

The Talking Creature

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The Talking Creature was the inaugural event held by my theatre company, Mammalian Diving Reflex, in our new program, SocialCapital. SocialCapital is a wing of the company dedicated to stripped-down research, experimentation, discussion and forms which, as yet, remain off the radar of traditional theatre and performance practices. *The Talking Creature* was an experiment in trying to isolate two core elements in the theatrical experience: talking and strangers. Standing in front of an audience of people you don't know or, at least, don't know very well and establishing an open channel for the transmission of ideas is, in my experience, nerve-wracking. There's a tendency to imagine the audience is thinking the worst, that they're aware of your every mistake and are there to judge you as harshly as you judge yourself. Or if, on the other hand, you happen to have an overabundance of confidence, you tend run the risk of trying to dazzle, also ruling out an open conduit of communication. I confess to oscillating between these two tendencies. *The Talking Creature* required humility, confidence, talking and listening; arguably the four cardinal points in almost all theatre.

The Talking Creature occurred five times over the course of the summer and fall of 2003 in Toronto's Kensington Market, The Power Plant Art Gallery, and the Peterborough Folk Festival under the auspices of Artspace, an artist-run center. It was simple: a call for participants was made via email, in newsletters and, in the case of The Power Plant, an ad in Now Magazine. The text stated: "*The Talking Creature* is a participatory event examining the art of conversing with strangers in public. *The Talking Creature* examines this anxious dynamic in an ordered but random fashion, with the conviction that unfettered and fearless conversation between strangers is fundamental to freedom." Once the participants gathered at the predetermined time and place, everyone dispersed and scoured the surrounding neighborhood, approaching strangers and inviting them back to the meeting place for an unstructured, unagendaed conversation. That was it.

I was in a show recently and one of my first lines was a "hi" to the audience and during one of the performances there were a bunch of drama students in the house, a few of whom responded to me. I felt this enormous urge to initiate a discussion with them: that, I thought, would be *FUN*. But, as was dictated by the script, I was chastised by the other character for initiating the contact – at which point the audience might as well have disappeared as the only interaction remaining was rhythmic variations to accommodate their laughter. *The Talking Creature* erupts out of my fatigue with this very limited theatrical and, ultimately, social ontology, and tries to get back to the essential notion that all art is about discussion and discussion is, above all, concerned with expression, communication and encountering other people, their points of view, their opinions, feelings and experiences; encountering other's worlds and being humble enough to let it affect us.

While essentially a project in its own right, and quite distinct from the main of my theatre practice, *The Talking Creature* does have dramaturgical implications for performance creation. Most theatre still hasn't managed to dispense with coherent, pithy and supposedly interesting characters whose lives occur, incident by incident, plotted out in a manner which gives a view of the world as universe and the totality as cosmos.

Presenting false possibilities of self-knowing – even amongst nominally postmodern dramatists – still dominate; characters lives are summed up, they understand their various shortcomings and blindspots and are offered a sort of redemption – whether they choose to take it or not. And if they don't, then, at very least, we, as audience, are offered that possibility.

But how to get around this, how to create something which moves beyond standard approaches to representation. In film and television this same question has led to the proliferation and surge in relevance of documentaries and reality shows. But dispensing with this in theatre – confessional monologues aside – is more tricky. However, theatre does have superior access to the real in its immediate proximity to the audience; no matter how real a documentary might be there is nothing real about the flickering light dancing on the screen; it is pure representation. In film and television, the audience is always only encountering a dead, frozen artifact and while docs do the real thing really well, they actually do representation much, much better as even the most honest documentary film possesses a large degree of manipulation on the part of the filmmaker. This leaves theatre as the most likely place to generate an *actual* encounter, after all, in theatre, there are living bodies scattered everywhere: the actors are alive, I can see saliva jump out of their mouths and the audience is alive, I can hear them unwrapping their lozenges.

Another aspect of the impulse behind *The Talking Creature* was a fatigue with the acceptable parameters for socializing. Lack of common space and few ways to hook up with people outside the rigid conventions of bars, galleries, theatre lobbies and dinner parties; scenes generally requiring alcohol and a particular kind of wit where discussion usually surfs from one cultural meme to another have a value but within certain specifics, arguably narrow, limits. There are few forums available for an open discussion where the habitual personality is not activated by a shared history and sensibility or entrenched power dynamics which, more often than not, prove themselves to be intransigent. This fatigue with representation and social convention dovetail as both are responses to a false world; a world carefully wrought; as refined as white sugar and, in my mind, about as unhealthy.

There were two remarkable aspects of *The Talking Creature*: The first was that the strangers approached were, for the most part, completely open and excited by the idea. There was almost no fear – a bit of confusion, maybe, and the occasional inquiry as to whether or not this was a religious thing. But, almost exclusively, people were totally game. The second remarkable aspect was the difference between the vibe before and after the search for strangers. Before, as all the participants, most of whom did not know each other, stood around waiting for the event to begin, there was palpable tension; no one knew what to do or what to say; all that hovered seemed to be anticipation. Once the strangers had been lured back, however, there was absolutely no need to facilitate the encounter, no need to provide a topic or a structure. In fact, the conversation sparkled, almost manic in its urgency. The trick was simply the act of risk-taking; the energy invested in approaching strangers, or, in turn, trusting the stranger who had approached you, provided a forceful dividend in a surprising ease and comfort. The shared experience of talking to a stranger provided a starting point, but a point which was, more often than not, left far behind. No one stood around talking about talking. There were too many other pressing things on our minds. To return to the theatre from this experience is difficult but charged with the desire to be able to inject it with the kind of energy that occurred during *The Talking Creature*.

Misha Glouberman, Sheila Heti, Leah Walker and Carl Wilson offer glimpses of a way through with their *Trampoline Hall* lecture series; an example of a kind of entertainment managing to pack in a crowd; people interested in listening to each other and engaging. Again, the idea is simple: “lecturers” present a topic upon which they are *not* experts. This eschewing of expertise is what deftly assures the event remains, however sneakily, in the realm of performance. That *Trampoline Hall* has managed to capture the attention of a young, enthusiastic, socially and politically engaged audience interested in attending talks by people less-than-informed speaks to a distrust of experts and formulations (theatrical or otherwise) too complete, too solid, too slick, too rehearsed, too CNN. It’s not the legitimacy or accuracy of the information that appeals but, rather, the act of *coming* to this information *together*.

Moving further into an experience of “real” theatre is the work of Jacob Wren. Still occasionally hanging on to the vestiges of representation, Wren, particularly in the two works, *It’s Easy to Criticize* and *Unrehearsed Beauty*, does manage to mix things up, with enough singing and dancing to still be considered entertainment, while providing a forum for discussion during the actual performance. And audiences have engaged, discussing the work, arguing amongst themselves about its merit, the role of boredom in our lives and in the theatre, locking intellects, transmitting and sharing information and, ultimately, (ex)changing.

More and more, my own desire, while standing in front of an audience with a head full of script to regurgitate, is to ask everybody if it’s okay if we all stop pretending. I know many people are enjoying themselves, sitting in the dark, listening to me; I know the jokes are making them laugh, that all the death so often scattered in the stories is making them cry. But I have many doubts about the efficacy of this exercise as a medium for affecting audience consciousness.

These days I have two projects that utilize direct address and a little audience participation and upon which *The Talking Creature* is beginning to have a dramaturgical impact. *pppeeeaaaccccee* is a three hander set in a postrevolutionary future where the characters have a very casual conversation with each other and with the audience about what life was like before, during and after an unspecified revolution. *A Suicide-Site Guide to the City* is a solo performance in which I work with autobiography, fiction, confession and audience participation. In both cases the performance style needs a confident relaxation able to directly interface with the audience. In the initial run of *A Suicide-Site Guide to the City*, which was presented in January 2004 by Intrepid Theatre in Victoria and by the PuSh Festival of International Performance in Vancouver, I applied some aspects of *The Talking Creature* by forcing myself to hover in the lobby and introduce myself to every single audience member. I would start the conversation by explaining that I was the writer and performer of the show and asking what had brought them to the theatre. I would usually follow this up by asking if they were involved in show business and, if not, what they did to raise their rent. If someone got into the theatre before I could talk to them I would enter the house and sit beside them, initiating the same conversation. I was surprised to find that the audience appreciated the contact – were, in fact, *honoured* by it – and that an easy rapport was quickly established. The atmosphere generated had a direct impact on the vibe in the room, with people very willing to respond to me during the course of the show, with little effort required to get them to sing happy birthday to my sister who I claimed was in the audience and join me onstage for a make-out session. It’s important to note that, while mingling in the lobby, I

was not “in character”, there was nothing performative about what I was doing and when occasionally asked if the conversations were “part of the show”, I said no, I just wanted to meet the people in the audience. Which was true.

The muscles developed through *The Talking Creature* were instrumental in the ease with which I was able to approach the audience and led directly to the establishing of a very open and communicative atmosphere. I realize I am conflating the problems of dramaturgy with those of performance but, in my mind, a dramaturgy which does not take into account performance and audience does so at its own and the text’s peril. How I anticipate the interaction with the audience has a direct effect on what and how I write. A writer who focuses strictly on the contours of her characters and their interaction without taking into account that, in performance, the audience is yet another character and, in the writing process, an area where she will be projecting bits of herself, is missing a rich arena for an additional layer of drama.

But more important than its dramaturgical implications are the implications *The Talking Creature* and related events have for the possibility of forging a new kind of theatre; a theatre so potentially different from what we now call theatre that to call it theatre may be a misnomer; a new kind of event which can muscle in on the social relevancy so dominated by film, video and television.

To tell intricate stories of love, death and loss, of trying to express some universal sentiment, more and more seems to me an act of complicity with a depressing status quo. But the paradox of political art, at this time in history, is that, for the most part, and excepting some of the more gruesome details, everybody pretty much already knows. Or at least everybody that’s going to be dropping in on one of my shitty little plays already knows. Or at least, will claim to know, rendering any efforts to affect consciousness useless. People will certainly be grateful at my efforts to speak politically; not because I’m making any dents in the way things are but because those fellow travelers are relieved to hear someone saying it onstage. While providing a little entertainment for the converted does have an element of satisfaction, it doesn’t tend to linger.

That there is a latent and strong desire to experience the other couldn’t have been driven home more clearly than on August 14, 2003 when the blackout shut down Toronto and New York City, the former famous for the coldness of its population and the latter for their rudeness. But, dislodged from routine, many people became nearly ecstatic at the opportunity of communing openly with strangers, interacting with an openness and urgency that was remarkable for its relaxation, trust and joy: *The Talking Creature* as presented by the aging power grid and the miracle of privatization.