

***Stealth Pedagogy: the lessons of vomit, deception, and choosing children over friends* by Darren O'Donnell**
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The Children's Choice Awards is a decisive intervention into the phenomenon of the international performing arts festival: a group of elementary school kids are chauffeured from event to event; they check out the art and offer brash, incisive and audacious opinions. And then they hand out a few awards. The audience applauds the young jury as they enter each venue, often remarking how wonderful this opportunity is for the kids and basking in the glow of their own altruism. The intention here, however, is stealth pedagogy aimed at the adults in attendance, perhaps most importantly me.

Eleven-year-old Edwin sits next to me in the van on the way to see Hiroaki Umeda's *while going to a condition + Accumulate Layout*. Surrounding us a bunch of girls, their faces illuminated by a variety of ipods and phones, sing songs from the current hits radio repertoire: *Hot and Cold*, *Poker Face*, *Singles Ladies* etc. I focus my camera on Edwin and begin a series of general questions to introduce him to our blog audience. He mentions he has no favorite colour, but a favorite shade: white and, in the same breath, he tells me he's Christian and that the church feels, to him, like a safe place.

Later, off camera, he offers up the classic question: "Are we almost there?" I flip on the device and ask him to repeat the question with the same feeling and intention. He easily pulls this off. A little later, the question comes again and I shoot again.

Moments later, Edwin reports that he thinks he's going to be sick. We're almost at the theatre and I'm not sure how seriously I should take this threat. "Are you sure?" "I think so," he says. I ask Alfred to pull over, but before we stop, Edwin begins spewing a torrent of half-digested macaroni and cheese. Everyone scrambles for cover, Alfred curbs the van and starts shouting about never getting the smell out – I guess that's fair, since it is, after all, his livelihood, but could we just wait until the kid is finished to have this discussion?

Donna, the associate producer, tosses me a plastic bag. Alfred throws open the door, and I try to pull Edwin toward fresh air and the more forgiving pavement. Vomit erupts again. I'm on my knees, hanging out the door of the van, holding the bag for poor Edwin, the odor of his digestive juices triggering my own life-preserving reflexes, and I begin to gag. Keeping the bag in place, I crane my head around the side of the row seat ahead, attempting to breathe uncontaminated air. Alexa and Katie, the two 11-year-olds girls in that row, look down at me with a sort of horrified bemusement; rather than maintain my composure and dignity, sparing them the site of a supervising adult in a state of distress, I look at them, express my panic and report that I don't think I'm going to make it. I'm pleased to be fielding Edwin's barf, providing a service to him, while at the same time offering a learning opportunity to the two girls: even adults are weak in the face of puke. It's a complex moment.

Someone from the festival's administration emails me, asking if we can incorporate an award celebrating a staff member who is leaving the organization. This, it seems to me, is a total imposition. Maybe the festival director, it is suggested, could get onstage and present it. To diva or not to diva, I ask myself. Would the director get up during the course of any other show, to make some random announcement? Seems unlikely.

But I capitulate, thinking that we can roll with this, that I'll personally give out the award, that we won't include the kids, since they have no connection to this person. I make it a priority to see how far I can go to

incorporate as many conflicting requests as possible – it's an artistic challenge I pose myself.

During the rehearsal, 11-year-old Sandeep – who probably clocks in at around 4'11" – steps into a cardboard box and hops around Performance Works. It looks ridiculous and everyone laughs. This performance of his must be in the show. He refuses out of shyness. Other kids urgently raise their arms, offering to perform. 12-year-old Christine points out that it looks funnier if the person is short. We cast Valerie.

This is what we'll do to temper the interruption of a totally unrelated internal award.

I stand onstage and announce that Emma is leaving the festival and we are dedicating the Box Hop to her. Valerie jumps off the stage and performs, I introduce Sandeep as choreographer and he stands, throwing his hands into the air to accept his well-deserved accolades. The audience roars, thinking they're witnessing a wonderful moment of performance, and I hope that a lesson is learned, even if only unconsciously: this is the kids' show; keep your dirty paws off it.

Days later, back home, thousands of miles away from The Jury from Surrey, and I've corralled Valerie to do a wrap-up interview on a local radio station. I glance at my phone and read her panicked emails; she is nervous that she won't know what to say. I call her and reassure her: if she doesn't know the answer to a question, just say so, and put the pressure back on the interviewer, where it belongs. I attend a Valentines party at the Toronto Free Gallery, my drunken friends screaming raffle ticket numbers while I remain constantly attentive to the information coming in from my phone, staying connected with Valerie as we count down to her interview. My friends, feeling my inattention to their needs, mock me. I try to explain, but it's impossible to be succinct enough for their drunkenness to follow. All they can glean is that, for some reason, my loyalties are with a nervous kid three time zones away. I bundle this moment up and include it, too, as yet another instance in the intervention, that my friends are going to have to untangle themselves, or stew with the notion that I'm now that guy glued to his cell, constantly coordinating his career. I huddle in the office of the gallery, ignoring the party, my ear pressed to the computer's speakers as I listen to the radio's host talk to Valerie like she's developmentally disabled. Moments later, I'm outside on my cell – my friends watching me (*I'm talking to a kid from the jury, I hiss.*) – and Valerie and I agree that the host treated her like she was retarded. Adults are often quite disoriented when talking to children. Yes, Valerie agrees, and we wish each other goodnight.

Youth are ostensibly empowered in any number of projects happening all over the place but let's get real: the pedagogy flows in both directions, perhaps even mostly in the direction of the adults, stealth though that teaching may be. Accommodating the participation of kids derails us, taking us into a littoral zone, where we are revealed to be the control freaks we're always pretending we're not. Performer Tim Crouch addresses the kids as they enter the theatre but is surprised and annoyed when they continue the discussion into his show, his initial expression of 'aren't they adorable' giving way to harsher sentiments. He talks to me afterward, explaining that he was concerned that the audience was being forced to watch the show through the kid's perspective. And I'm, like, *hey, you started it.* We're happy to empower children, these efforts reaching their limits when the power dynamic actually manages, against all odds, to flip and favor the little turds. Ultimately, though, I think the adults can get the last laugh, if we can only own up to a fact that I try to keep solidly in mind: I don't work with kids to help them, but to help me.

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