenue; in the long term, the controversy damaged the company's reputation with both the local community and government funding agencies. Gorrie feels that the *Stiletto* boycott was one of the major factors behind the City of Victoria's decision to cut the company's funding the following year. Although Kaleidoscope's financial instability was given as the reason for the cutbacks, there were "some innuendoes about the show" and Gorrie feels that the "reactive council" was concerned about allocating public funds to such a volatile company (Gorrie). The *Stiletto* controversy also tarnished Kaleidoscope's relationship with secondary schools and the (GSVD), which subsequently influenced the company's artistic decisions. After *Stiletto*, Gorrie explained, Kaleidoscope decided to "stick with the classics" rather than venture into new areas (Gorrie).¹⁴

Where to go from here? Certainly the power of the media to shape public opinion, combined with parents' desire to protect their children, continues to threaten the viability of YPT. Yet it is to be hoped that companies like Kaleidoscope will continue to produce exciting, provocative material for young people, taking into consideration the need to include parents and educators in the process. Now more than ever we need theatre that challenges rather than cajoles, that presents questions rather than platitudes, and that forces us to look at the world we live in and take responsibility for our actions. If there is anything to be learned from *Stiletto*, it is that YPT has the capacity to engage students, teachers,

and parents in discussions that they might otherwise avoid. The challenge, of course, is finding ways to keep the conversation going. ❁

NOTES

- 1 YPT is also sometimes referred to as “TYP” (Theatre for Young People) or “TYA” (Theatre for Young Audiences). See Ardal.
- 2 For example, in the mid-1990s a play about sexual identity produced by Seattle company GAP Theatre was postponed at one school because the administration was nervous that a “gay positive” monologue delivered by one of the actors would stir up controversy with students and parents (Berson 29).
- 3 Toronto theatre artists were unequivocal in their support of Theatre Direct. Richard Greenblatt, then Deputy Artistic Director of The Canadian Stage Company, Sky Gilbert, then Artistic Director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Don Bozuek, then Artistic Director of Ground Zero Production, and Jini Stolk, then Executive Director of the Toronto Theatre Alliance, each wrote letters of support that were republished in the Spring 1989 edition of *CTR*.
- 4 “The artistic growth at Theatre Direct is severely inhibited by the ‘state of the market,’” Serran concluded in 1989. “Due to economic restraints Theatre Direct [...] is stranded at a borderline” (Serran 5). Theatre Direct was not the only company to experience financial strain. In 1995 Ottawa-based Salamander Theatre encountered serious difficulties when it tried to book a tour of *Romeo and Juliet*. Although the play was a “curriculum text,” only two out of sixty-five schools were interested in booking the play. Those who refused cited concerns about student behaviour and budget constraints as primary reasons (Crowder 46).
- 5 Maja Ardal explains that after the box office failure of *Two Weeks with the Queen*, a critically acclaimed late 1990s production about “childhood cancer, homosexuality and AIDS,” YPT was “in danger of becoming a hesitant and careful company in the future, choosing rather to follow marketing directive and ceasing to produce material that was challenging and innovative” (Ardal 194, 196).
- 6 For more on the challenges faced by YPT companies in the 1990s and today, see *CTR* 106 (Spring 2001), especially the articles by John Lazarus, Eleanor Crowder, and Julie Salverson. For a discussion of the challenges facing YPT companies in the late 1980s, including Serran’s article on Theatre Direct, see *CTR* 60 (Fall 1989).
- 7 One of my first theatrical experiences was watching a Kaleidoscope play in the gym of my Kelowna, BC elementary school, c. 1981. Unfortunately, I can’t remember the name of the production but do remember that it was based on an Inuit legend. My strongest memories are of the use of masks and music to transform the school gym into a magical and mysterious land of snow.

- 8 On July 5, 1991, after almost a year of postponements and delays, Kaleidoscope finally opened its own theatre facility on Herald Street with a production of the Cole Porter revue *Too Darn Hot*. Although the construction project managed to come in under budget thanks to a “windfall of donated services and goods” and the assistance of a Federal Employment Grant, which saved Kaleidoscope \$200,000 in construction, administration, and other labour costs, renting and operating a large building took a serious financial toll on the company (Bigsby). In February 1995, after a 1994 summer production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* cost the company an estimated \$25,000 in lost revenue (the production was expected to bring in \$100,000 at the box office), Kaleidoscope was forced to downsize its operations considerably. According to Colin Gorrie (Executive Director), “We maxed out our deficit situation at the end of August.” Faced with a \$460,000 debt, the company appealed to professional money-raiser Stephen Andrew for assistance and managed to reduce the deficit by an estimated twenty per cent (Gordaneer).
- 9 Gorrie now feels that linking *Stiletto* with CAPP was a mistake. (Gorrie).
- 10 Novels that address real-life problems and “present issues of behavior and ethics as they affect people in situations with which readers can identify” are frequent targets of censorship because they are seen to interfere with parents’ rights to raise their children (Booth 17).
- 11 Rimmer’s work with *One Yellow Rabbit* indicates that he was no stranger to controversy—which may or may not be coincidental in this case. For more on *Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp* and other examples of OYR’s work, see Morrow, esp. chapter 5.
- 12 According to Whytbrow, “[T]his [questioning] process is driven by a fundamental desire to understand—rather than confirm—and to reflect the state of the human condition (or aspects of it) as it relates to a given culture” (Whytbrow 278). “Feast—not fast food. Simple—not simplistic,” is Canadian YPT director David Craig’s mantra. “Involve the audience, don’t distract it. Emotionally powerful—not watered down. Talking to—not talking down to. These are the tremendous challenges that face us as we create a production” (Craig, qtd. in Swartz 201).
- 13 In sharp contrast to the strong support offered to Theatre Direct by the Toronto arts community in 1989 (see note 3), the local Victoria arts community was relatively silent about *Stiletto*. Elizabeth Gorrie does not recall any “obvious support” from other theatre groups, although I personally know of one instance where a local alternative theatre company satirized the controversy (Gorrie). At a fund-raiser for the 1996 Victoria Shakespeare Festival, a group of four young male actors performed a short skit in which a toy kaleidoscope was destroyed by an actor wearing a stiletto heel. While the performers did not make any direct verbal references to the controversy, the message was clear. The reason for the Victoria theatre community’s

generally apathetic (and in the case of the skit, malicious) response to Kaleidoscope and *Stiletto* is uncertain.

- 14 The *Stiletto* controversy has had several positive outcomes. Teachers in Victoria are now taking the initiative to learn more about shows before taking their students, CAPP continues to encourage theatre outings that complement the program, and (although no longer run by the Gorries) Kaleidoscope is aware of the need to establish stronger links with the community. Under the Artistic Directorship of Leslie D. Bland, the company has received critical acclaim for its most recent productions including a highly successfully version of Tolkein's *The Hobbit* (2002). For more on Kaleidoscope's current mandate and productions see <http://www.kaleidoscope.bc.ca/>.

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