

All Statements Are Insecure Questions: Eight Words toward a Theatre

by Jacob Zimmer

INTRODUCTION

There are eight words I return to. They are words I heard and haven't been able to stop hearing. For the past three years, while I have been director of Small Wooden Shoe Theatre Co. in Halifax, they have been touchstones. I see them in the work I did with sabotage group before I heard them; I see them in all my plans and hopes for the future. So, eight words toward a theatre ...¹

1. FAITH

Without faith, it is impossible to please. Faith that permits risk, grace, digging deep and true questions.

Faith that the work is important and worth doing and will find the resources it needs. Faith gives us a reason other than money.

1.01

I have faith in Britney Spears dance numbers and Skid Row lip syncs. In a good story and a great rock 'n roll kick. In pratfalls and slow waltzes with dialogue no one can hear. In eating fried chicken from a bucket stage left and funny hats. That a clock radio has the power to redeem theatre, if only for a moment.

1.02

The Mysterious Death of WB, a live-to-air-pirate-radio-detective serial about the death of philosopher Walter Benjamin was performed in a kitchen for a live audience of nine. The three actors, despite being jammed against the wall by music stands, microphones, a soundboard and a Foley door, were somehow able to execute costume changes and fight scenes. I felt a joy and pleasure that is rare for me in theatre (especially at one of my own shows). We were intimate and immense. We had faith in the smallness, the minority of the work, and so became big.

It is time to enjoy and find the freedom and strength of working in a minor art form. Theatre has lost its space in society's consciousness. Instead of fighting to restore a former (and probably fictional) importance, we find ways to embrace this minority, to have faith in ourselves and the work despite all the evidence to the contrary.

2. OBEDIENCE

Faith without obedience is an empty promise.

We give obedience to the space, to the work, to the audience, to history, to ourselves.

This word is problematic. I know that, and like to wrestle with the problem it creates. Investment and commitment have been suggested as alternatives, and while those are included in what I call "obedience," they don't make me squirm as much. They don't demand the existence of something bigger than me.

2.01

At Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts, working in the beautiful, dilapidated, two-portables-knocked-together Black Box theatre – which, days before rehearsal started, had lit itself on fire – I realized that there was no hope of a clean, seamless, Robert Wilsonesque show. I knew that, no matter what I did, the audience would smell the recent fire;

they would see the buckets hanging from the ceiling to catch the eternal drips, hear the raccoons under the stage. I could choose to ignore the space, to push ahead with a vision that no one would see, or I could be obedient to the roughness of the space. So I lit the buckets, I staged scenes around the hole in the wall caused by the fire. We left technical material (ladders and wrenches) around, used them when possible, and always acknowledged they were there.

This changed my work from the beginning. As a young director, producing my own shows with no money, engaging with the space and using its faults and strengths has become essential. When I don't have the money for a "real" theatre (let alone a "real" set), the location becomes the set.

This initial understanding has now moved beyond the necessity that invented it (though I am still a young director producing my own shows with no money). For design, for dramaturgy, for performance, it has become a way of looking at theatre. The obedience has become an ethic.

2.02

The *Knee Jerks*² were necessary. Needed. I needed them in a time when I could no longer submerge politics below layers of form and distance. And finally, in III and IV, I needed to stand in front of an audience and speak clearly about my politics. I was clear about the ego involved, which is the same ego involved in every work before an audience. That ego is also what we call "artistic responsibility." To think that I have responsibility is both ego and obedience.

3. GENEROSITY

We give of ourselves. We give spirit, thought, sweat, blood, time, space and (lastly) material.

We are generous with our faith and obedience. We have faith that "whatever resources there are, as long as they are shared, are sufficient" (Ehn).

3.01

I wanted to include a thank you list to everyone I have ever worked with, who inspired me, whose words I used, who supported my work, who read drafts of this article; all those who have shown generosity and faith towards me. But I grew so paranoid I would leave someone out or misspell a name that I decided to cut it. Please know that I am grateful and owe you everything and I apologize for not keeping in touch. I hope you are well.

3.02

How do we, despite the overwhelming time commitment and struggles, look beyond the needs of our own theatres and find ways to respond to the needs of others? It is easy to become self-involved and to forget even our most immediate communities. Generosity starts with the ability to stop, see and listen to others. This is also the beginnings of theatre.

4. RIGOUR

To be obedient to faith requires rigour. To be rigorous requires faith and obedience. Rigour keeps laziness and impatience at bay. It is impossible for the individual to be constantly rigorous, so the company works with rigour. We, together, are rigorously mindful.

4.01

Rigour does not mean precious, but preciousness threatens at every turn. What we do may be important but should not be precious. The audience senses preciousness and thinks we are self-important navel gazers. When we can also be loose, allowing space for ownership and

enjoyment for others, we step back from preciousness. I have been guilty of preciousness on more than a few occasions and regret it each time the audience walks in the door.

The balance between rigour and looseness is an ongoing conversation. Rigour prevents looseness from being sloppy; looseness prevents rigour from being precious.

4.02

Working on the second draft of this article, I came to the pain of rigour. It is selective and restricting. I know that to be faithful to my structure there are sections I must cut – things I would like to say but can't fit. Already I've expanded five words to eight to allow for big cheap theatre, and there still isn't space for everything. I am reminded that rigour is difficult and can result in headaches and that it is necessary.

5. RISK

Working with rigour is not always safe – sometimes it's safer to let it slide. Faith and obedience are rarely safe – they are both leaps without assurance of landing. Those who have been betrayed will tell you that generosity is not always safe. Safety is the mantra of the status quo. Risk allows us faith, obedience, generosity, rigour.

Risk is the willingness to follow something to the end. It is when you fear you may fall but continue on faster – to risk embarrassment because we went too far, thought too big. To fail. And, we hope, to fail better next time.

5.01

Other Than War is simultaneously the largest train wreck and the most successful show I have been involved in. Researching and creating *Other Than War* nearly drove us mad, with the disturbing interpersonal identification between the characters of *Uncle Vanya*, the Red Army Faction (German, anti-fascist terrorists), and sabotage group (Canadian art collective). We ended up with an unformed, deadly, three-hour reading; strained relationships, debt, and finally, the end of the company. But we attempted something worth trying. We may have failed in many ways, but that we tried at all makes it the most important show I have been involved with. The success is not the size of the failure (I'm not that masochistic), but the size of the attempt. I am working up the courage to try again.

5.02

There is a moment I look for – the moment when everything is on the border - when the entire production is frail, when the insecurity of the theatre is exposed. To admit and celebrate the frailty of the work is to embrace risk. To be frail on stage is risky for the actor; when the dramaturgy is delicate and exposed, the playwright is at risk; when the staging and tempo might collapse, the director has taken risks. To be frail also asks the audience to risk, since they are needed to hold us up. It is impossible to stand without them, and when we ask them to help, they engage with us differently than when we simply ask them to watch us be strong.

6. BIG

Faith, obedience, generosity, risk and rigour are big concepts. To be big I require faith, obedience, generosity, risk and rigour.

Big is not only a measurement of size or length. I find bigness everywhere - especially in the minutia.

6.01

There are things that we cannot understand. By their nature, we cannot wrap our heads entirely around them. Shakespeare understood this and included bigness in his plays – it is why they last so well; we are compelled to keep digging.

This is why simple transposition is never sufficient. Transposition implies everything in the script can be moved without loss. Shakespeare’s plays create a world, complete with mysteries and metaphysics.

6.02

From the fourteen-year-old who loved football and *Phantom of the Opera* to the twenty-year-old who disavowed both and turned to postmodern theory and Robert Wilson, I have been attracted to big things – things that could take the breath away with epic scale.

History does that for me. It is too big – there is no way to comprehend it all, no hope of getting it right. It is impossible as theatre and therefore a fruitful subject.

7. CHEAP

Cheap insists on faith. It does not mean stingy. Cheapness demands generosity from all sides. Cheapness requires phenomenal rigour. It is easy to spend money and difficult to find alternatives.

Because we don’t risk money, we are able to risk what matters. Cheapness includes a different relationship to the audience and box office. Cheap is an ethic not a bank balance. It allows us to be fluid, to change locations and styles, to be nomadic.

7.01

As a technician, I repeat the mantra: Good Fast Cheap, pick two. Cheap requires time – endless phone calls and emails; it requires humility; it can be difficult to ask for what we need. This rigour creates a new field of imagination. And like other imaginations, the more we use it the sharper it gets.

7.02

In Argentina with the Rat Conference,³ I saw the Poor Theatre – theatre groups from around the world performing with almost nothing of what we “require” for a production. These shows were cheap in many ways – lighting, props, costumes were minimal; the seats, uncomfortable; aesthetics, born out of bodies on stage. They were also among the richest performances I have ever witnessed. The abundance of imagination, faith, rigour was overwhelming.

We mouth platitudes to the effect that theatre can be two people in a room but cancel our shows because the money didn’t come through for the video projections. It was good to be reminded.

8. THEATRE

A conversation not a building. Theatre is what happens between people sharing space for a time. The theatre I work towards is big with faith, rigorous with obedience, cheap to enable risk, and generous with our community.

8.01

The theatre is no longer the site for the creation of seamless, whole universes. I see no shame in leaving those priorities to the cinema.

We are in a room together. It has walls and a floor and a ceiling. There are lights, speakers, rough edges. There are people in the room who speak. What excites me is the ability to smell

each other, to hear the lights and see the speakers, to reach out and touch an actor on stage (though I never have, the possibility sends my heart racing.)

I want that reality – I want the audience to feel that reality. I don't want to hide the edges.

This can lead to deadly theatre (any methodology taken to dogma). It must be done with care and dynamic range. It does not preclude illusion and wonder. I try to have at least one moment of “technical brilliance” in each show – “How did they do that?”

8.02

The *Knee Jerks* were written and pieced together in the moments before and during rehearsal, rehearsed in the moments before and during performance.

The process was necessary and potentially deadly. Necessary, because theatre needs to respond quickly. It is possible to make a play in less time than it takes to perform it. This is a vital ability. But deadly, because the world seems to run on knee jerks. To enter that mental space seems wrong. Theatre must also be complex and deep. Reveal the layers and dig for better questions.

Should theatre respond quickly, or take the time to consider? Both. How then do we reconcile deep questioning with the need to act in the moment? The ideal might be a standing community of collaborators who work on projects together for months or years and also, if needed, create a play in twenty minutes to be performed that night. The rigour of the long projects would inform the knee jerks, and the energy of knee jerks would inform the deep questions.

9. AFTER WORDS

I fail these words everyday. I keep trying.

NOTES

1 These words come to me by way of playwright Erik Ehn (faith, obedience, generosity); musician, writer and collaborator Justin Evans (risk, rigour); and the Rat Conference, <http://www.ratconference.com> (big, cheap, theatre).

2 *The Delayed Knee Jerk Reaction Series I-IV* (November 2001–March 2002) were produced as a response to September 11 and the war in Afghanistan. Performed as readings in a bar and a gallery, they were made by combining new material and scenes from “classic” anti-war plays. The first two were performed by six actors; the final two as solo pieces for myself.

3 The Rat Conference is an affiliation of theatres exploring alternative ways to collaborate, produce work and share resources. It was inspired by a 1992 article by Erik Ehn in the journal *Theatre*. The Rat Conference comprises an e-mail list, a Web site (<http://www.ratconference.com>), annual large meets and frequent conversations. In December 2003, the ninth annual Rat Meet took place, as part of the Experimenta 6 Festival in Rosario, Argentina.