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Caridad Svich

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Losing the Plot (And Finding It Again)

Katie Ebner-Landy

Katie Ebner-Landy is a dramaturg currently working with director Tim Supple on a play about Europe.

When a future historian of modern Europe looks at early twenty-first-century theatre, they will find something strange. For a number of years, from around 2014 onwards, everyone seemed to be writing plays about Europe. These were plays that toured across Europe, which were produced by some of the most renowned directors, and which often opened in Northern European cities like Amsterdam, Zurich, and Strasbourg. But the style of all of these plays, the historian will notice, was uncannily similar, so similar that they would be forgiven for thinking that they were made by the same creative team.

Taking Ivo van Hove’s Re: Creating Europe (2016), Milo Rau’s The Europe Trilogy (2014), Falk Richter’s I am Europe (2019), and Heiner Goebbels’s Everything That Happened and Would Happen (2018) – the historian will find that none of these plays are what might be considered to be ‘dramatic’: they have little or no dialogue, no action, no narrative, and no fiction. Re: Creating Europe is a play where actors read out real political speeches about Europe from a podium. The Europe Trilogy is three plays split by forms of trauma (difficult fathers, state collapse, and migration), each of which is told through autobiographical monologues, and respectively performed in a living room, on a podium, and in a kitchen. I am Europe is a play that consists of actors’ autobiographical monologues about their countries, their sex lives, and their social oppression. And Everything That Happened is made up of readings of Patrik Ouředník’s history Europeana, interspersed with real clips taken from Euronews. Rather than drama, the artistic language of these productions will seem closer to that of a sermon, speech, rally, or conference – it is not for nothing, the historian will think, that Ivo van Hove and Milo Rau both chose to use a podium in their plays – but even these categories seem too fixed to describe these productions. If they are like speeches, they are speeches that make a series of unconnected propositions, in a structure in which everything could be re-arranged and in which there is no tying up to be found at their conclusion.
No dialogue, no action, no narrative. No plot, or using Aristotle’s term, no *mythos*. The historian, well-trained in a number of sub-fields, will look for the factors that might explain why this curious absence has occurred. They will ask whether it was because these productions were all made by directors from similar demographics: Northern European middle-aged male auteurs. They will question whether it is because the directors were all affiliated with post-dramatic theatre, but will dismiss this from being a full explanation, knowing that these directors did not always make theatre in this way. (Ivo van Hove, they might think, became famous in the English-speaking world for his adaptation of *A View from a Bridge*, which left its plot firmly intact). They will look at reports of feelings of confusion, powerlessness, and hyper-normalisation in the early twenty-first century, and at the vagaries of late capitalism, but will feel that this can’t account for the precise kinds of dramatic fragmentation that these four performance cases expose. Eventually they will circle round to the subject matter of Europe.

For neoclassical interpreters of Aristotle, a plot is made up of a unity of time, place, and action. Might it be, the historian will ask, that these were three precise forms of unity that Europe lacked? In the Europe of the early twenty-first century, which location could be chosen for a *unity of place*, which historical moment could be agreed on as a *unity of shared time*, and what one European crisis could provide a *unity of action*? Thinking along these lines it will seem that the period’s very idea of Europe seemed to be lacking the crucial ingredients that a story requires. That is: where the story of Europe takes place, when this story begins and ends, and what happens within it. Essentially, what this story is at all. With this thought, the historian might feel that the fact that this moment’s plays about Europe all rejected the unifying and structuring tools of drama is no longer so puzzling at all.

Gathering together their files for a virtual conference to a global audience on ‘Representing Europe in Twenty-First Century Theatre’ the historian will type out the title: ‘Losing the Plot’.

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Like someone protesting they knew the band before they were famous, I started my work on Europe before I had seen any of these plays. I had set out, with director Tim Supple, on a process to see behind Europe, to peel off its masks, and to make something of this through the medium of theatre. The approach we had developed was to hold workshops in a number of European cities, where we would ask actors across Europe to tell us what they considered to be Europe’s founding myths, most important historical events, and most widespread contemporary narratives. We would then use this material as the basis for our play.

As time went on, it started to dawn on me that with this approach I would likely fall into the very same trap of making a play about Europe that ended up losing its plot. I decided to come clean about this while at a conference, ending my talk by praising Aristotle’s structure and asking the audience what they would choose as one place, one time, and one action that represented Europe. A few hours later I sat down to listen to Timothy Snyder’s keynote. He described how there was one very popular and very dangerous story of Europe, a story he called ‘The Fable of the Wise Nation’. This is a fable about how European nation-states came together after so much war, having learnt the lesson of the horror of violence. Why it is a fable is because it is not true: postwar Europe was not made up of nation-states who could learn this lesson but of Empires. The history, not the story, he argued, is that European unification was a substitute for Empire: a way for the European imperial powers to stay afloat in a moment where their colonies were breaking away.

Snyder’s talk presented a key for how I could escape from plotlessness and I started to think about how the story of this fable might work in theatre. There were two research and development workshops in London and Paris on the horizon, and I prepared for them by going into the archives of the founding fathers of Europe. What I found was how far these men were embroiled in thinking of European unification as a continuation of the colonial project. This could be seen in the language used in the 1950 ‘Schuman Declaration’ which mentions how ‘with increased resources Europe will be able to pursue the achievement of one of its essential tasks, namely, the development of the African continent’. It could equally be seen in the legal clauses of the Treaty of Rome, which established the Common European Market as being a free trade area that also applied to all of the six European signatory countries’ colonies. For French Prime Minister Guy Mollet this meant ‘the road is open to the union of Europe and Africa, to what we are beginning to call Eurafrika’.

I collated this material onto a timeline of twentieth century European history which incorporated all of the decolonial struggles and I brought it to our first

workshop at the Young Vic in London, along with the European Union’s (EU) own account of its story of unification, which hit all the plot points that Snyder suggested. We worked with actors on both the EU’s own story of unification and the decolonial timeline, thinking of how a play about myth and reality might come alive. In the rehearsal room, we found one extraordinary story within the narrative of EU integration, and our provisional title became something like: The Story of the Unification of Europe, from the 1952 European Coal and Steel Community through to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, With a Story About How the Treaty of Rome was Actually Signed on Sheets of Blank Paper, and With a Short Foray into How This All Applies to the Disintegrating Empires of Europe.

We arrived at the Bouffes du Nord in Paris wanting to play more with the idea of a drama focused on March 1957: the date of the Treaty of Rome and Ghana’s independence from Britain. We thought that this could be a drama that told the story of the agreeing and signing of the Treaty with two geographical points of focus. We were searching for the right theatrical form to tell this story and began our work by asking actors to improvise different narratives of Europe in the style of agitprop: showing Europe as a capitalist empire, Europe as beacon of peace, and Europe as a colonial monster. This form didn’t seem quite right, however, and we slowly realised that we were missing something. If having no narrative seemed to us like a cop-out, upgrading to a strident, single narrative proposed a vision that would be myopic in its presumed clarity.

The difficulty with our project on Europe is that unlike past artists who made theatre about national or political bodies – like the brilliant and iconoclastic theatre-makers of the 1920s USSR – we are neither setting out to glorify or to critique Europe, something that a singular narrative focus can do so well. We instead want to attempt to stare it in the face. We are neither falling into market-narrative-spin or into fragmented and autobiographical post-dramatic theatre. They reminded us of just how deftly theatre can handle stories and plot and revealed the kind of form we might need to use if we want to find a plot for Europe. Between now and December 2019, we must decide which of the suggestions we saw in the rehearsal room we should pursue. This afternoon, at 13:49 in Paris, I feel that I want to work on a play about a-€1 million EU Special Grant which is promised to whichever theatre company can best tell the narrative of European integration. In it we would follow a brilliant South Korean performer encountering all kinds of European theatre companies who have set out to make plays about unification – from a radical Polish company dealing with the colonisation story, to a rural Scottish troupe doing a Mummers play on Viking invasions, to an Italian commedia dell’arte farce on the blank pages of the Treaty of Rome – before ending up in a very stiff verse drama about Brexit at Shakespeare’s Globe.
The Implacability of Authorial Intent

Eric Marlin

Eric Connor Marlin is a playwright, theatre-maker, and producer. He is co-founder of the Healthy Oyster Collective NY, with whom he has created three original works.

On 19 September 2019, the Dramatists Guild of America released a two-page play by David Lindsay-Abaire entitled *Can I Change the Words or Music?* The play, a mix of agitprop and instructional video, dramatizes a conversation between a teacher and a Dramatists Guild Rep. The teacher asks for permission to make changes to a play she licensed for performance – cut some swears, shift the ending, whittle down the cast size. The Dramatists Guild rep insists that no words can be changed. After the possibility of canceling the performance is raised, the rep advises, ‘you should never alter a script or a score in any way without permission. If you do, then you are responsible for breaking the hearts of your students – and our writers. So please – don’t change the words or music’. Boom. Zing. Curtain.

For a couple of days, it seemed all theatre artists were posting the piece on social media, framed one of two ways. Either, with a sense of obviousness, a ‘See! Yep! This right here!’ This is crucial, or with an eye roll, with disdain, with a contempt for this rather square notion of authorial intent. Full disclosure: I’m a playwright. I believe in authorial intent. Change my words and I’ll call up the Dramatists Guild of America. But I acknowledge that this death grip, this insistence on the sanctity of my text, is a defensive posture.

Authorial intent is not a self-evident aesthetic or moral value. It is by no means universal. The immovability of authorial intent is particular to a theatrical ecosystem built around new-play development, where ‘the text’ is the presumed authority in the room. The US has such an ecosystem, as do other nations, but plenty of places don’t have the same kind of new play ecosystem we do (we didn’t even really have it until the middle of the twentieth century). Many of us know that Germany, for example, is much more a director’s theatre, where the text and the production are two very different matters. The US, of course, has plenty of theatrical traditions that work against a text-centric approach, but they are firmly framed as the avant-garde. They are not the pervasive norm. Text is the pervasive norm. Text is the presumption.

Because of this, the space between text and production is seen as paper-thin. The new play process assumes there exists an ideal production for every play, and the job of the director is to execute a production that hews as closely to this ideal production as possible. This sometimes has the effect of flattening out collaborative imaginations. Playwrights will often say, ‘The text is just a blueprint! It’s just a recipe! It’s just a set of instructions! It’s not alive until it’s on its feet!’ I’ve said these things myself. But these are sneaky metaphors. The recipe might not be the same as the cake, but stray from the recipe, and you’ll wind up with a bad cake. We have trouble escaping the binary of ‘in development’ and ‘complete’, where once the playwright’s idea is ‘complete’, other collaborators are not emboldened to work with ideas that expand, or even clash against, the playwright’s ideas. So yes, the text must be realised, but don’t you dare to realize it incorrectly.

I’m not being glib. These are real emotional concerns. Yet despite my automatic capitulation to authorial intent, I also chafe at its inflexibility, its inability to account for the very alive-ness of theatre. In every room I’ve ever been, I’ve made changes to my work based on the collaborators present. But I can’t be in every room. And so, pragmatic concessions must be made. Don’t change a word without my permission, lest I sic the Dramatists Guild of America on you.

But the problem is that authorial intent is slippery. It does not mean the same thing from playwright to playwright. We all have different boundaries around what we consider sacrosanct and what we consider malleable. And when authorial intent is presented as legally unquestionable, it does not allow for these shifting boundaries to be considered.

In the summer of May 2019, I was working on a new play about queerness and camp called *What a World! What a World!* The play featured eight characters, four men and four women, all played by the same two performers, who were both women. I was not present at the first part of the rehearsal process. When I came in the second week, I found my director, Ilana Khanin, had asked the actors to skip over any ‘gendered’ language in the piece (i.e. man, woman, handsome, beautiful, etc.). According to *Can I Change the Words or Music?*, she shouldn’t have even entertained such a change without speaking to me first, let alone tell the

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actors to do so. And yet, her exploration invited a rigorous conversation about how this play framed gender. She was not disregarding my intent so much as trying to better understand it. And to do so, she needed the right to try it on its feet and show me, rather than have a theoretical conversation about the matter.

Currently, Ilana is directing my play *How to Mourn the Dead: A Tragedy* (in *flux*), for a February 2020 production at Montclair State University. To grapple with several choral sequences in the play, she has played with a number of wildly varied ideas, from setting them to music to staging them as Westerns. Many of her ideas, by the traditional conception of it, go against my authorial intent. She is not ‘serving’ the play so much as she is interrogating it, breaking it down so she can resemble it. Sometimes her ideas thrill me; sometimes they feel completely incorrect. But as a whole, the process is thrilling because rather than simply serving my vision of the play, she is actively carving out her own vision. Our two visions may exist in tension with one another, or they may harmonize. Both possibilities would end up serving the text.

As playwrights, we make a poor case for ourselves when we frame authorial intent as self-evident, as something only a monster would dare question. It makes it look like we don’t understand alternative theatrical models, like we’ve never looked at theatre outside of the US or the UK. It makes us look fragile. But it’s only because we’ve got a lot to be fragile about. It’s a great time for playwriting as an art, and a miserable time for playwriting as a career. I mean, does such a thing even exist? You’ve heard the horror stories, you’ve read *Outrageous Fortune*, you know the contours of this problem: with very few exceptions, no one ‘lives off playwriting’ unless they also teach, write for television, or come from money.

So, what do you with such financial insecurity? Well, you hold on to whatever power you might have. You maintain slavish devotion to authorial intent. You insist on the primacy of the text, the part of the process you have control over. You say we’re all here to serve the play, not the playwright, but as the conduit for the play, you’ll need us as your clairvoyant go-between. I have a sneaking suspicion that if all American playwrights unionised tomorrow and negotiated standard rates with all the Off-Broadway, LORT, and Regional houses tomorrow, we’d all be a little less crazed about our words being changed. Not because we’d be selling out. Not because the deep vulnerability we risk in sharing something we laboured over would evaporate. Not because we wouldn’t care about our plays anymore. But we’d have more to fall back on than ‘respect for our vision’.

So no authorial intent cannot be bought off. However, I do acknowledge that there is an emotional and financial impulse behind the insistence on the text’s supremacy. When making theatre within capitalist constraints, you need a bargaining chip. In lieu of a union available to bargain for you, genius makes for a nice bargain. Sometimes when I talk with collaborators who’ve never written a play, I’m startled by the sense of security they presume playwrights have. They mistake the text being secure for the playwright being secure. But I understand the confusion. It’s one American playwrights encourage. Rhetorically, we bind ourselves tightly to the text, so where one begins, and the other ends is impossible to locate.

When I see people posting Lindsay-Abaire’s piece with a dismissive caption, I get it. I too wish we had a more nuanced relationship to authorial intent. I wish it wasn’t so stifling. I wish copyright law could distinguish between shaping a joke towards an actor’s performance, and the fundamental dramaturgy of the play being altered. I want to eye roll too! But also, what are you going to offer me in return? Are you going to start paying me more? If text no longer reigns supreme, where does that leave me? It leaves me feeling pretty expendable.

And of course, this brings up the questions of how we accomplish this legally. If ‘don’t change the words or music’, a maxim helpful in its simplicity, is no longer the guiding principle, what replaces it? How can playwrights still be protected? Part of the reason I am comfortable with Ilana playing with my text is she is a close collaborator. We’ve worked together a lot, and I trust her. Clearly that cannot happen on every process. How can we embrace less standardised contracts? How could playwrights be emboldened to define where authorial intent ends and collaboration begins? How could we write contracts that can respond to the porous boundaries of theatre-making?

At the end of the day, I agree with Lindsay-Abaire’s piece not because it argues for protecting playwrights with his stature. I agree because it argues for protecting the playwright who has no cultural clout or financial security. But I cannot help but long for a world that empowers playwrights beyond ‘don’t change the words or music’. A world where playwrights’ ideas can be more directly challenged, and where playwrights have more security to push back, where we don’t go timid in the face of financial
insecurity. A world where it is playwrights, not the text, not authorial intent, that garner the real respect.

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A Feeling of Form: Directing Concert from the Michael Chekhov Perspective

A Conversation between Sinéad Rushe and Tom Cornford

Sinéad Rushe and Tom Cornford

Sinéad Rushe is a theatre director, author of Michael Chekhov’s Acting Technique: A Practitioner’s Guide (Bloomsbury, 2019) and Senior Lecturer in Acting and Movement at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London.

Tom Cornford is a director, dramaturg, and Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Concert is a dance-theatre performance based on the music of iconic Irish fiddler Tommie Potts, a co-creation directed by Sinéad Rushe, performed by Colin Dunne, and sound designed by Mel Mercier. It premiered at the Dublin Dance Festival in 2017 with a subsequent international tour including The Pit, Barbican London (as part of Dance Umbrella 2018), and Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York City.

TC: How did Concert come about as a project?
SR: It was an impulse from the performer Colin Dunne. I directed his first solo show, Out of Time, which was about Colin’s personal relationship with Irish dance. Here, he wanted to work with the music of Tommie Potts (1912–1988), an iconic Irish fiddler. Potts released only one album in his lifetime in 1972 which is celebrated in traditional music circles. Colin’s aim was to create a response to that album because in some respects his trajectory is similar to that of Potts: Potts tried to innovate within a traditional music form and Colin experiments within the boundaries of the traditional Irish dance form. In addition, given that Potts’s music is revered in the Irish music world, we thought it important to collaborate with a sound designer in order to handle carefully how the music was heard in the theatre. Colin invited Mel Mercier to join the project, an Irish sound designer and composer who has a strong background in traditional music.

TC: So, the project developed as a collaboration between the three of you?
SR: Yes.

TC: How about other aspects of the design?
SR: We debated having a scenographer also, but there were budget constraints, the risk of having too many key collaborators at the table and there was also the fact that Mel and I had not worked together before. For Out of Time, Colin and I invented the visual design ourselves and then had it built. For Concert, we knew the design would revolve around serving the composition of sound in the space. Early on we had the idea of wooden boards as sites of exploration for Colin to dance on, and because we were dealing with recorded rather than live music, we wanted to use the artefacts of the time of the album’s release: a record player and a tape cassette recorder.

TC: And do those boards have a basis in his practice? There are sheets of plywood of various sizes placed on the stage floor with rubber mats on top of them.
SR: Historically, Irish dance would have happened in pubs, village, church, or town halls with wooden floors so there’s a simple reference to that. Part of Colin’s practice is to work with rubber mats on stage to dull the reverberation of the taps on his shoes against the raw wood. On tour you’re at the mercy of the stage floors, so rather than construct a touring floor, the boards were treated on their base side to function like a ‘sprung’ dance floor. Of course, they then became a design feature in themselves, evoking small stages, private spaces, isolated islands. Potts was a very private person; he never played with other musicians in public and the only film footage that exists is of him playing in his kitchen. So, in Concert, the wooden boards

4. The show was produced by Maura O’Keeffe/Once Off Productions, and co-produced by CND Centre National De La Danse Paris, MA Scène Nationale – Pays de Montbéliard, La Comète Scène Nationale de Châlons-en-Champagne, Dublin Dance Festival. Supported by The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, Limerick City Arts Office, and Dance Limerick. Funded by The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaion and Culture Ireland. The show was the winner of Gradam Comhaircheoil TG4 2018 Award in Ireland for Musical Collaboration. See www.sineadrushe.co.uk; www.colindunne.com.
are a nod to the domestic, the intimate, the ordinary.

TC: But similarly, to the recording technologies, you’re thinking of technologies of –

SR: Of dance and of Colin’s performance in particular. Potts’s tools were traditional music, the fiddle, and other music styles. Colin’s tools are his shoes, the mats, the boards, and live sound technology with microphones on the soles of his shoes.

TC: It seems to me that Colin and Mel have got quite clear roles. You have a sound designer who will manage how the music is treated and reproduced, and you have a performer who’s going to dance and perform. What about the director’s role?

SR: My role involved several things: a) driving the questions on dramaturgy, structure, shape of the show; b) determining the dramaturgy of the space; c) interrogating and guiding Colin’s dance (I have a background as an Irish dancer). I set him tasks and grounds for improvisation to investigate a tune or explore material, identified useful lines of direction for his choreography, and offered detailed feedback. For the spoken sections, I edited the text with him and directed his delivery, and honed, refined and reshaped; d) holding the ‘whole’ or super-objective of the work, creating systems whereby we could draw from our research (unpublished interviews and private recordings of Potts), and reinforce key themes; e) being the glue between the creative and production teams. I consider it my job to hold the fort, so to speak.

TC: You said about grounds for improvisation, which, to me, is a reference to Michael Chekhov and his idea of improvisation as a bounded act of creativity. As I understand it, he’s usually imagining more than one performer and a shared technical basis for them to do something creative. Usually there’s a dialectic between establishing what you’re going to do and the basis upon which you’re going to invent and then leaving space for you to add something to the instructions. He gives ‘grounds’ so that it’s not just a free-for-all. How were you understanding that idea of the ground?

SR: One of the first things we did in the preparation period was listen to the album all the way through. Then we listened to each tune and determined what we thought its quality was: a-rhythmic, jerky, jaunty, mournful, or meandering, for example. Then Colin would improvise movement to that tune, trying to move consciously with that quality. This became the basic approach to each tune. So that was a very basic ground.

TC: For Chekhov, quality is an adverb, it’s the way in which something is done. So, were Colin’s improvisations always grounded in the vocabulary of traditional Irish dance where he was physically trying to replicate that quality? Or is it more emotional than that?

SR: It’s a mix of both. The trouble with a traditional dance form is that there’s a certain limitation, even though Colin has worked very hard to open the vocabulary up. Often the improvisation was within that dance vocabulary but sometimes it was more human, more pedestrian; the quality of the tune determined which terrain his movement ventured into. Sometimes his impulse began with ‘ordinary’ movement, but he developed it later into choreography. Our difficulty was one of trying to move beyond merely dancing to the tune but at the same time appreciating that each tune had certain demands. It was important that Colin was not in competition with the tune; Potts was not there to answer for himself or able to adjust to the moment as any live musician would do. We were sensitive to the fact that traditional music is essentially a live form, and that in Concert only one half of our duet was present.

TC: So, are you thinking about quality as a physical quality?

SR: Yes, but perhaps it’s a little broader than the way Chekhov thinks about it; for example, one tune feels like it doesn’t want to end, another goes round and round, another feels like a swing number and that it needs two or three other people to dance with. Colin would take that sensation of ‘it feels like there should be three of us doing this’ into an improvisation. He didn’t mime a situation where there were two other people; he was inspired by the expanded, collective, outward facing energy of it. It’s psychophysical and it’s almost a gesture.

TC: Can you explain what you mean by ‘gesture’ in this context?

SR: In his standard use of that term Michael Chekhov calls psychological gesture the predominant energetic will or drive of the character, something that summarises the character. Here, we sometimes asked
ourselves, what’s the gesture this tune is making, what’s it driving towards, what does it want to do, what is its direction? Is it relentlessly moving forward or is it more static, on the spot? More importantly, we talked about gesture for the shape of the whole piece. Potts lamented the limitations of traditional Irish music; he felt it wasn’t virtuosic and was repetitive. He looked to classical music, sacred song, and opera for fresh inspiration. For example, in his arrangement of the traditional tune ‘Rakish Paddy’, he took exact motifs from Chopin and inserted them into the tune; it’s playful and fresh. He was also a fervent Catholic, so I felt strongly that there is a spiritual yearning in his music for something more, a reach for this form to uplift, to take us somewhere else, to stir the soul.

**TC:** So that ended up becoming an underlying dynamic for the whole piece, this idea of trying to take off?

**SR:** It determined the structure of the show in three parts, yes. In part one, Colin explores the material, searching for the essence of Potts. Here, everything on stage was isolated, fragmented, and the atmosphere was introspective. In part two, all the boards come together with a sense of Colin ‘meeting’ Potts and Colin dances a series of tunes back to back in a suite. In part three, Colin moves beyond dance and immerses in a sonic world, playing the piano, some chords on the violin, replaying Potts’s recordings; this section moves beyond Potts and offers something else. In the early stages we thought part three would be a rousing, uplifting, epic or symphonic piece of new music, merging the recordings of Potts and Colin. But we realised Potts isn’t like that; his spirit is much lighter and humble. So, it became a more modest look at what else we might do, at where this encounter between Colin and Potts might take us.

**TC:** And for lighting, did you retain the same kind of vocabulary you’d been using?

**SR:** I took Colin Grenfell through the atmosphere of moments of and of the three parts, and that became key vocabulary between us all.

**TC:** Atmosphere, in the Chekhovian sense, of the feeling of a space in time?

**SR:** That’s right. And asking how that feeling manifests in space is very helpful. We weren’t deconstructing Potts to question him; we wanted in some sense to honour his project and bring him to a different kind of audience. And to convey his specific atmosphere which has a sense of play, surprise, innovation, a quirky a-rhythmicality, a lack of crescendo; it is intimate with a reflective sadness. These were our guides.

**TC:** Let’s think more generally about what you’re doing as a director in this situation. Most of the things which we might think of as a director being or doing are absent. I’m interested in what you’re doing as something which you might repurpose Chekhov’s technique for. It is known, now, as an actor training technique, but you approached these concepts in a situation which is very different. How did you go about that?

**SR:** Above all, I connect to the Chekhov work through his broader principles that shape an artistic approach. For *Concert*, something as simple as Chekhov’s idea of a feeling of form led the process: the form of the tunes, their structure, their sound composition in the theatre space, the poetic of the speakers moving around the stage. The content can emerge from the form; we can make work by leading on a principle like that. I worked with Chekhov’s sense of direction – he talks about the six directions in space (up, down, forward, back, left, and right). At one point, we were going to have the boards lift and become suspended so that the ‘floor’ Colin had danced on would find elevation and flight. But as our thinking evolved it wasn’t right; we hadn’t earned that. Yet we did find verticality in two ways: lighting a flown speaker the first time we hear Potts’s voice and in the transition to part three when the boards become a makeshift ‘screen’ to project Potts’s image for the first time. These were two small conscious events that projected verticality. So, I’m using a broad application of these principles in making, thinking, and dramaturgy that activates space dynamically and that conveys meaning. I also use his ethical principles to create an atmosphere in the rehearsal space. Asserting and embodying the principles of ease, a feeling of the whole, and a positive expansion can help everyone in the room to hold their nerve and to have faith in working on material that is elusive or doesn’t form itself very quickly or easily. Chekhov’s intangible principles help hold a space for the unknown,
chaotic, and uncertain landscape of devising where you really haven’t a clue about what you have until your third show in front of an audience.

TC: It occurs to me that there’s a contrast between something that feels quite instinctive, personal, and based on a hunch, contrasted with Chekhov, who’s highly systematic. I wonder if these are related to each other, and what the benefit is of you having access to this sort of systematic way of thinking in these kinds of contexts?

SR: It goes back to what Chekhov says himself: you cultivate technique so that you are free to improvise and follow a hunch when it arrives. But if you’re relying on inspiration alone without the knowledge of structure or exercises that might unlock something on the day that nobody has any ideas, then it will never work. Chekhov would be the first to say that it’s very important to hear and endorse the instinct of the artist, that you’re not serving the technique, the technique needs to serve you. Our creative individuality is the spark that is our impulse to create and it must be honoured and cherished. The scaffolding of the technique is what allows that to exist, because you’re practising tools that keep the capacity for hunches to arrive and for them to take shape.

TC: And that contradicts the mainstream assumptions of actor training, doesn’t it? Because most people tend to talk about actor training as providing tools for a situation.

SR: Chekhov says if you know how to play your role, then play it and never mind about the tools; they are there for when you don’t know. Of course, I absolutely believe in knowing and bringing things to consciousness because that’s what makes us free rather than lost or deluded. I’m not at all advocating a ‘just feel it’ approach. Nevertheless, I think sometimes with technique we can forget that the tools are about developing the capacity for inspiration, for pursuing instinctively a strong impulse, and knowing how to bring it to fruition. We need to make sure that our techniques create a space for that impulse to be heard and felt and followed up on, and that they’re not dismissing it or closing a door on it or making it impossible even to exist.

Good technique – and good use of technique – creates that space. In all creative processes, there’s a delicate balance to be struck between being tight and loose, between knowing when to craft and decide, balanced with when to change tack and throw things up in the air. It’s challenging; too much of one can wreck the work so you have to learn to recognise the symptoms. The technique is not about providing instant, ready-made solutions, it’s about teaching us how to explore, search, remain curious, sustain interest for as long as possible, return to the familiar again and again so that our discoveries are arrived at with the appropriate levels of depth, rigour, and integrity. You can’t have a formula for that.

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Thoughts on Robert Blacker – 35 Years of Friendship and His Passing

Michael Roth

Michael Roth is a composer, sound designer, and musician who, in addition to chamber music, opera (including his acclaimed The Web Opera, streaming online now), and film, has created scores for over 250 productions throughout North America. His collaborations with Robert Blacker included La Jolla Playhouse and/or Stratford Festival productions, directed by Des McAnuff, of Romeo & Juliet, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, Much Ado About Nothing, Macbeth, The Tempest, Henry V, and many others. This in memoriam reflection was written on 11 October 2019.

Robert Blacker worked as a dramaturg for 40 years at New York’s Public Theatre, where he was their first dramaturg in residence; La Jolla Playhouse in California; and the Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada. He was Artistic Director of the Sundance Theatre Lab for eight years and was responsible for guiding the development of over 50 plays and musicals.

In the weeks since Robert Blacker passed, I’ve read several beautiful loving tributes to this very
kind good friend of mine recounting what a great, smart, thoughtfully meticulous dramaturg and theatre literary advisor and manager he truly was. Yet, when I’ve thought about my friend Caridad Svich’s request that I write about Robert, my mind has a hard time focusing, intuitively or instantly flashing on or going to (or even remembering?) the approximately 35 productions we worked on together. Maybe it’s just my own mind circling on what it means to have been friends for over 35 years, and thinking about a flood of personal – and not, if you will, professional – memories as I reflect on a long friendship. Perhaps this is something that happens more and more as one, as one inevitably does, gets older.

As the years moved along, thinking of our professional accomplishments, whatever they were – or the occasional frustration we might have felt along the way, thinking that perhaps we weren’t doing everything we could sometimes and not adding up professionally as well as we thought we should – now I wonder, are those professional things more worthy of writing about or even remembering than the fact that we were always happy to see each other?

I see Robert sitting in an easy chair in my living room, as he inevitably would, and my dog (now long gone) running to him, jumping into his lap, Robert just laughing and laughing.

Or years earlier, the first season at La Jolla Playhouse, in fact my very first night in La Jolla, when there was no housing for me for the first three to four days, Robert said, ‘You’ll just crash on the sofa with me until you’re settled’. And since he knew I’d be up early the next day and would want to walk up the hill to the playhouse, Robert offered his great first night in La Jolla dramaturgical know-how when he warned his fellow New Yorker about the surprising absence and inconsistency of sidewalks in parts of La Jolla.

A few years later we shared a hotel room in downtown Moscow (when it was still the USSR). We passed time each evening laughing at the dubious hotel meals centred around what we called ‘fish surprise’. Robert laughing, both of us always a bit hungry (and Robert did really like good food, that was certainly a contagious enjoyment when you were in his company). A very specific memory: flying back to the States (on Pan Am!), sitting together after the intense weeks working in Moscow, we both fell asleep right when the plane took off, and woke up when the stewardess offered us standard ordinary airplane coffee, our first post-Moscow coffee. Laughing, Robert said this was the probably the best coffee we would ever have, as we both wondered if the previous weeks in Moscow had been an interesting albeit intense busy and educational dream; he laughed some more.

So, laughter, there it is – and his laugh was a good solid unsubtle thing.

Sure. We talked about plays and our work a lot – lots of hours talking about Shakespeare – he was so proud of his book Shakespeare in Three Dimensions (Routledge, 2017), now an important part of his legacy, surely he knew, during these last few years, that would be the case. Together we analysed lyrics I was about to set, acknowledging how tricky it would be to figure out the meaning/rhetoric, rhythm, and musicality of something like Ariel in The Tempest – ‘On the bat’s back I do fly/After summer merrily’ (V.i) (it really is a tricky line to figure out rhythmically in context, we talked it through a lot). Or – Robert reminding me of encouraging me to make sure that when Caliban sang, he really did sing out that word ‘Freedom’.

I suppose, thinking back, that my habit of being at almost all text analysis sessions when working on Shakespeare comes directly from Robert’s thoroughness as an archaeological dramaturge digging into every facet of Shakespeare’s text. We would sit at a table with Des, Robert, an OED with magnifying glass, and a dozen scholarly books on Shakespeare and language keeping track of image chains. It became my job to notice every single image or image chain that had anything to do with sound or music – knowing that it would then be my job to acknowledge them with sound – even if (and usually better if) my way of doing that was purely abstract.

In Romeo and Juliet, there are many references to time – time passing, time feeling perhaps a bit still even if it never is, or time moving faster than we want it to – and in our two productions, in one way or another – even if with a quiet celeste chord, almost subliminal, or light touch of a synth low pitch, or a bird song – I would accent every time reference with a gesture. That likely would not have happened without experiencing first-hand Robert’s love for what he did, and sharing that love with his colleagues, friends, and collaborators. Robert probably was most important in instilling a confidence in what I might be trying to do as long as that confidence came from trusting that there was dramaturgical purpose to how I went about creating music and sound for theatre: create an interesting instance of sound if it was worth the audience being inquisitive in that moment. I guess that has kept me going, evolving into the composer/sound artist I am, thanks to him.
All that being said, the strongest recent memory I have is when a few years ago someone very close passed away, I knew the first call after family that I had to make was to Robert. He had been near to us both through many ups and downs. There was so much DNA, years of good and bad to remember and sift through, Robert would be perhaps the one close friend who knew all of it and would be honestly, candidly, and sympathetically real in the moment. We reminded ourselves, as Beckett put it, we’re ‘on Earth. There’s no cure for that’.

And now this good friend to so many friends of mine, who worked hard to help us create our work, our own unique ‘stains on the silence’, is silent as well, we’re left to remember him, living in the echoes. I wonder, at the risk of giving something like Facebook far more credit than it deserves, if he could have imagined that my simple announcement there of his passing would bring well over almost 250 comments, likely more than anything I’ve ever posted in that social universe. Did he in anyway realize how much his leaving affected so many of his friends – who knows? I hope so, Robert and, well, all of us deserve knowing good things. And losing a friend suddenly – something that happens more and more and does not discriminate – is yet another much needed reminder not to take each other for granted, something we do so easily. We travel in one direction, echoes grow fainter, friends and friendships slip into memories, illness becomes a word we notice more each day, some pains last longer, medications become more and more a part of routine, and some memories turn into thoughts we don’t remember if we ever thought. It’s nice, from time to time, to remember a friend’s wisdom, dramaturgical or otherwise, and kindness, and good laughter, 35 years’ worth. On we go – take good care pal, see you on the other side.

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Backpages is edited by Caridad Svich.
Editorial team: Maddy Costa, Patrick Duggan, Andrew Haydon, Carl Lavery, Catherine Love, Diana Damian Martin, Ian Rowlands, Duška Radosavljević, and Aleks Sierz.