Education as Arts Talk? Canada's National Arts Centre and Praxis Theatre's SpiderWebShow

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Abstract This chapter focuses on SpiderWebShow, a collaboration between Canada's National Arts Centre in Ottawa and a Toronto-based theatre company, Praxis Theatre. SpiderWebShow is part blog, part place of theatrical experiment, and part social networking site with an ambition of becoming a space for a national conversation on Canadian theatre. The authors think through how SpiderWebShow is implicated in the evolution of a national theatre's relationship to public education, a shift specifically from a patronizing attitude of bringing culture to the masses, toward one of being a facilitator of artistic development and critical conversation locally and regionally.

Keywords National theatre · Nationalism · Outreach · Digital · Technology · Public education

1 Introduction

The National Arts Centre (NAC) in Canada's capital city of Ottawa features programming and educational activities in both of Canada's official languages of English and French and now also produces a season of indigenous theatre. Opened in 1969 on the energy of Canada's 1967 Centennial celebrations with a mandate to act as a catalyst for performance, creation and learning across the country, the NAC has just marked its 50th anniversary. It recently changed its brand and unveiled a new tagline, "Canada is our stage", reflecting its intention to play a vital role in the

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performing arts all the way across what is a very large country. Also, it is undergoing a physical facelift that will see the brutalist concrete facade of its building, situated nearly across the street from Canada's parliament buildings, replaced by a spacious glass-walled atrium, and many new performance and event spaces. Part of the facility opened on Canada Day 2017, in celebration of the country's 150 anniversary (National Arts Centre "Renovations" 2015d).

The NAC's physical facelift manifests a wider reorientation in the arts toward institutions and spaces that are more inclusive and welcoming. The monolithic, fortress-like structures built to house the arts in the 1960s and 1970s were supposed to make you feel as though the culture produced within them was as strong and permanent—"this nation is great and lasting," their imperturbable facades seemed to say, "and so will be its art." But such buildings also buttressed a normalizing nationalism that had its exclusions. They rarefied the activities they hosted by hermetically sealing them off from the society they were to serve, a situation allowing the work taking place there to detach itself from its surroundings, from history, a stage from which to launch new entries into the annals of Great Art. In recent years, this ideological-architectural principle has been revised (Fair 2015; Wilmer 2004). In North America, overturning this notion has been especially championed by scholars in the field of arts management such as Doug Borwick, Andrew Taylor and Michael Kaiser, all of whom preach various forms of revolution in the arts toward a new era. In *Building Communities, Not Audiences,* for example, Doug Borwick writes, "there is a real danger that they stand upon gradually melting icebergs drifting further and further from solid ground. The fundamental cause of this drifting is a lack of direct, meaningful connection between those organizations and the communities in which they exist."

Because this shift involves rebooting arts institutions' relationship with the public, their education and outreach efforts play a key role in reimaging the social relations taking place through and the cultural discourse occasioned by the art. In this chapter, I want to consider how the NAC is matching its physical transformation with a small but impressive experimental side-project called *SpiderWebShow*, a website enabling a different form of discourse and conception of space than its other more traditional education activities such as artist workshops or educational guides. Part experimental performance website, part online theatre magazine, *SpiderWebShow* demonstrates that digital technologies and social media can help a large institution such as the NAC foster a more democratic and egalitarian relationship with its meaning-making audience. What *SpiderWebShow* accomplishes is illuminated for me by Lynne Conner's "arts talk" model, explained in her book *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era*. In Conner's view, performance practices in the Western tradition have for the most part been highly engaged, responsive audiences equipped with the tools to engage in practices of what she calls "social interpretation": dialogue, discussion, debate. Only in relatively recent history did the paternalistic view develop that theatre bestowed intellectual and moral sophistication through arts experiences. Digital technologies, Conner reckons, are currently enabling a gradual turn—or a return—to those earlier more social practices. Here, then, I will measure *SpiderWebShow* against the idealism of the arts

talk model by offering its creators' take on its successes and some limited empirical data supporting the quality and reach of the discourse it has generated.

2 The Centrifugal Logic of the National Arts Centre

The NAC was established with an explicitly paternalistic attitude toward culture, that it would be where the country's best culture was showcased. It was not unique in this; the very notion of a national theatre had this agenda from its beginnings in eighteenth-century Western Europe, but the cultural revolution of the 1960s throughout the West seemed to inject it with some renewed energy. In Canada, the NAC's creation was catalyzed by a wave of cultural nationalism in the country coinciding with 100th anniversary of Canadian confederation in 1967. When that nationalism had somewhat waned in the 1980s, particularly as it dovetailed with the official policy of Multiculturalism in Canada enacted in 1988, conversations around culture began to shift across toward how the institutions supposedly reflecting the country could be more fully representative of its diversity. Soon after it had been established, then, the NAC began to already look like an anachronism, and this seemed to set its administrators a bit adrift as well. As a retrospective commentary on the NAC's evolution published in 2009 has put it, "the flame that had nourished the boldness of its original vision gradually burned out, as the Centre became increasingly complacent." With the hire of a new President and CEO Peter Herrndorf in 1999, the NAC prepared a new strategic plan in which it acknowledged that while the NAC had been involved in educational activities since it opened in 1969, "the educational role has never been given a central focus in the organization" but that "youth and education activities" would become their "core activities in the years to come" (National Arts Centre 2001). New initiatives would include a young artist's Program involving classes, workshops and sponsored tickets for youth, a Young Audiences Programming initiative to program content appropriate for younger audiences, and the development of new study materials for students to be distributed through a new website. When, 7 years later, the NAC reviewed its own progress, it admitted it had made only modest improvements in education, particularly on account of a lack of an operational plan to put the suggestions of the 2001 report into action.[1] The institution reiterated its commitment to education, this time expanding its education efforts beyond Music, where it had focused its attention, to Theatre and Dance, proposing to take advantage of technology by creating a new website of resources called ArtsAlive.ca, as well as through what it dubbed "telementoring", webcasts and podcasts that would see professional artists mentor students unable to travel to participate in education activities in Ottawa. The report

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[1] The new report did tout that over the intervening 6 years "more than 600,000 young people have been part of education efforts at the NAC". What success they had had, however, was largely in Music, with a highly successful and free Summer Music Institute (National Arts Centre "Strategic Plan" 2008).

suggested that Arts Education was in decline in Canada, and that it could fill the gap by providing resources and programs for teachers, students and classrooms (National Arts Centre 2001).

In a wry critique of the UK's National Theatre, Roehampton theatre professor Joe Kelleher writes that that theatre's programming has a "centrifugal logic" that shows up in "an educational rhetoric of 'outreach' and 'access' and 'bridging the gap' between the theatrical stage and 'new audiences' out there" (Kelleher 2005). Even after the NAC's self-studies and its twice-declared formal commitment to education, much of its activities still seem based on a centrifugal logic of distributing Great Art to the Masses. Such activities have value, but they remain based in an idea of an arts institution in which education or outreach is attached to the value delivered to the public by the work itself; that is, an artist conducting a workshop transfers expertise directly to the public, and an educational brochure is intended to enrich and amplify the value contained in the work on offer. At an extreme, this can make outreach look like advertisement, and one can find examples of NAC outreach that have this flavour, for instance, an "Arts Education" YouTube video (National Arts Centre "Arts Education at the NAC" 2015c) that effectively dramatizes a press release that encourages youth to attend theatre matinees (National Arts Centre "Arts Education: An Opportunity" 2015a). Another problem with the NAC's outreach activities, one it was trying to mitigate by developing a website and telementoring, was that its outreach activities were mostly of benefit to people in the Ottawa area, and of far less visibility and relevance to those elsewhere in the country. This problem of being nationally relevant has dogged the institution since its inception. As the theatre critic for Toronto's *Globe and Mail* J. Kelly Nestruck recently put it, "The National Arts Centre's English Theatre has always been a conundrum—it's a theatre with a national mandate, but a regional audience, charged with putting on artistically ambitious works in a commercial-sized house" (Nestruck 2013). This leads the NAC to make what are sometimes strained gestures toward the national, for instance, the claim in its 2008 report that offers as proof of its national reach its having produced Calgary's Crazy Horse Theatre's play *Time Stands Still* and an English and French language production of Wajdi Moawad's play *Incendies*, the English version in co-production with Toronto's Tarragon Theatre; both make connections elsewhere in the country indeed, but idiosyncratic as representatives of any imagined Canadian totality (National Arts Centre 2001). The report claims national reach, in other words, in terms of the plays it produces, rather than in any of its education or outreach activities. Whatever the success of its education initiatives, they have remained rooted in the notion of an arts institution being the arbiter and distributor of culture in the form of knowledge and expertise.

3 The Centripetal Logic of *SpiderWebShow*

But change is afoot at the NAC and not just in its architecture. The NAC brought in two new people who have been reshaping its English Theatre division: Jillian Keiley, the Artistic Director of the innovative theatre company Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland as Artistic Director of English Theatre (National Arts Centre "NAC English Theatre" 2015b), and Sarah Garton Stanley, a Canadian director and dramaturge known in Canadian theatre for promoting the development of new Canadian work, as Associate Director of English theatre (National Arts Centre 2012). These two younger, well-respected artists had a fresh perspective on the 'national' of the NAC's mandate, Keiley for coming from Newfoundland, a province that joined confederation with Canada only in 1949 and which has a distinct identity in the country, Stanley for being arguably the Canadian theatre artist most thoroughly connected to the work happening across the country. Stanley and Keiley have played a role in shifting the NAC to being a centripetal institution, meaning toward one that is the recipient of culture rather than its distributor. As Stanley put it to me:

> The more big institutions can support the means of production (instead of holding them) the better. […] Every good idea that is showcased at the NAC should (in my opinion) be an idea that was hatched and produced/shared elsewhere. The NAC is a place to share that which shines super bright. In my opinion it is not our job to tell people what defines them culturally (democratization of culture and teaching non-English speaking immigrants Shakespearean sonnets, for example) […] It is our job to receive, from the ground, from our ground, what our culture is. (Stanley "Personal Email" 2015a)

In this spirit, Stanley curates 'The Collaborations', a developmental initiative at the NAC which puts the institution's resources in the hands of artists developing projects in different parts of the country, and sometimes over multiple years. (National Arts Centre "Collaboration" 2015e).

> The *SpiderWebShow* project emerged out of this new disposition. Whereas the NAC's ArtsAlive.ca website is a platform for distributing arts education resources, largely to educators, *SpiderWebShow* is conceived as a meeting place for educators, artists and audiences to showcase and discuss exciting new work. It is a dynamic and multi-faceted website that aims to be a gathering place for important conversations about Canadian theatre and performance. Rather than broadcasting information out to the public, it aspires to gather the public in a kind of accessible digital space for discourse about theatre. This gesture of welcoming artists in, rather than outreach, characterized the initial gesture behind the project, for which the NAC partnered with Praxis Theatre, a small, young theatre company based in Toronto, led since its founding in 2006 by Michael Wheeler (Praxis Theatre "About" 2015). Stanley reached out to Wheeler because Praxis had established by that point a reputation for growing discourse about the art and business in the theatre community partly through Praxistheatre.com, an online space for dialogue about the art and business of professional theatre. This can be seen as part of a larger trend in the industry toward large institutions capitalizing on the expertise of smaller and more community-based ones. For example, Ruth Howard of Jumblies Theatre also of Toronto, in a review of Doug Borwick's *Building Communities, Not Audiences* book, notes: "For those of us who have chosen to venture 'outside the arts mainstream' in order to seek social purpose and connection in our work, it might feel surprising, even suspect, that the mainstream arts world is suddenly casting an interested eye on us: that books are being written about 'mainstreaming' the sort of

work we do" (Howard 2014). The close relationship these smaller organizations enjoy with their audiences has in recent years become the envy of larger institutions who want to shift their ethic to be more open, democratic and participatory. As Lynne Conner writes, "the twenty-first century audience is retrieving its historical position as the centrepiece of the arts apparatus." (Connor 2013 p.2)

How does *SpiderWebShow* implicitly reimagine "the audience", how does it relate to the NAC's national education objectives, and what sort of model does the project provide large institutions that are rethinking their public role?

To start with, *SpiderWebShow* reimagines the 'national'. Stanley notes that that *SpiderWebShow* came from a desire to freshly imagine the NAC's national mandate: "the *SpiderWebShow* grew out of a desire to build a space that could hold a national imaginary" (CTR 14). In contrast to the way the original design of the physical building of the NAC supported the idea of a monolithic and enduring national cultural tradition, Stanley in particular frames *SpiderWebShow* as a more pluralistic and ambivalent space to 'imagine' the national. Stanley writes that while in Canada "the national imaginary was far from confident," it seems nonetheless desired: "shared attacks on its lack suggested a space that could hold it was enduringly longed for" (Stanley "Spinning" 2015b. p.16). But the national should celebrate contradiction and embrace diversity, and what the NAC was able to do by collaborating with Praxis was to create a less controlled space, one that would not be about its own promotion or marketing, nor one devoted to either one or the other of professional discussion or artistic development (Wheeler speaks of audience engagement not in terms of outreach or publicity, but as what he calls "social design" (Praxis Theatre 2013)). This permits the website to serve several purposes at once, potentially helping meet three of the NAC's expressed strategic goals: artistic excellence in the production of new work, expanding its national role, and focusing on education for theatre and dance. And by being centripetal rather than centrifugal, the benefits could thus return to the NAC, or, rather, be multidirectional across local communities throughout the country. The unexpected title of the website, the fact of it being billed as a "show", and described by Stanley and Wheeler as a "co-production", making the site not informational, but a kind of multifaceted dramaturgical and social media experimental space (Stanley "Spinning" 2015b p.17), the "show" being in Stanley's description "multi-entendu": "show it, make a show about it, join the show" (Stanley "Personal email" 2015a).

Rather than a set of documents, it becomes something more like an event, a centripetal "bottom-up" virtual place of exchange for people across the country to show work, share ideas, and debate. Visitors to Spiderwebshow.ca land on a home page that tells them they are in the "lobby" of a "theatrical space where Canada, the internet and performance minds intersect," and can from there drop into one the sites several experiments in performance or dialogue. The most fulsome element of the site is an online digital magazine with the Twitter-ready title #CdnCult (which is an echo of the popular #CdnPoli hashtag on Twitter for discussing Canadian federal politics). #CdnCult features an eclectic collection of writing from Canadian theatre (and other) artists, educators and enthusiasts, collected together in themed editions, which are in turn gathered in groups of ten to form a 'volume', of which there were

8 since #CdnCult first began publishing, though it has now moved on to a different style of presenting the writing) (SpiderWebShow "CdnCult" 2015a). The writing gathered together in #CdnCult is vastly variable in form and includes among other things artists' descriptions of ongoing projects, artistic directors and programmers explaining their choices, editorials about professional challenges in the industry, and an ongoing dialogue between three artists located on the East, West and North coasts of the country. Other sections of the site layer over top of this polyphonic space other spaces for multimedia experiments in dialogue and performance, an aspect that has jumped off the site and materialized in the form of a new experimental digital theatre festival based in Kingston, Ontario called FoldA. Another section, 'Sounds', collects together multiple audio projects: 'Secret Selfies', recorded audio self-portraits by artists, a project coordinated by Halifax's Secret Theatre company; but as well three podcasts created by Canadian theatre artists, Simon Bloom's 'TheatreUX' podcast about theatre and tech, a story podcast created by a group of theatre artists in Calgary, and two others about Canadian theatre by Toronto-based artist Jacob Zimmer's Small Wooden Shoe theatre company (SpiderWebShow "SpiderWebSound" 2015d). Another area of the site is perhaps its most intimate experiment, something Stanley and Wheeler have called 'Thought Residencies'—a series of recorded audio monologues made by a theatre artist on a subject, and of a nature, of their choosing; these offer a wonderful snapshot of an individual's thinking, unconstrained by the niceties or habitual expectations constraints of a typical "arts panel", a kind of personal "hot take" on something of pressing importance (SpiderWebShow "Thought Residencies" 2015f). And there are other, ongoing experiments as well: a map locating and visually interconnecting artists who contribute to the site (SpiderWebShow, "Map" 2015b), a gallery of image-based dramaturgical experiments (SpiderWebShow "SpiderWeb Gallery" 2015c), bite-sized five-minute "Talk Show" video interviews with artists from across the country by Stanley (SpiderWebShow, "TalkShow" 2015e), and a Performance Wiki (SpiderWebShow 2016), a knowledge-building project about Canadian theatre that could, if developed, supplement the existing Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia maintained by the University of Athabasca (Athabasca 2016). These are the basic elements of the site, but the platform is malleable, and invites its contributors—who may be anyone—to propose new ideas. When Vancouver-based theatre artist Adrienne Wong joined the project as an Artistic Associate and Head Researcher, she welcomed proposals in any shape: "We will only understand how theatre and technology work together by making things and letting them fail or succeed. Join us in these experiments."

4   Education as Arts Talk: Indications of Success

Appraising what the 'success' of a project like the *SpiderWebShow* looks like we have think about what the 'success' of such an initiative could look like at all. Looking at *SpiderWebShow* through the lens of Lynne Conner's "arts talk" model reveals it as an excellent experiment in audience relationships certainly with some

successes. Arts talk, for Conner, does not just mean literal "talk", but also "a spirit of vibrancy and engagement among and between people who share an interest in the arts" (Connor 2013 p.5). Connor takes as her premise in the book the idea that in arts experiences, audiences take their pleasure foremost from engaging in acts of social interpretation in the form of dialogue, discussion and debate. She argues that the institutionalization of the arts in the late modern period, however, coupled with rarefaction of spaces of 'high art', has alienated art from its audiences. Over time, this has left many without the interpretive "tools" to engage in interpretive practices and limited art to only that constituency of society that feels equipped. Connor contrasts this situation with that in sports, where there is a very robust and lively practice of social interpretation in which a broad cross-section of society feels empowered and equipped to respond (Connor 2013 p.32). How, her book asks, might the practices of arts audiences become more like those of sports fandom?

What feels particularly contemporary about Conner's view of public arts that is democratic and accessible is its openness to digital spaces and technology as platform, not as a discrete separate sphere of public discussion, but a public space fluidly intersecting with any other physical public space. Wherever it happens, the goal of Conner's arts talk model is to:

> build audience-centered learning communities as spaces (physical and digital) offering programming that (1) create a conscious relationship with the audience that is transparent in its goals; (2) offer productive facilitators and/or facilitation structures that ask, listen, and request rather than tell, lecture, or direct; and (3), begin and end with the audience's interests in mind. (Connor 2013 p.99)

These goals are interesting in relation to *SpiderWebShow*, and to the evolution of theatre 'outreach' more generally. That the first is about creating a relationship with explicitly defined goals itself arguably marks a change from a paradigm in which this is assumed to be understood already as a self-evident public good. For the NAC, this was a specifically national 'good', the creation and dissemination of Canadian culture presupposing an ideologically laden transaction with its audience—Conner proposes instead that this ought to be rethought, and once it is, made explicit. Her second goal suggests that at least if outreach is to reach beyond a core audience who is prepared by experience or education to engage in art, then more open arts talk spaces will still need to be facilitated, curated, guided. Multiple challenges arise, however, in realizing that vision. How to create such spaces without imposing values, language or particular vectors of interpretation on the audience, however subtly, in a fashion that essentially becomes coercive and discouraging of genuine open dialogue and dissension? Also, how can one curate digital spaces, given the internet's ethic of individual expression and openness?

The matter of how to curate and brand the website with the 'stamp' of the NAC is thus important to the kind of discursive space it is, and who feels welcome to voice what opinion within it. Partnering with Praxis Theatre and offering the site as a neutral space of exchange, rather than one branded by the NAC and seemingly originating from Ottawa, would support this idea of it as a virtual, dislocated platform upon which anyone from across the country could feel welcome speaking. Today, some years after the project was launched, in fact, one can still interact

extensively with the site without detecting its association with the NAC. Reading the writing on the site today, a careful reader can detect the NAC's voice; Artistic Director of English Theatre Jillian Keiley writes, for example, about how the NAC is telling the Canadian story partly through an emphasis on work focused on indigenous peoples; Métis artist Cole Alvis talks about his experience working on 'The Cycle', a research and development project at the NAC, one of the site's contributors, Laakuluk Williamson-Bathory writes about a show she did in partnership with the NAC, and a piece by #CdnCult editor Michael Wheeler imagines, tongue-in-cheek, what could happen if Canada's parliamentary Senate, which many in Canada regard as an obsolete, undemocratic element of the parliamentary system, could be replaced by a performance venue connected to the NAC by a tunnel, since the latter is just across the street. Still, the NAC is not overtly part of the *SpiderWebShow* brand, which goes back to the notion of understanding nation, among the artists of the younger generation at the Centre, as something self-consciously and inherently imaginary, rather than something that must be identified and made concrete. As Stanley herself has written on the site: "a National Theatre does manifest here in the action of revealing the breadth of Canadian theatre. […] The question and the idea of a National Theatre must reflect the diversity of peoples and their individual expressions and practice, instead of attempting to discern one unifying principle" (Stanley 2013).

To evaluate the "success" of SpiderWebShow, then, is not to look at who is learning what, but in assessing whether it has successfully created a space to, as Lynn Conner has it, "to ask, listen, and request rather than tell, lecture, or direct" (Connor 2013 p.99). As a digital project, one way to describe the scope of that space is in analytics data for the web traffic it generates. Full statistics were not available, but by way of a snapshot part way through its history: between January and September 2015, *SpiderWebShow* averages about 1500 "sessions" per month (a session is a period of time where a user is actively engaged with the site), or about 50 per day. Over the same period, the site had 30,000 individual "pageviews" (total number of pages viewed, including reloaded pages).[2] Another hard measure might be the way people engage with the Twitter hashtag #CdnCult, which is *SpiderWebShow*'s main discussion forum. A rough analysis using the Twitter analytics website Keyhole of the #CdnCult hashtag reveals impressive numbers. Randomly selecting two 2-week period as a sample of the hashtag's typical "reach" (defined by the number of unique people who may see it) the reach in 2 weeks of September 2015 was 83,000 and in December 2015 was 283,000. The number of "impressions" (the number of potential views involving the hashtag, including in some cases the same users' views) are double these figures for both 2-week periods. Uses of #CdnCult, it is worth pointing out, are not just those 'broadcast' by @SpiderWebShow on Twitter, although those count; it also includes uses of the hashtag by other artists, academics and institutions in the theatre community, its take-up in the community demonstrating the website's influence itself.

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[2] My thanks to Michael Wheeler for making these analytics about *SpiderWebShow.com* available.

The numbers in the analytics sound stratospherically high, and they do vastly exaggerate the number of individual social media interactions at stake; in the September period, a search on Keyhole suggests there were 58 unique Twitter users engaging with the hashtag, and 78 in December, bringing the numbers back to earth. But rough and rowdy as these data are, they aren't completely insignificant. Consider that despite the size of the country, Canadian theatre is a relatively small professional community; for example, *Canadian Theatre Review*, the main professional journal of Canadian Theatre, has a subscribership of about 600, and that for bilingual peer-reviewed journal *Theatre Research in Canada* about 300 (bear in mind that these are just paid subscribers to the print editions; the actual numbers for online readership have been steadily increasing and make those readerships larger). But while those publications are different in orientation and readership, there is some overlap, and what is additionally interesting in comparing them with *SpiderWebShow* is that the latter appears, judging at least by Keyhole's analytics of the #CdnCult tag, to be accessed nearly half of the time away from a desktop computer on a mobile device, and about 20% of the time on an iPhone, suggesting a more mobile reading experience than is likely the case with the other Canadian theatre publications.

But whatever the analytics reveal about *SpiderWebShow*'s impact, the story of its success probably lies elsewhere. As Sarah Stanley writes:

> Success comes in many shapes with a project such as this. The key indicators for me—outside of traffic—are the following: being referred to as a source for what is going on, leading the conversation (and practice) on digital cross-overs from real world theatre to digital world theatre. Contributing to the way we work across time and space. Being the archive of record for theatre/performance in English Speaking Canada (all of Canada would be better).

And echoing Stanley, Wheeler writes specifically of the #CdnCult element of the site:

> As Editor of #CdnCult I have two measures of success: One is the degree to which we our articles will become the 'Journal of Record' in Canadian performance. And I mean this in a different sense than *Canadian Theatre Review* (which I have written for several times), which I perceive as the journal of record in academia. But the self-publishing revolution has created a different body of work and contributors online – especially in creative industries. I want the #CdnCult magazine to be the go-to place for that material.

Whether the website is *the* 'leader' or *the* journal or archive 'of record' is not, it seems to me, not ultimately quantifiable, nor really the point. What matters is what space the site creates within the discursive field surrounding Canadian theatre and what can get said in that space. Though *Canadian Theatre Review* is not limited to academics—it is not refereed, and publishes as many non-academics as it does academics, and, full disclosure, I (Barry) am one of its Associate Editors—Wheeler is identifying something important about what may make *SpiderWebShow* important in the Canadian theatre discursive landscape: its diversity of voices, and the responsiveness of the whole platform to issues arising in the industry. As he suggests, the barrier to entry on this platform is in practical terms low, such that anyone might propose to contribute, and in just about any form they want.

What this means most critically, and this is perhaps the most important way that *SpiderWebShow* becomes a key 'education' initiative, is the grassroots advocacy role it is able to play. By being a platform on which a conversation can spring up without professional or academic barriers, or without the interference of a large bureaucracy of an institution, new and surprising, diverse and raw, perspectives can spring up that do not fit perfectly well into a pre-determined theme or mandate. And one feels that quickly when going through the material on the site: it is rough and rowdy, eclectic and novel. There is really no sense that it adds up to any perspective, and no sense that such is its intention. In that 2008 Strategic Plan cited above, the NAC mentioned advocacy as an important objective: "The NAC should be using its unique position to be an advocate for the arts and arts education with opinion leaders, the media and the general public ... and continue to promote dialogue among artists, arts organizations and arts educators" (National Arts Centre 2001 p. 4). Though the site may not look like the typical sort of advocacy effort of a large institution, it is certainly a space where open dialogue is promoted. When asked about how the website can be best understood as a platform for education, Wheeler pointed to advocacy:

> I am really proud of the work we have done around equity issues. Probably our most important (and most read) Edition was on the Blackface controversy at Theatre Rideau Vert [in which a white actor performed in blackface as black hockey player P K Subhan]. Although there had been a number of editorials in the media, incredibly no one had asked black theatre makers in Montreal what they thought about this. So I felt we filled a space in a way that was needed by being a non prescriptive platform for a community and urgent topic. […] We are committed to continuing to be inclusive of performance practice by all peoples here and there is an educational component to that.

As if in demonstration of his point, now Vancouver-based theatre artist Jivesh Parasram wrote in #CdnCult, responding specifically to the practice of writing argumentative 'open letters' in the Toronto theatre community in recent years, but in a way that argues for just the space in which he is writing:

> Theatre, live performance, whatever it is we *do…* is like a village square. To extend the metaphor – an open letter is a fortress. A fortress constructed and crafted from an often well researched argument. It *concept*ualizes its statement and works to create barriers – or castle walls – to any disagreement. It's almost totalitarian in that way, whereas the city square is relatively democratic. I don't want to come to your castle to be lectured at–it's pointy and cold. I'd rather live in the village square. And the reason? Because there, we talk. (Parasram 2015)

It is easy, of course, to romanticize radical openness of any discursive space. For his part, Parasram has a problem with the way some conversations are playing out online, and sees, at least for the moment, value in moving these conversations into non-virtual spaces where people might offer their ideas differently—lending some irony to the fact that his opinion is presented in the online platform of *SpiderWebShow*. But one needn't get categorical about the division between virtual and non-virtual spaces, and in fact it a distinguishing feature of Praxis's work, of the *SpiderWebShow*, and also of Conner's arts talk model, to fluidly shift between online and 'real-world' discursive spaces to optimize the virtues of each. *SpiderWebShow* is an ongoing,

evolving experiment in precisely this, and it can make at least some legitimate claim on being an open 'village square' for arts talk, despite its being co-produced by one of the largest arts institutions in Canada. The NAC would do well to recognize and build on what works about this space, such that its building's transformation in Ottawa from a concrete to glass facade in its renovation can be matched, as it should, with equally transparent and welcoming practices within its walls.

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