

Small Wooden Shoe
Halifax, NS

**Fragile Positions:
Five Words on Four Slips of Paper**
About a conversation about performance

by Robert Plowman

Introduction

0.1 / Monday, October 25, 2004. Seated on stage in the bar of the Khyber Centre for the Arts in Halifax are (from left to right): Jacob Wren, Susan Leblanc-Crawford, Emily Vey Duke, Chad Dembski and Ame Henderson.

0.2/ Every conversation starts in the middle. This conversation about performance began as an e-mail exchange among its five participants, some of whom had met or seen each other's work or worked together previously, and some of whom were strangers. Before the conversation it was proposed that some of the ideas about performance mentioned in the e-mail correspondence be used to anchor the discussion. And so, words were written down on slips of paper and drawn not quite at random from not quite a hat.

First word:1.0 / Imperfection

1.1 / A brief history of imperfection in art: There are the flaws deliberately woven into Persian rugs, because, the weaver knows, no one approaches the perfection of the Almighty. Then there's Oscar Wilde, who writes, "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art and Art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence." We go to the circus to see the trapeze artists fall.

1.2 / "Mostly I really love imperfection," says Ame Henderson, "but imperfection that comes from a really rigorous attempt at something." Henderson is a performer and choreographer, her work is intimately concerned with the body and the body's limitations.

"And the body for me is always imperfect," she says. "We're damaged goods the moment we're born, and we go through life trying desperately to do the very best with what we've got."

1.3 / Chad Dembski is not a dancer. "When I dance [in performance] I'm pretty terrified," he says, "because I have no vocabulary for it, I don't have any training, but in the same way I feel I work way harder at it than I do if I'm acting in a show. It takes me to a much more vulnerable place." And this vulnerability and dedicated amateurism, Dembski says, in fact brings him closer to his audience.

1.4 / There are performers with such incredible technical prowess that they've become unbearably dull. Craft alone is sterile; creativity is born in confusion and messiness — yet without craft it stays there.

For Susan Leblanc-Crawford it's about appreciating the value of accidents. Leblanc-Crawford is a core member of the Halifax-based Zuppa Circus Theatre, and the company's creation process places a premium on those happy accidents that can't be planned for, only welcomed.

"When we're creating scenes," says Leblanc-Crawford, "we have a rule list on the wall in Zuppa Circus rehearsals and one of the rules is never stop the scene, even if it messes up." Often the mistake is more interesting than getting it right.

1.5 / When there are all these elements of mass media culture which have so much power? For Henderson, it's that popular culture aspires to a kind of technical perfection she cannot identify with.

Emily Vey Duke agrees. But the language of imperfection and the performance value of amateurism that Dembski advocates has negative connotations for her. "I guess the reason that makes me anxious," Duke explains, "is that I feel like so much contemporary art — so much marginalized cultural production — is made without enough care."

Duke, in collaboration with her partner Cooper Battersby, is a writer, visual artist and video artist. And while she has performed live, she is predominantly a performer for the camera.

"I've developed, especially in the post-conceptual art era, a deep appreciation for artists who are willing to excel and become good enough that they could move into the arena of the production of popular culture. And yet choose not to," she says.

1.6 / "I think there's a difference between perfection as a kind of goal and perfection as a cultural value," offers Jacob Wren. "In one sense you have: 'this is what I think high culture is,' or 'this is what I think is worthy of Hollywood,' and everything below it is garbage." Laughter. "And it's a kind of hubris." The alternative, Wren explains, is the imperfection the artist struggles against to create something of meaning — attempting to transcend the mundane, not pretending to be set apart from other people.

In our multiplex culture, where the idea of imperfection in entertainment is bonus DVD blooper reels and accidental celebrity nudity on the Internet, there is something faintly miraculous about live performance that breathes and changes with its audience — in large ways or small. We go to the circus to see the trapeze artist fall.

2.0 / Terror

2.1 / As long as there's been performance criticism, critics have written of terror. Of course, the catharsis essential to Aristotle's conception of tragedy relies on the audience's experience of pity and fear. The actor playing Christ in medieval morality plays really died on the cross. (Pity, fear.) Lugosi performing Dracula in theatres, women lining up to faint in the aisles, stretchers at the ready. (Pity, fear.) And for the modernist avant-garde: Artaud's transcendental terror of his

Theatre of Cruelty. To see the trapeze artist fall. The caught-breath moment of this time it's really happening, this time it's real. But the terror of the performer no one writes about.

2.2 / Jacob Wren: "It's funny, I never use the word terror, I always use the word humiliation. I always find getting in front of people and performing quite humiliating. And I try and perform in a way that doesn't hide my humiliation. And I guess the only other thing I have to say is, considering how humiliating I find it, I don't really know why I still do it."

2.3 / Whether Emily Vey Duke is performing for an audience or for the camera is immaterial. "It's equally humiliating," she says, "if not more humiliating that I would be committing my image to a permanent media."

"And for me that humiliation — the terror that strikes when you are put in the position to perform — is innately linked to shame around wanting to be the centre of attention." For Wren, this shame is a function of our top-10-chart approach to culture. "This idea that culture is about someone being the best is very different to the experience of culture that's been meaningful to me, which is one of culture helping people figure out what they think."

2.4 / The terror. The humiliation. "I kind of enjoy that," says Chad Dembski. In fact, in his work as a solo performer at cabarets, Dembski has been courting performance anxiety. "It's almost cathartic or therapeutic or something, to allow myself to just drown in that humiliation or that fear and just express it, and almost give it back to the audience. Not in an aggressive way," Dembski says, "almost like a gift."

3.0 / Impulse & Pleasure

3.1 / Who is the work for? The artist or the audience? And if the artist is creating work not for herself but for someone she has never met, or indeed a group of people she has never met, in fact many separate groups of people she has never met, how does she construct their hypothetical pleasures?

3.2 / "It's interesting to me that those two words — impulse and pleasure — were co-joined," says Emily Vey Duke. While she describes the pleasure of the viewer as being at the core of her practice, Duke doesn't believe that following her impulses as a filmmaker would necessarily produce work that her audience would enjoy. "I feel like a lot of the time when artists do make works based on their own impulses," she says, "the work is intensely repetitive and has the character of neurosis."

Again, for whom, whose pleasure?

"We're making work that matters to us," says Ame Henderson. "I can't think about anything else than that really. I can't make work about things that don't touch me somehow."

3.3 / "I also think of my work as for the pleasure of the audience," says Jacob Wren, "even though often it has the opposite effect." Laughter. "It makes people angry, or makes people upset." Perhaps, Wren says, it's a pleasure intended to appeal to a certain kind of person.

“So much of popular culture is designed to give the viewer pleasure, but to sell them things, or in a kind of cynical, manipulative way. And I think if you’re trying not to be cynical about it, or trying not to be manipulative, there’s kind of a limit to how much pleasure you can generate.”

3.4 / SUSAN LEBLANC-CRAWFORD: I think the pleasure of the audience is directly related to the pleasure of the performers. And I feel that from my own experiences as an audience member.

JACOB WREN: I think that’s true, but I can also think of theatre performances that I’ve seen where the people on stage are having way too much fun and I’m getting nothing out of it.

SUSAN LEBLANC-CRAWFORD: Maybe that’s the denial of the audience. The pleasure has to be for the audience. It’s a story you’re giving them, it’s a dialogue you’re opening up with them.

3.5 / Duke’s objections to linking impulse with pleasure, she says, might be a function of differing artistic paradigms. Differing language. “I come out of a conceptual art tradition that sort of writes out the pleasure of the viewer,” says Duke, “and I don’t think that’s the case with the tradition of theatre.”

Henderson doesn’t use the word impulse. But if she did, she says, it would be to describe the sort of performance state she’s always trying to reach, of responding without editing or prejudgment. Being fully alive and connected in a way a performer can never be when she’s caught up in ideas of perfection and imperfection. “I do not seek, I find,” Picasso said.

And there is pleasure, Henderson adds, in the struggle to get to this performance state she’s seeking. “Pleasure to push at things that are uncomfortable.”

4.0 / Contradiction

4.1 / An artist’s aesthetic can be its own dead-end. The work develops a certain sameness, each show more fully realized than the one before, yet less interesting. For composer John Cage chance operations were the way out. Months spent devising scores based on throws of the *I Ching*, in order to escape the traps of good taste that close both creator and audience off from the world.

4.2 / “There’s something about the thrill and excitement that anything could happen in the theatre,” says Chad Dembski. Yet for so much of the theatre Dembski sees, it doesn’t happen. And so, an essential contradiction he faces in his work is how to plan for this quality of spontaneity in performance.

The director Richard Foreman talks about the joy of watching the first ten minutes of a film, when everything that happens is mysterious and strange. But soon the audience learns the rules and the film falls more and more into a predictable pattern, with fewer and fewer variations. Part of the New York theatre avant-garde that came of age in 1970s, Foreman made his career on creating baroque, surreal plays which maintained the mystery and strangeness of those first ten minutes until the final curtain. But, after 35 years of honing his aesthetic, Foreman has, in his own way, become absolutely predictable.

4.3 / The creation process of Zuppa Circus, explains Susan Leblanc-Crawford, is about finding unexpected combinations of often dissonant material. Layering text and music and physical scores, created without any direct connection to the story of the show under development.

When actors rehearse a play in the traditional manner they look to find the anger in an angry scene, the sorrow in a sad scene — and so the words and the actions duplicate one another with a sort of banality commonly known as realism. The contrary elements in the work of Zuppa Circus aim at a more delirious, poetic truth which you do not reach when you begin with answers like “angry” or “sad.”

I do not seek, I find.

4.4 / Emily Vey Duke: “The fundamental philosophical question I find myself asking is: Is art totally valueless? Totally worthless. Especially contemporary art. Is it completely without value, and a completely self-serving project that’s undertaken almost exclusively by middle-class white people? Or. Is it — like all the artists that I have really revered throughout history have felt — the ultimate thing, that should occupy the same space as religion occupied in the past?”

4.5 / “A friend of mine in Montreal likes to use the metaphor of the official opposition,” says Jacob Wren. “That what we’re doing is the official opposition.” And in a minority government the official opposition can have tremendous influence, gradually nudging the debate to one side, slowly shifting the whole frame of reference to favour its own agenda.

“I like that metaphor, because often art’s talked about in religious terms, and I think the romantic philosophical tradition ended with: Art is the ultimate value. But it’s too much pressure,” Wren says. “Moving things very slowly and not very far. If you could do that it would seem enormous.”

Afterwards

5.1 / Imperfection. Terror. Impulse & Pleasure. Contradiction.

Other words were written on other slips of paper which were not selected. These remained for a later conversation.