

Performance Creation Canada

Opening Address: January 9th, 2004

Written by Michael Green, One Yellow Rabbit,

There exist in Canada today a number of organizations whose purpose is to support specific facets of this country's cultural industries. The Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, for instance, is concerned with issues that impact a membership of theatre producers as defined by the Canadian Theatre Agreement. CANDANCE is a self-described network of dance producers and presenters who, though wonderfully idiosyncratic when encountered individually, have banded together for the purpose of bringing unity of purpose to the upper echelons of Canada's dance scene. At the other end of the spectrum are professional associations like Canadian Actors' Equity and Union des artistes, each set up to safeguard its membership in their dealings with the first two.

Professional associations like these share the cultural landscape with showcases, marketplaces and festival-based discussion events, and this has been the state “networking” within our industry for my entire adult life. In almost every case, these “networks” have as their mandate the practical realization of pre-considered outcomes: to set up tours, to land co-producers, to lecture, to discuss issues of mutual frustration: and always, in my opinion, more or less ineffectively. Or, when some practical goal has been met, perhaps that success was realized in spite of the artificial environments these networks generate, and not because of them.

These types of associations, though important and useful for what they are, are the antithesis of the creative environment I hope we are able to describe here this weekend.

My own interest in and commitment to this type of networking initiative goes back a long way: A few years ago – I think that it might have been spring of 1997 – I found myself at a roundtable discussion in Toronto. The process by which I arrived there was

circuitous, slightly confrontational, and wholly indicative of the reasons why, ten years later, I find myself addressing you all now.

I had been on the telephone to Ottawa, trying to leg-wrestle a modicum of financial support for our festival from the established bureaucracies who, although entrusted with a mandate to nurture the evolution of a unique and identifiable culture in Canada were, in fact, not equipped to deal with developments as they were actually unfolding. At the time, neither the Canada Council nor the Department of Canadian Heritage could provide a single grant program for which High Performance Rodeo was eligible.

The telephone conversation that resulted in my attendance at that Toronto meeting went something like this (remember, this is 1997):

Me: Are you sure I have no recourse to appeal your decision to continue to ignore our starving festival?

Ottawa: Well, lets discuss it further when we see each other in Toronto next month.

Me: What are you talking about?

Ottawa: Aren't you coming to the meeting at Harbourfront?

Me: What meeting?

Ottawa: Oh, it's nothing.... It's just a meeting of some Canadian presenters.

Me: I don't know anything about it.

Ottawa: That's because it's a meeting of presenters of work of a larger scale.

Me: You mean like Carbone 14? (We had just presented Carbone 14's *Lost Souls*).

Ottawa: Well, yes...but we already have someone coming from Calgary.

Me: Who???

Ottawa: ATP (who at that point had presented nobody, as far as I was aware – a situation current artistic director Mr. Bob White has since addressed admirably).

Anyway, I crashed that Harbourfront meeting. But while I was there, I got myself into even more trouble.

I was sitting in a room with the artistic directors of Carrefour, Festival de théâtre des Amériques and World Stage who were trying to convince a motley collection of Canadian “presenters” to align themselves to form a circuit that would accommodate national tours for large, mostly European shows. These were the shows that normally made up the program of the spring theatre festivals in Toronto, Montréal and Québec City. The hope must have been to amortize the cost of bringing them to Ontario and Québec by touring them to the provinces in the summer.

This may well be a worthwhile idea. But as a practical initiative the concept was doomed to failure from the start, for a number of important reasons:

- 1) The good people at the head of the spring theatre festivals of Central Canada had no experience programming for audiences outside their established, metropolitan milieu;
- 2) The disparate group around the table had little experience in presentation on this scale;
- 3) The regional presenters had, in many cases, never met each other before, and were therefore in no position to operate as an effective group;
- 4) The whole concept seemed forced. It was as if the leadership of these three festivals had been forced into pitching this strategy by funding institutions desperate to see public investments go further.

The effort had a less than grass roots character to it. It was the epitome of a top-down, almost imperialist initiative that seemed to value the wrong things.

It was a frustrating affair. And, as you will notice, nothing came of it. Nobody could foresee that at the time, of course, but I found it to be rankling experience. I was disturbed by the fact that the Council and Heritage could consider spending thousands to help tour large international acts across Canada when One Yellow Rabbit’s High Performance Rodeo could not get even a dime for its proven, Canadian-centric programming.

When it was my turn to say something I said something like this:
Can anyone here seriously imagine selling tickets to a 9-hour Lithuanian Hamlet in the middle of summer in any Canadian centre west of Toronto? Or even in Toronto? Of course not. You want a network of presenters to move important work across the country, but you can't manufacture one in this way.

It seemed we had nothing in common. And then I said something like this (this is 1997, remember.):

Anyway, we already have a network in Canada. It's an ad hoc entity with no name, but we commission, create and tour Canadian multidisciplinary creation based work across this country every year - not in the summer, but in the dead of winter.

What hubris on my part. I know that now, but even then I could see the possibilities for something like Performance Creation Canada. As early as 1993 High Performance Rodeo was learning the benefits of co-producing tours of Canadian artists with likeminded presenters in Victoria, Vancouver, Lethbridge, Edmonton, Regina, Toronto and Peterborough. Out of a very real and mutual necessity, we were in the process of forging an alliance of our own.

In order to net the grant funding needed to Canadian works to our various festivals and seasons, we regional presenters needed each other. We were in the process of demonstrating that our emerging community of regional presenters was capable of finding each other and supporting one another in spite of the tremendous challenges represented by distance, a lack of funding for travel, our highly individualistic mandates and personalities, and our relative inexperience.

Interestingly, many of these original presenters had something else in common: in many cases the presenters also operated as a creation based company in their own right.

Of course, after this outburst around the table at the offices of Harbourfront, the pressure was on me to demonstrate what I was

talking about: That following January I was successful in persuading no fewer than 25 presenters from as far away as St. John's ND to gather in Calgary for the High Performance Rodeo.

In retrospect this, too, was an ill-considered, if earnest, attempt at networking. It was certainly nothing like the grass roots, individual artist-up type of democratic entity we are attempting to envision today. It was a "presenters' meeting" and nothing more. But it was a start.

Imagine my excitement the first time I attended the Informal European Theatre Meeting where practical considerations are not allowed to cloud an atmosphere of true communication, participation and observation. The one "ritual" that was drilled into me upon my arrival at the Galway satellite IETM in November 2001 was: Welcome, stranger. No buying. No selling. Have fun.

So, what happens then? Well, relieved of the duty to hustle, the IETM member is allowed to talk to anyone they so desire without any pressure beyond the common courtesy of not being a social boor. As a consequence, you end up spending time with people you actually like! Of course the buying and selling happens. It always does. It happens in the bar. It happens on the street. It happens even more so because now you are talking to someone with whom you share more than an economic equation.

A network like IETM works in ways that our existing Canadian affiliations do not. One reason for this is that IETM is actively dedicated, not to achieving tangible results, but to fostering a relaxed and passionate atmosphere in which free-radicals, rogue electrons, particle/wave impulses and other creative energies are encouraged to interact without the expectation of practical results.

This, of course, is the essence of artistic endeavor. Ours is a people business, in the most profound sense. In a creative environment, the tangible benefits of networking are manifest because that network was designed to precipitate the unexpected.

The concept of IETM is not as an institution at all. IETM is an environment.

The performing community in this country is continuing to evolve and expand more rapidly than existing support organizations are able to adapt. At the same time, many artists continue to move away from traditional forms of creation and presentation while defining practices and disciplines unique to their distinctive artistic vision. The multidisciplinary field of performance creation is emerging as a major force in tomorrow's performing arts scene in Canada.

In Western Canada we use the term "Performance creation" to refer, quite simply, to work that is performed by the artist or artists who created it. Unlike more traditional forms of artistic endeavor, performance creation includes a variety of disciplines. As a form of expression, performance creation challenges traditional concepts of regionalism, multiculturalism and new artistic practices, and traditional relationships between the artist, management, the presenter, the media and the audience.

As the practice of multidisciplinary performance creation evolves, so too does our need for a practical and critical exchange of energy and ideas.

My vision for Performance Creation Canada is a fellowship dedicated to a thorough and holistic discussion and celebration of the Canadian performance creation milieu. This would eventually involve the discussion of artistic practices and the ecology in which they are exercised. Educators, critics, academics and archivists are clearly central to this process, and this intellectual engagement is another characteristic unique to the philosophy of Performance Creation Canada.

And to our delegates today who are representing the interests of the funding agencies whose responsibility it is to make sure that taxpayers' money is not squandered; who might quite rightly be worried that no practical outcome could possibly come from an initiative with so idealistic and elusive a mandate as the one I am

proposing I say that the myriad practical and ultimately tangible successes of a network like IETM speaks for itself.

Unlike existing professional “networks” and associations, Performance Creation Canada will operate in an informal spirit of inclusivity. Disciplines represented will include any performing or performative art form that is ultimately presented by the artist or artists who created it. Artist-based theatre, dance, music, interdisciplinary performance and performance art, and the presenters and agencies that support them, are examples that fall within the definition of “community” that Performance Creation Canada seeks to engage.

In many ways, this current initiative follows on from earlier forays into this area. Other festivals and artist run galleries have explored the concept. Six Stages held an “Informal American Theatre Meeting” proto-type in Toronto some years ago. And much of the information, philosophy and technique involved in performance creation can be found on the website founded and maintained by University of Calgary educator and artist Gerald Thurston.

Performance Creation Canada will be neither a showcase nor an association for any special interest group. Performance Creation Canada is not a "presenters' network", but will naturally support such an endeavor. Performance Creation Canada encourages the participation of companies and individual artists, educational institutions, festivals, agents, government agencies, publishers and the media.

Performance Creation Canada seeks to be – not an institution – but an environment. All environments are a symbiotic synthesis of the parts that make the whole. All environments take their character from the individual features of which they are comprised, and our environment is no different. The ecology of our environment depends on each of you individually to bring yourselves to it.

In closing, I would like to read to you an email I received from Mr. Brian Webb, artistic director of Brian Webb Dance Company,

artistic director of the Canada Dance Festival held biannually in Ottawa, and president of the CanDance Network.

Michael,

I'm sorry that I can't make these meetings, as I will be in Montreal and Ottawa. I think that they are timely and important for the development of contemporary expression in Canada.

My ideas are presented in point form and are not fully developed. But here goes:

- 1) That the focus is interdisciplinary is very important. All contemporary expression, no matter the media, has common concerns, especially finding any kind of relevancy in the culture at large. How to build a sustaining, appreciative audience from the community is important.
- 2) Breaking barriers and isolation is very important. We should work together on common concerns but after we become more knowledgeable of what we are all doing.
- 3) The concept of including artist, presenters, curators, writers, educators as well as funders is a fine concept. The more we recognize the importance that each part of the arts community plays, the stronger and more relevant we will become. Art is placed at the center of our conversation.
- 4) Building a critical dialogue from within our ranks is necessary before we consider including the interested public. I respect the importance that you give this in your introduction to the weekend's activities.

These next comments refer to the structure the group may consider. I am making them referring to my position as chairperson of the CanDance Network.

- 1) An informal structure is important. It provides equality, spontaneous discussion and an organic growth.
- 2) By becoming an NASO (National Arts Service Organization), CanDance has had to formalize our

structure (board of directors, etc). This changes how the Network communicates. It is more efficient but it is obvious not all members are equally comfortable with this formalization.

- 3) It is important that this initiative develops organically from the community for the community and not be driven by a bureaucratic agenda.
- 4) There will be those who will put more energy into driving this concept forward. We will have to find a way for them to do that that still recognizes the input of all those interested.
- 5) It's important that this new network be distinctive and not copy what is already being accomplished. I feel its distinctiveness is in its interdisciplinary nature. I hope that we will also have the participation of the visual arts community. It will be important for us to communicate with and be informed of all the networks that currently exist.

Good Luck with these meetings!

Brian H. Webb
Brian Webb Dance Company
The Canada Dance Festival
The CanDance Network

Thank you for coming together to embark with us at One Yellow Rabbit on what I hope will prove to be one of the grandest experiments in the evolution of Canadian contemporary performance culture. And welcome to the High Performance Rodeo.

Michael Green
Co-Artistic Director, One Yellow Rabbit
Curator, High Performance Rodeo
January 6, 2004