

Artistic director Darren O'Donnell

Sep. 22nd, 2017

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In videos of his talks, Darren O'Donnell has the dimpled, sun-bleached look of someone who may, say, be a skydiving instructor, or free-climb mountains. His face is wide, with boyish smoothness, balding, blond hair shaved close, and his hands spread wide, too, palm up, as he talks in a fast, friendly patter to audiences around the world about his theatre company, the long-running Mammalian Diving Reflex, which is once more bringing one of its canon to the Melbourne Festival. He's one of those lean, genial Canadians, quick in speech and enthusiasm, the kind who may have a shelf of South American cookbooks and another of French cultural theory, and hiking boots in the hall.

As he hastens into a Melbourne cafe on a wet morning, he's more professorial: tortoiseshell glasses, a greying short beard, a dark green rainproof jacket zipped to the chin. There's a hint of the monk as he sits, requests water and turns his full attention to the interview. He is a man of tight energy, tight focus. Offer a hazy, wandering query and he unspools a long, flexing wire of exposition.

Dissatisfaction, O'Donnell says, is the factory of his professional abundance. Dissatisfaction with the limits of being an actor; then a writer and director; then with conventional theatre altogether, how the audience is all sitting in the dark and the actors are all in the light and there's no communication between them. It's two-and-a-half minutes into the conversation and the words crowd up, precise and jostling, as for someone invited to explain a beloved hobby technique. Mammalian Diving Reflex was a regular Toronto-based theatre company until 2003, when O'Donnell began to pursue work that is intervention-based, and then – “I don't know if you remember the book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* by Richard Florida” – pause to accept a deceitful nod – “yeah, so the idea of city as material in artistic practice seemed to make sense, so that's when I went to get this master's in urban planning – to understand cities in a really complex and thorough way – thank you” – his bottle of water is brought – “so that kind of

spun around to thinking about youth engagement...” Soon after, he made *Haircuts by Children*.

The company operates on an understanding, analogous with O’Donnell’s training in shiatsu, that the world has abundance and lack, and always the responsibility to move material and energy to where it is needed. Social acupuncture, he calls it: the judicious application of provocation and challenge to stimulate a sclerotic system. “Discomfort is important; you want to be confused.” The methodology inverts “stealth pedagogy” to, for example, teach adults how to deal with children; it gives away power and messes up protocol. The projects travel the festivals and community arts programs of the world, bringing nine-year-olds bearing sharp scissors to adult scalps, taking night-time walks through neighbourhoods with teenage guides, asking children to play carelessly and then naming them “choreographers” of the re-enacted play on a stage. With such misrule, O’Donnell hopes, a kind of percussion will shake away bias and complacency.

He speaks steady and urgent and constant, tripping only a little in his abundance of explanations. A day later, he will email through some of his publications: an essay about *Haircuts* is 273 pages long. There’s a book, *Social Acupuncture*, and a novel, too. He once had a relationship with a woman of colour, and they found that their cultural universes were too far separated. Now he works in the hope that in an alternative universe, in the future, such a relationship may be more possible. No skydiving then, but lots of work.

We are not social engineers, the company manifesto says, but curious nerds sending little shocks into the system to see what happens. This isn’t mischief, though; rather it is progress, giving advance space to things that are as yet overlooked. One might have made a provocative performance out of staging same-sex marriage 20 years ago, O’Donnell observes, but now it is commonplace in much of the developed world. Thus will be recognised the powers of young people, the energy of older people. So he mentors a generation of Torontonians, and cultivates networks of youth in London, and knows that already they are graduating from creative institutions and will continue the work of curious

nerds. The only request he has is that in his toothless old age, each protégé will visit once, and gently feed him a spoonful of pap.

Vulnerability is one of the company's main engines: the astonished emotion brought up by the company's interventions. Children hesitantly accepting their power over adults' vanity, adults bravely lowering their heads to be shorn. The vulnerability of the performers will spill through to the audience in *All the Sex I've Ever Had*, a part of this year's Melbourne Festival, in which elders recount experiences in sex, romance, abuse, loss. "There's a huge amount of power in being vulnerable," O'Donnell says. In a photograph from the performance *Playgrounds on Fire*, in which children are invited to terrorise adults, a goblet of saliva slides from a kid's lips towards the camera held by O'Donnell himself, but is not released. This is not about teaching kids; it's about training adults to see that we are all – young, adult, elderly – soft vessels of apprehension, easily bruised, fundamentally kind, radiant with revelation.

The man pops with zeal, even as he bundles his key ring into a minimalist backpack and heads out into the Melbourne damp. He has talked raptly for nearly two hours, found time to ask questions, used terms such as "relational aesthetics" and "microtopia", admired Melbourne's city planning, and evoked a practice of realistic dismay and optimistic strategy, all with jet lag and no lunch. He's still a kid himself, he says, and rides off on his rented bike, into the misty rain, pushing abundance before him.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Sep 23, 2017 as "Diving deep". [Subscribe here.](#)



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