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The Art of Impact: Reflections from Five Canadian Artists

By Marcus Youssef, Hannah Moscovitch, Antoni Cimolino, Cris Derksen and Mélanie Demers

This is the third article in our series about arts and culture philanthropy. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and The Metcalf Foundation.

In this article, five highly-regarded artists from across the country and from a diverse range of disciplines reflect on the value they bring to their communities. The authors share — theoretically and anecdotally — how they use their artistic vision to address the needs of today’s audiences.

Marcus Youssef is a playwright and actor, artistic director of Newworld Theatre, and recipient of the 2017 Siminovitch Prize for Theatre.

Sometimes it’s hard to imagine that theatre and live performance can have any real, measurable impact. We live in a society obsessed with “disruption,” speed, and digital technology. However, in these times when people are also feeling increasingly alone and isolated, live theatre is where I sometimes — blissfully — experience a sense of authentic connection. Maybe even communion.

When this occurs, I think it is because of theatre’s fundamental liveness. It is an irrefutable fact that a performance event’s audience is, if fully engaged, keenly aware of every performer’s move and breath with a deep sense of what *is actually going on*.

To offer an audience an experience that can foster this level of engagement, I believe live performance must encompass some kind of risk. This can be the risk of attempting to invent a new form that isn’t a traditional narrative “play;” the risk of collaborating with artists who have intellectual disabilities and whose presence in our culture has been largely erased; or the risk in investigating political content that challenges our tendency or need to portray ourselves as inherently moral or good.

Winners and Losers is a performance I created with writer and theatre-maker James Long. It is about competition, capitalism, and personal relationships. In it, we are ourselves and play a game in which we name people, places, or things and debate whether they are “winners” or “losers.” It starts out funny but then turns highly personal. Towards the end of the show we assess each other according to this

reductionist, zero-sum metric. We performed the show for five years, touring 15 cities in 10 countries. The reception was almost universally rapturous and also complex. Audiences and critics were at first entertained, then often enthralled and horrified to witness something normally hidden and masked — our collective complicity in dominance and exploitation — so nakedly exposed in a raw, personal way.

Another project is a writing collaboration with my friend Niall McNeil. Niall's life includes Down syndrome. He identifies as a writer yet writes at the level of someone in Grade 1. We have devised a conversational, transcript-based method for writing together that allows me to define structure and edit material without changing his words. *King Arthur's Night* has been performed at some of the largest performing arts venues and festivals, from the National Arts Centre to the Hong Kong Arts Festival. But the greatest impact I have noticed is when we do relaxed performances and the audience includes many people with intellectual disabilities and their families. People have approached me after and said, "Now I know this is possible for my son," or "I would really like to be in this kind of play."

At its best, theatre is a risky, often experimental attempt to change both how we tell stories and who gets to tell them. It is a real, not virtual, space where performers and audiences can choose to risk being fully present and celebrate the unmediated, non-idealized versions of ourselves in all our complexity, *together*. Theatre offers us communal pleasure in the unfiltered, corporeal presence of our own fallibility, absurdity, and joyful, tragic, unknowable humanity.

This is the impact I aspire to.

Hannah Moscovitch is an acclaimed playwright and TV writer whose works for the stage include *Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story*, *East of Berlin*, *This is War*, and *Bunny*.

I might have more impact if I wrote a TV show about zombies.

Not all artists pay attention to impact, but I do. I sit in the audience during previews and make sure the piece is having one. But sometimes the impact I want to have — for the audience to feel a lot of emotions, for example — is not necessarily the impact the audience wants to undergo. Sometimes audiences don't want to be traumatized, or painfully enlightened, or sickened. Audience members have fainted during my work, for instance, and that's a big impact to have on an audience member, but maybe not a very fun one.

Human behaviour is complex, sometimes indecipherable, and that is what I like to show onstage. At times, my audiences have wanted a simple story with jokes in it and I have told them a difficult, dense one.

In the last few years I've started to speak very specifically to women, because I wanted to do that (it feels original and meaningful), and because it seems like women want to hear about themselves. Women *want* me to tell them difficult stories, subvert the norm. Women are in the middle of a revolution. So right now, I feel very good about the meeting of my artistic vision with the audience (or my impact) because I can make the art I like at the same time that I can offer the audience what it wants.

I co-created a piece called *Secret Life of a Mother* a year ago. It's a confessional work for the stage in which Maev Beaty (a performer and a friend of mine) plays the character "Hannah Moscovitch." The

piece is about my miscarriage, labour, and the early days of my motherhood, and about whether I am a good or bad mother. This work is my most formally experimental, most subversive, and most taboo-breaking. Its conceit is bizarre: Maev plays me, but because she is a dear friend, I talk about Maev during the show, which forces Maev to talk about herself — sometimes she breaks out of the character of “Hannah” to tell her own secrets. But experimenting with form aside, I’m pretty sure the show is having an impact because it speaks the truth — complex, ugly, frightening — at a time when women want that.

The impact of *Secret Life of a Mother* has been the most quantifiable of my work to date. (Because how do you define impact? Critical response? Audience enthusiasm? Revenue?) Women have written me letters and left them at the box office, emailed me, found me on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. There was an avalanche-like response. Women wanted to tell me about their worst experiences, because I had told them mine.

It was the best feeling.

All I’m really saying is to have an impact, find the right audience.

Antoni Cimolino is artistic director of the Stratford Festival. In 2019 he is directing The Merry Wives of Windsor and Birds of a Kind. Among his many accomplishments he was instrumental in establishing the Festival’s \$81 million Endowment Foundation.

Whenever I think about what theatre is for, I always look back to ancient Greece. Greek theatre was more than just entertainment; it was a forum for engaging with matters of public concern. I believe a classical theatre today should, likewise, be a place where we scrutinize who we are and what we do.

I plan each Stratford Festival season around a theme, asking myself which plays seem particularly pertinent to our own moment. (That changes with the times: a play that meant one thing to us 20 years ago, or even five years ago, may mean something new today.) And each year we complement the playbill with our Forum — a season-long series of talks, discussions, and other events that explore issues and ideas arising from the productions on our stages.

In 2018, we explored “free will.” How far can we truly be free — politically, emotionally, spiritually — and how do the freedoms we crave impinge on those of others? In Robert Lepage’s production of *Coriolanus*, modern dress and a uniquely cinematic staging drew parallels between ancient Rome and our own digital era. We used different kinds of cross-gender casting in *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar* to reveal Shakespeare’s critiques of patriarchal warrior societies, and in *The Comedy of Errors* to incorporate gender fluidity into the world of a play deeply concerned with issues of identity.

I programmed and directed Eduardo De Filippo’s 1940s classic *Napoli Milionaria!* to draw attention to moral and ethical dilemmas that are just as pressing today, while director Nigel Shawn Williams reframed *To Kill a Mockingbird* to give it a more biting edge in the age of Black Lives Matter. In a lighter vein, we had fun contrasting sexual liberty with inhibition in *The Rocky Horror Show*, while the brilliant new play *Paradise Lost* posed profound questions about freedom and fate in a literally cosmic context.

In all our 2018 productions, we sought not only to entertain but also to illuminate, to provoke, to galvanize thinking about the choices we make and the attitudes we hold. Ticket sales — which in 2018 surpassed the half-million mark, a 10% increase over the previous year — indicate that this is increasingly what patrons want. Audience demand prompted us to extend five productions, among them *The Comedy of Errors* (a particular hit with young people) and *Rocky Horror*, which ran into December — unprecedented in our history. Not only was *The Tempest* another of the season's revenue leaders, but many patrons told me they could no longer imagine Prospero *not* being female.

By distilling complex and often contradictory truths from the diverse experiences of our fellow humans, theatre can be as vital to our democracy as it was to that of the ancient Greeks. Unlike the echo chambers and keyboard warriors of social media, its emotional immediacy offers us visceral experiences of other points of view, encouraging empathy in times of widespread extremism and intolerance. The experience of our past season only encourages me to keep pushing the envelopes of possibility in 2019 — a season whose theme, appropriately enough, is “breaking boundaries.”

Cris Derksen is a half-Cree, half-Mennonite cellist and composer who pays rent in Toronto, tours the globe, writes music for all genres of art, and is the proud mother of three guinea pigs with her wife Rebecca Benson.

I see impact in art as a pebble hitting water and the ripple effect it creates. This ripple is held by time and space. Its effects are varied — sometimes welcomed, sometimes ignored. But do I make art because of how it affects others or how it affects myself? The answer is both.

I am very conscious of my positionality in my work. I am a Two-Spirit, half-Cree, half-Mennonite, classically trained cellist and composer from northern Alberta based in Toronto. These dichotomies influence all choices I make in art — being true to my perspectives of “tradition” while living in the now. I have always been interested in the intersections of the contemporary and the traditional art forms. Music, visual arts, fashion, writing, and theatre all move forward through these intersections to try to explain the human condition in new ways by pushing the old in new directions.

I used to see this from a two-dimensional intersectional vantage point, but I now see how my perspectives can be translated through my work to give my audience a magnified look at themselves through my perspective. As I write commissioned work for non-Indigenous ensembles with a non-Indigenous audience in mind, I have been able to shift my own perspectives to the audience to give undercurrents of meaning that would not be present if a non-Indigenous person were writing it.

Most recently I've been writing music that includes National Film Board and CBC archival recordings from the 1940s of white people talking about Indigenous people. There is no denying the power structures that were and are present and the mis-information about, among many things, the existence and/or impacts of residential schools, Indian Hospitals, and the disappearance of more than 3000 missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people that continues to this day.

Using older classical tools with powwow groups is one way I can express the intersections between old and new. My third studio album, *The Orchestral Powwow Project*, received a Juno nomination in the Instrumental Album of the Year category. It brings together all parts of who I am. What excites me

most about *Orchestral Powwow* is placing our Indigenous music in the centre of the European model and having Indigenous artists lead the way with our drums and our heartbeat to create new forms of music.

Now, how do I know the audience has been impacted? I know because I've dropped a pebble of "Indigenous classical music" into the water that did not have my perspective before. I write music for myself and to help shift other people's perspectives of indigeneity.

Mélanie Demers' work crosses the disciplines of dance, theatre, literature, and visual arts. Through her company MAYDAY she combines political issues with poetic imagery. Her work crosses borders and is being presented internationally.

Note: English translation follows below.

Comme artiste, se poser la question de notre impact sur le public relève un peu de la même absurdité que pour un mourant se demander s'il y aura foule à ses funérailles. Il y a quelque chose de complètement indécent dans cette façon de regarder l'art comme s'il y avait un quelconque retour possible, un résultat, une réciprocité, un échange de bon procédé.

La beauté de l'art réside dans sa quête et non dans son achèvement. L'art est un coup d'épée dans l'eau. Un point c'est tout.

L'artiste est celui qui décrira le mieux le poids de l'arme, le trouble de l'eau, le scintillement de la lame, le sel des larmes, la cruauté du moment, la fatigue du muscle, l'odeur de l'humus et l'incessant recommencement.

Il n'y a rien d'autre.

Pourtant, combien de fois ai-je eu l'impression d'avoir été sauvée, comprise, éprise par un agencement de mots, de notes ou de couleurs, une chute, une lumière, une atmosphère.

Nous, artistes, devant la brutalité du monde, nous répliquons avec force procédés, combines et stratagèmes, espérant l'esbroufe, faisant subir au spectateur ruses et manipulations, tirant les fils et les ficelles... Pour que quelqu'un, quelque part, soit ému... Mais rien ne le garantit. Jamais.

Parce que depuis que le monde est monde et que le Sapiens est savant, il y a un souffle qui soulève nos carcasses, qui meut nos corps et qui anime notre race. Et c'est de ce souffle que se nourrit le mystère.

Le mystère qui permet parfois cet apaisement, cette consolation, cette demi-tranquillité pour les phases terminales, pour les sur-le-point-de-se-suicider, pour les presque vivants, pour les revenus de guerre, pour les revenus de tout, pour les revenus de loin, pour les jamais partis, pour les ressuscités et pour les poqués de la vie. Mais c'est si rare.

Au final, moi, je n'attends de rien de l'art. Vous devriez en faire autant.

L'art est bien des choses mais rien qui ne répond à un besoin.

L'art est un polaroid. Un arrêt sur image. Une brèche. Un échantillon de la grande sauvagerie du monde. L'art est un faux traité de bonnes manières. L'art est un élixir qui rend fou. L'art est un tunnel sans fin. Un puits sans fond. Un baume à lèvres qui goûte la cerise. Une carte routière. Un labyrinthe. Une cicatrice. Un pawnshop pour les riches. Une niche. Une bécosse. Un playboy sous le matelas. L'art est une utopie. Un suppositoire dans le cul. Une peine d'amour. Une panne d'essence en plein désert. Un dessert. Une recette de grand-mère. Une couche souillée. Un langage inventé. Une salle d'attente. L'art est un one night stand qui dure. L'art est une menace. Une insulte. Une trahison. L'art est une exception. L'art est un effritement. Un effondrement. Une guerre de tranchées. Un drapeau blanc. Un mariage arrangé. Une messe païenne. Un dessin d'enfant.

L'art est un acte de foi. Souvent un acte manqué. Mais toujours un acte d'amour.

C'est toujours ça de pris.

*The following translation of Mélanie Demers' statement is by **Marie Claire Forté** — a Montréal-based artist driven by the relational, experiential, and experimental potential of dance.*

An artist wondering what impact their work will have on audiences is perhaps as absurd as a dying person wondering if their funeral will draw a crowd. When considering art, it is absolutely indecent to look for any possibility of return, result, reciprocity, quid pro quo.

Art's beauty lays in the quest, not the completion. Art is using a sword to stab water. Period.

The artist is the one who best describes the weight of the sword, the troubled water, the glistening blade, the salty tears, the cruelty of the moment, the tired muscles, the smell of the soil on the shore and the unending return to begin again.

There is nothing else.

Yet how many times have I felt saved, understood, or been dumbstruck by an assembly of words, notes or colours, a fall, a light, an ambiance.

To the world's brutality, we artists answer with processes, combinations and stratagems, hoping for bombast, subjecting the audience to our cunning and manipulations and pulling strings in the hopes that somebody somewhere will be moved. But there is no guarantee. Ever.

Because the world is as it is, and Homo sapiens have knowledge, there is a breath that enlivens our carcasses, moves our bodies, and animates our race. This same breath feeds the mystery.

The mystery sometimes appeases, consoles and offers some kind of rest to the terminally ill, those on the cusp of suicide, the nearly living, those returning from war, returning from far, returning from everything, those who never left, those brought back to life and those damaged for life. But this is so rare.

In the end, I do not expect anything from art. You should not either.

Art is many things, but nothing that answers a need.

Art is a polaroid. A freeze frame. A breach. A sample of the world's great wildness. Art is a false treaty of good manners. Art is an elixir that makes you lose your mind. Art is an endless tunnel. A bottomless well. A cherry-flavoured lip balm. A road map. A labyrinth. A scar. A pawnshop for the wealthy. A niche. An outhouse. A *Playboy* magazine under a mattress. Art is a utopia. A suppository. A heartbreak. An empty tank in the middle of the desert. A dessert. A grandmother's recipe. A dirty diaper. An invented language. A waiting room. Art is a lasting one-night stand. Art is a threat. An insult. A betrayal. Art is an exception. Art is an unravelling. A collapsing. A war in the trenches. A white flag. An arranged marriage. A pagan mass. A child's drawing.

Art is an act of faith. Often a failed attempt. And always an act of love.

There's always that.