



JORDAN TANNAHILL

**THEATRE  
OF THE  
UNIMPRESSED**

IN SEARCH OF VITAL DRAMA

## Prologue

### A Cough in the Dark

Amy and I have endured a lot together: puberty, breakups, the death of parents, Burning Man. Throughout our decade of friendship we've each moved through several boyfriends, minimum-wage jobs and dive apartments, though she always a few more than me. Like her spirit animal Janis Joplin, she's a woman of hard living and restless nomadism, a life that's endowed her with the lowest threshold for bullshit of anyone I know. Last summer Amy called me and said, 'I have to see a play. Wanna come?' She said it was a friend's show – a 'remixed' Shakespearian comedy in a local pub – and she needed a wingman to help get her through it. I told her it sounded like she was going in for a root canal. She confessed: 'I generally see theatre out of obligation.'

At intermission Amy turned to me and apologized. I nodded toward the door, and she scrunched up her mouth; she was torn. 'Just tell her you got a migraine,' I offered. Life is short. We downed our drinks and made a beeline for the exit. As we waited for the streetcar, watching would-be patron after would-be patron walk up to the pub, realize there was a play happening and turn on their heels, Amy mused, 'I *expected* to hate it. Didn't you? It's like we're resigned to being unimpressed.' She let the thought linger in the humid summer evening around us as she lit a cigarette. 'I mean, Christ, in medieval courts the jester would be dismembered if they were boring.'

'Dismembered?'

'Beheaded.' She exhaled smoke through her nose. 'I guess the stakes are high if you're worried your head will end up on one.'

She told me that only the jester possessed the power to ridicule the king. The criticism he lobbed, cloaked in satire,

could undermine a king's authority while provoking laughter and breathless apprehension. 'If he was good enough, the jester could incite revolt, toppling the king while he was laughing.'

As Amy spoke, I imagined the medieval court as a microcosm of any civic state, and the jester – the artist, in other words – its socio-political release valve. If the jester does not offer challenging and brave revelations about the king, his comedy has no potency, and the king will grow bored and mutter, 'Off with his head.' And this was the crux of the problem with the terrible play we had just endured: it was too unaware or afraid to be challenging, too eager to please, too afraid to take risks that might scare off or provoke its audience. We grew bored until we drew our fingers slowly across our throats.

As a cultured urbanite in her late twenties, Amy has colleagues and friends who make theatre. In a couple of instances she's even found herself briefly dating men who made theatre. But for the most part she manages to successfully avoid it. Other engagements always have a way of conveniently supplanting plays in her calendar. She will politely ignore Facebook invitations, and only when she is really pressed, out of inescapable social duty, will she relent. Playwright Anthony Neilson might have been speaking directly about Amy in his 2007 *Guardian* article headlined 'Don't Be Boring': 'The most depressing response I encounter when I'm chatting someone up and I ask them if they ever go to the theatre is this: "I should go but I don't." That emphatic "should" tells you all you need to know. Imagine it in other contexts: "I should play *Grand Theft Auto*"; "I should watch *Strictly Come Dancing*." That "should" tells you that people see theatregoing not as entertainment but as self-improvement ...'

Was this sense of theatrical obligation widely held? And if so, what elements were making an invitation to the theatre

feel more like a trip to the dentist and less like scoring Beyoncé tickets? These were not idle questions for me. I'm a playwright, theatre director and, with my ex-boyfriend, William Ellis, I run Videofag in Toronto's scrappy, bohemian Kensington Market neighbourhood. In October 2012, Will and I spent a month of late nights sweeping two decades of hair out of every crevice of an old barbershop, removing the mirrors, swivel chairs and faded photographs of pompadoured eighties hair models, slowly converting the space into a small storefront theatre. Turn a corner at the far end of the performance space and you walk into a cozy room with a seventies avocado-coloured dining table, a dozen paint-by-number thrift-store artworks hung salon-style, a sink of dirty dishes and a rickety bookshelf stacked with queer theory and Canadian poetry. This is our kitchen.

The view from the kitchen window is a cinderblock wall, which lends the room a perpetual nighttime feel. Even our breakfasts are eaten by candlelight. We have about five minutes of hot water every morning, which means shared showers. Will and I have perfected the groggy synchronicity of simultaneous bathing – he wets his hair, I wet mine as he shampoos his, I shampoo my hair as he rinses his, etc. – a slippery, naked tango we've continued even after breaking up. The odd cockroach makes a cameo in our cutlery drawer and the bassy thumps and off-key wails of the K-Pop karaoke bar next door rattle our walls until three in the morning every night.

While a bit squalid, Videofag is our home. And it's become the home of a vibrant community of mostly Toronto artists operating on the margins. It's not unusual for Will and I to emerge from the shower in towels to find a cluster of actors making tea for their rehearsal, or doing a wig-fitting in our bedroom, or running lines on our couch. Our kitchen routinely becomes a green room, our bathroom doubles as a paint-and-props workshop and our backyard is a graveyard of discarded

set pieces. Some nights, artists even sleep in the gallery – one on the couch perhaps, and a couple in the spare bedroom – all in a space about the size of a suburban two-door garage.

All this is to say that I spend most of my life immersed in theatre. Which is why Amy's feelings of obligation unnerved me. In that casually tossed-off comment, had she hit upon some unsayable truth I too had felt but not yet allowed myself to admit? Had I too begun to see theatre out of a sense of duty? Theatre seems to be doing its best. There are a lot of nice plays. Well-plotted, well-acted, well-designed, well-intentioned, well-received – and I'm bored by almost all of it. I'm even bored by instances of these things within my own work. Had I become disenchanted with the form I had fallen so madly in love with as a pubescent, pimple-faced suburban homo with braces? Maybe theatre was like an all-consuming high school infatuation that now, ten years later, I saw as the closeted balding guy with a beer gut he'd become. Or like the long-term romance whose incendiary early days had cooled into amicable cohabitation – a functional companionship sporadically punctuated by passion, perhaps on New Year's Eve or an anniversary.

And what was worse, I had begun to feel as if I were operating within a larger theatrical culture of the unimpressed. In the post-show chatter in theatre lobbies and parking lots or by the bike racks where you'll find the artists fumbling with their locks, I heard the sounds of theatregoers frustrated, even defeated, by an art form's efforts to assert its relevance and vitality in the twenty-first century: 'Yeah, it was okay.' 'Well, I thought she was strong in it ...' 'Wasn't bad.' 'It could've been twenty minutes shorter.' 'It was good, but it didn't move me.'

This frightened me. At twenty-six, I felt too young to be disillusioned about this thing I had dedicated my life to. There were, of course, those rare moments of transcendence that kept me coming back. But why were they so few and far

between? The fear of my own cynicism is what drove me to seek answers to the two main questions of this book: What factors were contributing to this Theatre of the Unimpressed, and what consistent trends could I identify in the theatre that I did find vital?

I wanted to take the pulse of contemporary English-language theatre, from the commercial and mainstream to the experimental, from the regional playhouses to the underground DIY spaces. I wanted to determine what was contributing to this malaise and what could be done, or was already being done, to rectify it. So I spent a year asking a hundred individuals spread across five countries, a mixture of regular and infrequent patrons as well as people who undeniably loathed the theatre, why they did or did not attend. And if they did, what was it about theatre that moved them? Among the people I spoke with were several theatre artists, some obscure like myself and some major international heavy-hitters.

My informal poll was far from a controlled, scientific case study, but it was a good starting point for the central inquiries of this book. And while it's impossible to draw any definitive and objective conclusions from such anecdotal evidence, I was left with the distinct sense of a divided contemporary theatrical culture, half of which reinforces my assumptions about the form and another half that upsets them. There's a prevailing, predictable theatre that's risk averse and wary of failure, and there's a dark-horse theatre that's predicated on risk and failure as preconditions of a transformative live event. And it is the latter of these two theatres that will keep the art form vital in the twenty-first century, in a mediated age where the merits of liveness will be questioned as never before.

Eight performers wearing cheap red cloaks and yellow cardboard crowns sit in a row of eight wooden chairs along the edge of the stage. Plainly visible beneath their cloaks are the

performers' everyday street clothes. Footlights illuminate their faces, recalling both vaudeville and the flashlight held below one's chin while telling a ghost story. In the upstage darkness a table holds a pitcher of water, bottles of beer and snacks – the kind of table one might set out at a party.

A king begins to tell a story. He recounts it as if to a friend over a pint, casually and without affect: 'Once upon a time, a lonely night watchman noticed a pixellated spot in the footage from a security camera installed in a corridor. The footage was otherwise clear except for this one little spot of pixellation. Intrigued by this anomaly, the night watchman went to investigate, only to discover that the pixellation existed in the fabric of reality itself –'

'Stop,' says one of the queens, who revises the story: 'Once upon a time, a lonely night watchman watched the footage from a security camera installed in a corridor and saw his mother ...' She continues the story until another queen stops her and begins telling a story about a sex-crazed plumber. Then, another king stops *her* and returns to the story of the night watchman, until he too is interrupted, this time by a king telling a story about a talking dog. Over the course of the night, during these stories, a sprawling cast of characters multiplies, as do subplots involving gay soldiers, wizards in forests, murderous children and philosophical robots.

Each story – or is it simply one long, endlessly mutating story? – is dragged up from the memories and imaginations of the eight performers on the spot. Over the course of the six hours we are gathered together, this prismatic narrative seems to contain every story ever told, though none is ever completed. As in life, we are perpetually in the process of experiencing the narrative, grasping but never truly able to apprehend its conclusion. Moving from the extraordinary to the banal, we encounter stories of religious ecstasy, fables, ghost tales, love stories, domestic tragedies and a few raunchy sexcapades.

It is clearly a game, and the audience becomes giddy watching the kings and queens play it, competing with one another to hold our attention, interrupting each other and commandeering the narrative, exaggerating certain details or removing key points altogether. The storytelling is at times wearying, at other times hysterical, obscene, absurd, tender. At times, some of the kings and queens leave their chairs and wander over to the snack table and take a swig of beer, or lie down for a rest in the darkness beyond the chairs, while the others carry on. At one point in the night, perhaps around ten or eleven o'clock, there are only two kings left speaking, and then, twenty minutes later, two queens return, a king leaves, and a half-hour later, without my even noticing it, all eight are back in their chairs. This ebbing and flowing of performers mirrors the ebbing and flowing of the audience in the theatre; we are given permission to come and go as needed, to take a break, grab a bite, empty our bladders. After all, the show is six hours long. And there is no pretence of what 'should' happen in the theatre. I feel total permission to laugh out loud, to groan, to rest my eyes when I'm bored. It feels as if the audience and the performers are truly in this together. We are all, to recall Amy's remark, effectively and simultaneously jester and monarch.

The show is *And on the Thousandth Night...* by the seminal Sheffield, U.K.-based performance company Forced Entertainment, led by multidisciplinary artist Tim Etchells. I caught it during its 2010 run at the Hebbel am Ufer performance centre in Berlin. The company describes its work as exploring what theatre can mean in contemporary life – this exploration is 'always a kind of conversation or negotiation, something that needs to be live.'

*Something that needs to be live.* This feels like the most crucial component of my experience of *And on the Thousandth Night...* This piece could not exist in any other context but as a live performance for an assembled group of people. It was an event,



a one-time experience that could never be recreated in quite the same way again, and one that could not exist without our collective presence feeding into it. It was an event insofar as there was a palpable excitement for the performers and audience alike in simply being there and being together, doing this slightly impossible, insane thing with a group of strangers.

Forced Entertainment crafted a six-hour piece with no set dramatic text, trusting that the audience would be compelled enough to invest in it. And it was the tension between this bold risk and the moments of failure it yielded that made the piece truly electric. In fact, the moments of laughter and pathos almost always corresponded with moments of failure – when a story was cut off or contradicted or dragged on too long. As the performers became more tired, these moments multiplied. At times, we begged for another performer to interrupt a story that was particularly dull, but even when he or she was forced to carry on, the story's implosion produced humour and insight. Every narrative, in fact, failed to resolve, which always left us wanting more.

It was really the *spectre of failure* that gave the piece a dramatic charge. There was an irresistible thrill in watching a performer spin a narrative out of thin air knowing full well how easily that story could go awry. The spectre of failure comes from the knowledge that what is unfolding before us is happening live, and thus alive with the possibility that any moment this production, this event, might fall flat on its face. This face plant could be dull or it could reveal a unique, never-before-seen moment of exquisite beauty. Every moment in life is haunted by a similar spectre. In a theatre, the spectre of failure raises the stakes for onstage action and, consequently, increases the possibility of beauty.

When a piece of theatre doesn't feel quite alive to me, it's often because it lacks this imperative quality. A cookie-cutter touring production of a Broadway hit, for example, in which

the muscle memory of a hundred rote performances is tangible. Nothing is at risk of faltering, nothing unexpected will take the performers or the audience by surprise, and thus nothing feels truly 'live' about the experience.

'One of the best moments of an otherwise uninspiring show was when one of the English language's finest living actresses was beset by a tickle in her throat. A clearing ... No, not enough ... An outright coughing ... Then ... Poised ... A sip ... then another ... of water. An entire audience held rapturously in the failure of this moment to suspend our dulled loyalty to the doldrums of disbelief. What a moment! She coughed! Life! I would pay top dollar to see that again. But not the show that surrounded it. No, not the show.'

This reflection comes from Canadian director Sarah Garton Stanley in her essay 'Failure Theatre: An Artist's Statement.' I'm pretty sure Stanley's delight in this cough was not rooted in some *schadenfreude* (or at least not entirely), but more because she saw in it a small, revealing deviation from the intended course of the play. It was like a bright spotlight illuminating what she and the audience were doing in that darkened theatre, all of us fallible mortals grasping at immortal questions. A simple cough can surprise an audience, shattering the theatrical illusion and, in so doing, allow us to locate ourselves within this empathetic enterprise of performance.

I'm profoundly moved and compelled by our human struggle against failure. I'm more interested in the story of the vanquished than that of the conquerors. In the joke that flops rather than the one that brings the house down. In the character whose journey remains unresolved than the one whose journey ends in clarity. Perhaps all creative failure reminds us of our mortality: of the fact that we all die in the end, and that ultimately none of us, to put it bluntly, gets it right. Whatever the case, the theatre that most moves and excites me takes

risks knowing that it might fail. And sometimes it takes productive risks – it intentionally fails.

By risk I'm referring to bold choices that challenge the status quo, that subvert the expected, that attempt to reveal new layers of meaning, that provoke questions, that disorient and reorient us. They are bold choices that, given their ambition or volatility, might not pan out as expected. As an audience member, if I sense genuine risks are being taken by the creative team, be it a high school production of *Our Town* or a performance at the Avignon Festival, even if the production sucks spectacularly in other ways, I derive value from the experience. In these instances, I never feel my time is being wasted, regardless of the production's ultimate efficacy as a dramatic work.

In an interview with *New Yorker* theatre critic Hilton Als, Brooklyn-based playwright and director Young Jean Lee says, 'I've found that the only way to make theatre that gets the audience thinking is when I feel uncomfortable making it.' When considering what her next play will be, Lee tries to imagine the topic that would most terrify her to write and then pursues it. In *The Shipment*, which premiered at the Kitchen in New York City in 2009, Lee – a Korean-American – tackles contemporary black identity in the U.S. She deftly navigates the perils of cultural appropriation and racial stereotyping to create a profound and revelatory deconstruction of black representation in popular culture and theatre. It's the apparent risk in her confrontations with thorny socio-political subjects (her other pull-no-punches shows include *Straight White Men* and *Untitled Feminist Show*) that's made her, in the words of *New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood, 'hands down the most adventurous downtown playwright of her generation.' As Lee told Eliza Bent in *American Theatre* in 2014: 'One of the things I believe in most is self-critique and self-awareness. So every show is a challenge to myself, even in the way I approach it – even if it's the last thing in the world I

want to do, I'm forced to change. What I am going for with every show is to get in the way of the audience's self-complacency, or to put a little piece of gravel into their brains that irritates them ... Correspondingly, every show I've ever done has forced me to change and become a different kind of person and a different kind of artist.'

Theatre is a place where we collectively go to work things out. Plays create space for us to engage with potentially challenging questions, and the dynamism and unpredictability of doing this with strangers in a room in real time is what gives theatre its potency. It's also what makes it necessary for us, as audiences, to embrace failure from time to time as a natural by-product of this process. Failure suggests a living engagement, not something in which everything has been figured out in advance. The theatre is human and fallible and requires an audience that can be trusted with these vulnerabilities. It's an artist's responsibility to acknowledge his or her failures and learn from them. Fail in more exciting ways. Fail in more challenging and informed ways. As Samuel Beckett perfectly and famously put it: 'Fail better.' Or, as the bold, bedazzling, gender-fucking New York theatre maverick Taylor Mac put it in his manifesto 'I Believe': 'I believe authentic failure on stage is one of the great art forms. I believe I sometimes fail at my job and I sometimes succeed and that humanity exists in both. I believe if I want my audiences to experience the range of their humanity, and I do, then I must reflect back at them, authentic success and authentic failure.'

Theatre is, of course, part of – and indeed inseparable from – a larger culture and society, one that is often intensely risk averse, resistant to new or unusual expressions of activism and aesthetics. But if theatre is a reflection of the world we live in, it's also a reflection of the world we *hope* to live in. It's a space of potential and possibility. In fact, the entire institution of theatre exists in order to take risks that one simply cannot

take outside of it. Which is why it's so troubling to see theatre become more like the culture that surrounds it and not the other way around. Much of English-language theatre throughout the world – and especially in the country where I live and work – is burdened by an aversion to risk. This profoundly informs the ways in which we create, program, fund, teach, watch and talk about theatre. It has led us to build a tentative theatre that serves to buttress the status quo. It's a climate where the stable, tried-and-true tradition of the 'Well-Made Play' dominates, and work that deviates from that formula is derided or dismissed.

But only by understanding what theatre truly does best, by emphasizing, promoting and celebrating the very fact of its liveness – the full, messy experience of human connection – can theatre reclaim its relevance and vitality in our mediated age. This book looks at the factors that have contributed to the calcified state of many aspects of contemporary English-language theatre and suggests that an embrace of risk and failure, at an institutional and individual artistic level, is instrumental in cultivating a vital performance culture.