

TheatreBOOKS

Spotlight On...

Darren O'Donnell and 'pppeeeaaaccceee'



Darren O'Donnell is a Toronto playwright who is as thoughtful and provocative in conversation as the theatre he produces. Here, TheatreBooks gets some insight into one of his latest works, **pppeeeaaaccceee**, a spiritual and political rumination in O'Donnell's signature style, as well as what he thinks about theatre, politics and life.

NS: Simply put, how would you define **pppeeeaaaccceee**?

DO: One of the objectives with the show was create a work that defied description, something that people would try to describe but, in the end, have to give up and tell their friends that they would just have to see it themselves. So it's a little hard to describe. It's an allegory of sorts but one in which the specifics leave a lot of space for the audience to project their own interpretation. I think of it as interactive theatre, in that the conflict occurs not between the characters, but between the audience and the material as they try to negotiate the very strange world. I also think of it as a bit of stand-up comedy for the 22nd century where three comedians work together to create a gentle flow of jokes and information about the world they live in. I also think of it as a dance piece for words and concepts. I also think of it as a piece of magic, a meditation that can carry the audience along, trance them out, and hopefully, leave them transformed.

NS: How long have you been working on it?

DO: Since the fall of 1999 when I wrote a half hour prototype for the Rhubarb! Festival. When we did it, playwrights RM Vaughn and Judith Thompson were both especially encouraging, which convinced me that a full-length version was feasible. We've done two two-week workshops, a one week lighting workshop, a four week rehearsal in prep for the Six Stages Festival and now two weeks for

Theatre Passe Muraille.

NS: What motivated you to explore this idea of “The Revolution”

DO: When I talk about revolution, what I mean is a relatively sudden redistribution of the world’s resources in a more equitable way. It doesn’t have to involve intense social unrest but, frankly, it’s hard for me to imagine any significant change without it. I’ve recently been reading Michael Albert’s **Paracon**, which sketches a vision for a more equitable situation. He points out the absurdity of assuming that such a stupidly unfair system like capitalism is the best we can do and that we must have the imaginative capacity to envision and implement something else. His is a complicated alternative but he is confident that, with a little effort, average people can understand complex economic arrangements and work together to dismantle such a stupid arrangement. That said, however, the play uses the notion of revolution somewhat loosely meaning also a personal revolution that I think would be necessary before individuals are able to accomplish a wider social revolution. So I’m using the term to refer to a few things but also to refer to something that is, at this point in history, almost impossible to refer to.

NS: How do you feel about the state of theatre in Toronto right now?

DO: I think theatre is in rough shape pretty much anywhere you go. We were in Scotland with **A Suicide-Site Guide to the City** and I went to a few shows that were getting good press and word of mouth and they were just fucking deadly. Theatre has really dropped the ball and, for the most part, not really taken into account advancements in philosophy and aesthetics that have occurred over the last 50 years in most other disciplines. There really isn’t a strong contemporary vision of what theatre can do -- there’s no theatrical equivalent to a kind of pop music that is driven by the artists -- the Indie pop music scene is much stronger and established than the Indie theatre scene. And pop music is often very innovative -- something that is really lacking in most theatre. Part of the problem, I think, is that theatre is impossible to commodify, it really doesn’t circulate very well in the marketplace, so practitioners are isolated and atomized. An art school graduate can make a two minute film and have it screening in Italy or Berlin but a theatre school graduate has to make do with the Fringe Festival, so connections people are making are mostly local -- at best national -- and new ideas are not really moving around the globe like they tend to in the visual art world. One result is that people who want to speak to the world with their art -- writers and directors, mostly -- have left theatre for film and tv with the only people remaining to create work being actors. Actors

are really the only people who still reap some benefits from theatre. Postmodernism and the challenges it presents to character, plot and storytelling just hasn't occurred to most theatre artists in Toronto and elsewhere. Obviously there are exceptions but they're rare and weakly supported.

NS: What made you want/need to write **pppeeeaaaccccee**? Was it a slow realization, or was it something that seemed to make perfect sense to you right from the start?

DO: The inspiration for **pppeeeaaaccccee** was a conversation I had with my friend Julian Diego, in the summer of 1999. We sat on the patio of The Last Temptation in Kensington Market and had a conversation that ranged from speculative spirituality to hard politics. That was the first time I had been able to engage with someone on both those topics at once. **pppeeeaaaccccee** tried to fuse politics and spirituality. But it's important to point out that it does this with some sleight of hand -- it's not enough to represent these ideas in a well-made play -- with characters involved in conflict that the audience would simply observe in a detached manner -- but it had to engage with audience and attempt to actually induce a spiritual experience -- an encounter with the unknown. This aspect of the show has driven the critics bonkers -- they can't handle multiple and indeterminate meanings, or ideas that are kept hovering just out of the grasp of both the audience and, to be honest, myself. But if you're looking for an encounter with Unknowing, you have to embrace that kind of thing. Ultimately, I'm starting to think of the show as a dance piece for language and concepts.

NS: So with **pppeeeaaaccccee**, did you find yourself first inspired by themes and ideas, and less interested in producing a play with a standard structure?

DO: In order to create something based on the conversation I had had with Julian in Kensington Market, I decide to try to create something without plot, conflict or character. It was a formal experiment and proved very challenging. It's really hard to write dialogue without making characters contradict each other. That's why the show sort of sounds a bit like a stand-up comedy routine because the points the characters make aren't in opposition to each other but rather work like punchlines.

Because I don't experience an interesting conversation as an individual but, rather, as someone melding with the ideas of another, I wanted to lose the artificiality of character so I just wrote a triologue but, really, for one voice. Daniel MacIvor joked that he thought one person should get up there and do all

three voices -- which is what he loves to do in his own work. Rather than exploring the virtuosity that that kind of performance requires, I wanted to diffuse a single consciousness amongst a number of performers and create a kind of anti-individual, something that acknowledges that we are who we are AND who we are relating to -- the individual never actually exists.

The desire to dispense with plot is an old one for me -- nothing really actually ever happens in my life, the drama is usually very banal, with most action occurring on the mental plane so it was about a commitment to presenting something that was honest for me.

NS: What sort of response are you hoping to invoke in your audience? What do you want them to walk away with?

DO: Conceiving of the audience as a single entity that will walk away with a few very particular things is difficult. There are some specific people I'm targeting with the show and I'm very well aware that there are some people who will just not be able or interested in going anywhere with us. And that's very intentional on my part -- I want to send out a big challenge in the play's first moment and divide those who will resist that kind of flakiness from those who are willing to try anything and essentially leave the unwilling behind to get grumpy and irritated with the show. From the perspective of the box office, it's probably a stupid-ass strategy but from the perspective of someone trying to call out to like-minded individual and form a bond, it does a great job.

For those who can stick with it, I want them to feel like they've just spend the night hanging out with some really nice people talking about some really interesting things. I would like the show to be the basis for further conversation between people as they discuss the various lines and ideas that resonated with them and as they try to tease whatever sense they can out of the experience. The way the show plays with time is kind of interesting and -- I hope -- will provide the basis for a little reflection. The first section that ends with the characters resurrecting the pre-Revolutionary ritual of applause and triggering their declaration that they are idiots is actually the end of the play.

That's the last thing we learn about these characters -- that's they've essentially reverted into monstrous creatures who are tearing into each other out of fear and hatred. The revolution has failed. The second half begins with a slide that sets the show "during the revolution" and we see the series of realizations and revelations that lead to a more equitable world, with the play closing on a very optimistic note. All this flashes by pretty quickly and I'm hoping that those

who take time to sift through the experience will realize that the story (as opposed to the show) actually ends pessimistically. Hopefully this realization will dawn on the audience after they've left the theatre. I'm doing this because -- as I've mentioned -- it's so hard to imagine a successful shift in the world's economic condition that to posit a optimistic conclusion to the whole thing -- as much as soft hearted liberals like I sometimes am crave this -- is delusional. I know that most people will not reflect long enough on the show to unearth this -- it may well be too obscure and much too much to ask of anybody. But to get back to your question, the overall effect I'm looking for is a little bewilderment and a lot of joy at having seen something charming, thought-provoking and for the audience to have found bits of themselves scattered throughout the show.

I'm also directing the show specifically to my activist friends -- people who have no need of the show's political message -- people whose politics are up to speed and understand where I'm coming from. For these people I hope to offer a little hope and the notion that spirituality of some sort needs to be infused in our work as activists. In some ways I've always thought of the show as a love letter to the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and some other of my activist friends. They, I believe, will be some of the few people capable of receiving the full effect of the show.

But, having said all that, the show is specifically designed to remain a little out of my and the company's own grasp. We don't quite understand everything we're saying -- which, if you're trying to make room for 'the gods', or 'the unknown' to enter, is a risk that has to be taken. So there's an element of the unknown to the show's effect -- I don't know what the effect will be and the show is about learning how to trust something that is beyond the rational.

NS: Despite the fact that your work could be defined as "experimental," there is a really refreshing naturalism to the relationships and characters you create. It produces a real sense of intimacy, and allows the viewer to get more engrossed in the piece. When you made the choice to write in this style, were you commenting on the nature of contemporary theatre?

DO: Yes, like I said, I was trying to get beyond traditional notions of character and conflict and create something that was more like how I experience my life. The conflict I have in my life is rarely the type you might see in a typical show, it's mostly personal, internal -- even when I'm having some squabble with someone. And my experience of myself as a character or a discreet individual is not anything like the traditional idea of character.

I'm constantly walking around having conversations with other people in my head -- I form all my thoughts and views of the world based on my encounters with other people. I, as an individual never actually exist but, paradoxically, I do have to struggle -- like everyone -- to make sure my individuality doesn't get stomped out. Or maybe "autonomy" is a better word -- even though I'm never really autonomous. Anyway, I wanted to explore all this and have the audience experience it rather than show it to them.

NS: The three characters in **pppeeeaaaccccee** -- Greg, Ngozi and Maiko -- are they a reflection of your own beliefs? Do you agree or identify with the majority of the things they are discussing? Are you reflecting on things as you see them?

DO: While I may not agree with all the stuff they say I certainly do experience many of the ridiculous contradictory things they talk about. For example, there's a section where they talk about how whenever they're happy they become sad as they realize soon the happiness will fade and they'll be depressed again and when they're depressed they're happy to know that soon they'll be happy. I don't agree that that point of view is a very enlightened or intelligent one but I certainly live those kinds of stupid contradictions and paradoxes on a daily basis.

NS: Has working on **pppeeeaaaccccee** changed you?

DO: A lot of the problems that **pppeeeaaaccccee** posed in terms of trying to work without traditional forms of character/plot/conflict were resolved in **A Suicide-Site Guide to the City** which, in some ways, is a better play while lacking a bit in the really fantastic imaginative department. It's really hard to say whether it's changed me. The experience of producing such an elusive piece and being pretty much killed in the press has had some effect but who knows how that will play out. The biggest shock and education has been a result of sincerely creating something that I intended to be generous, rigorous, thoughtful and have people respond with such thoughtless vitriol. I didn't expect them to go all the way but was surprised at how incapable they were. Things were very different in the early 90s -- people like HJ Kirchoff, and Mira Friedlander were open to all kinds of weirdness and worked hard to appreciate them and meet them with respect. For some reason that's just not the way things are right now. Sometimes it makes me very sad, but I know those critics won't be around forever and that people who are in their twenties right now are very open to really diverse aesthetics. When university students see the show they respond with such intelligence and curiosity -- I hope they get jobs at the

newspapers really soon.

NS: Has directing the play affected how you view it?

DO: I don't really view the role of writer and director as separate. I consider all the different elements to be part of a whole: the text, the light, the sound, the actors, the acting -- they all contribute so ultimately I don't think of myself as a playwright but more as a theatre creator who brings elements together. Directing is just the phase that follows the writing (and lots of rewriting happens while directing when things reveal themselves to be less than adequate when they encounter an actor and are staged).

It's also important to note that the audience is also a part of the mix and when they're added to the mix they bring a whole new dynamic that needs to be addressed, with parts of the show needing to be adjusted accordingly. When we did **A Suicide-Site Guide to the City** in Edinburgh we had to make a bunch of adjustments because some of the stuff that worked in Canada just wasn't happening in the UK. So how I view the play is always changing based on context and attending to it as a director doesn't necessarily "change" how I view it but, instead, provide more information about what works and what doesn't, and my view of the play evolves accordingly.

NS: You have stated that you think theatre should comment on current politics -- in your opinion, what other elements are important to explore?

DO: The thing that theatre is not doing very well is exploring relational realms. In his book **Relational Aesthetics**, Nicolas Bourriaud, talks about currents in the '90's that saw the visual art world explore events that, rather than creating a piece of work to be viewed, took the participants and knitted them into particular social relations, framing them in specific ways to throw light on the relations between people. There's one artist, Rikrit Tiravanija, who, for example, build a replica of his NYC apartment in a gallery in Berlin and lived for three months in the gallery, had people over, made food for them and just basically hung out. Toronto-based Simone Moir has a piece where she invited participants to come to the Action section of a variety of video stores and make out with other people who were there in the same section. It was interesting because you had to be very sensitive to the fact that the person standing in the section may or may not be part of the event so it called for a very attentive approach to approaching people. I also have project that I've done a bunch of places in Canada -- galleries, on streets, in Kensington Market and in Scotland called the Talking Creature where people approach strangers and invite them to a meeting place for a random conversation about whatever happens to come up.

These kinds of relational projects frame social interactions and allow some distance to examine social norms and codes.

Related to this is the fact that theatre has been totally and brilliantly outflanked by film and television on the reality front with the proliferation of docs and reality tv shows. People are fascinated by real people going through real shit and ironically theatre, with the audience and performers in the same space and the same time offers so many more opportunities for real people to encounter each other in a much more intense way but we, in theatre, haven't figured out how to keep these kinds of encounters rigorous and scintillating. In film and tv it's easy: you just edit out all the boring parts. But how do you keep those kinds of interactions interesting with the total loose canon of an audience. Though I think theatre is trying to bust through this right now. There was an interesting show in Scotland that got shut down by the state. This guy would go onstage with his laptop, a big projection of his screen for the audience to see, and then he would cruise the local queer meeting sites on the internet and work with the audience to pick someone for him to go have sex with that night. At the end of the show the audience would see him off as he went to the guy's place. The next day he would begin the show with a report of how the sex was and present something he had stolen from the guy's apartment.

The problems with his piece are obvious -- the men weren't consenting, they had no idea they were being displayed in front of a packed audience, etc. but the form of the idea has some really interesting potential and the interaction was fairly restricted and rigorous in many ways. All the wild variables happened when he went to have sex so he would come back and only recount the most interesting details. Anyway, theatre is suffering a crisis of relevance right now but still does possess a lot of potential and I think we'll be through this lull relatively soon. One of the big problems is that we require big buildings with expensive lighting and sound equipment to make really striking stuff happen and these buildings, for the most part, are still locked down by the folks that started them in the 70s. There are a few exceptions -- Buddies in Bad Times and the Theatre Centre but my generation -- people at the prime of their careers and the height of their creativity -- do not possess the means of production so it becomes difficult to make change happen.

NS: What brought you into theatre originally?

DO: My family was sort of falling apart when I was about 10 and I found that the drama club at school offered a viable alternative. Everybody has to pitch in and do his or her best and together you go on this complicated, emotional and often physically taxing journey. It's a collective form and I have fun with the

group dynamic.

NS: Which playwrights or artists have influenced, inspired, or affected you in your life (as an artist, and person).

DO: Sky Gilbert, Tracy Wright, Bill Glassco, The Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, Clare Coulter, Karen Hines, Daniel MacIvor, Daniel Brooks, Hillar Liitoja, Nadia Ross, Richard Linklater, Jacob Wren and Mary Juana.

pppeeeaaaccccee

Darren O'Donnell

In Darren O'Donnell's new play, three people meet in Ephemeral and chat about the revolution. What revolution? Good question. A gently aggressive mediation, pppeeeaaaccccee examines our being, asks us what we're doing and reminds us that there are monsters in here. M-1, F-2. Softcover, 141 pp. \$16.95.

http://www.theatrebooks.com/spotlight/skwarna_odonnell.html