

Unpopular Art: Local Stories and Spatial Narratives  
by  
Ken Hudson

*The hybrid or meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation.*

*Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup>*

On the cusp of the millennium, I undertook two distinct yet related theatrical endeavors simply and directly in short measure and without any funding. These two productions, *Flying Dog Show*, and *The King #5 Henry*, were both created under with the premise of "making art with whatever you have around the house" or exercising the basic human freedom of expression. They both productions utilized (for the most part) local amateur talent and both were staged in alternative theatrical venues. These works were created, in addition to their artistic merits, as a gesture to illustrate how any artistic work may be produced effectively without the trappings or dictates of economic forces. It was also my aim to show that those works created outside the traditional production confines of "the theatre" would have a lasting transformational impact both on the local culture and on the participants themselves.

We live within mass culture and the constant inundation of images and ideas that arrive to us through countless media definitively impact our lives. Marcuse says that "today... private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality. Mass production and mass distribution claim the entire individual..."<sup>2</sup> The images of mass culture have a cumulative effect upon us. The fabric of our society is woven with the constant reinforcement of a semiotic of consumption, a hierarchy of value, and set of inverted moral precepts which passively, over time, have been accepted as the norm. We are, in essence, surrounded as in McLuhan's "spherical and resonant acoustic space,"<sup>3</sup> with all our senses engaged simultaneously.

The resultant cultural anxiety has forced the mass citizenry to retreat into the hypnotic trance of consumptive non-action. The major cultural media of our day: movies, the internet, television, and video games, all serve to create a docile population which now can judge themselves active based on virtual accomplishment, rather than on actual action. Habermas says, "The consumption of mass culture leaves no lasting trace. It affords a kind of experience which is not cumulative but regressive."<sup>4</sup> And it is this regressive trend that my works address. I am proposing that the act of creating theatre is a cumulative tonic for the regressive trends of mass culture:

Folk Art = Child's play

This aesthetic stance was once that of the *avant-garde*, the historical Dadaists, Surrealists, Beats, and the theatrical revolutionaries who "happened" in the 1960's. But today, even the most progressive of artistic ventures has become, for the most part, just another wing of the great media dragon. The *avant-garde* exists only now as "a group of well-paid cultural functionaries [that] has risen from...bohemia to the respectability of the managerial and bureaucratic elite. What...remains is the avant-garde as an institution...[and]...a continuing alienation between, on the one hand, the productive and critical minorities of specialists and specializing amateurs---who keep up with the processes of high-grade abstraction in art ...and on the other hand, the great public of the mass media."<sup>5</sup>

To distinguish my art from this state, I ventured to create works distinctly outside of recognized superstructures. Not only the bureaucratic ones, but also the literal structure of the physical theatre. These works, one is a storefront on a busy downtown street, and one in a hockey arena, created both new theatrical paradigms and at once revealed the inherent and implied theatres hidden in those spaces. In this way I created an anti-environment which permitted perception of the original environment. Space as character recognizing that "environments are not just containers, but are processes that change the content totally ..."<sup>6</sup>.

During the summer of 1999 I created the "spontaneous theatrical happening" *Flying Dog Show*<sup>7</sup> in a storefront on Queen Street in Toronto. During the 10 week run, a natural theatre was created by the physical enactment of various comedic narratives in the store's window, and by the unsolicited participation of bewildered passersby. The show was not advertised or formally promoted because the venture was itself an advertisement. The medium was the message, and the content of the weekly show supported the humorous angles of flagrant self-promotion. While the street might slow down, it never stops. It became not one show but many shows with all of us playing together and a street culture was revealed to everyone Street theatre and a theatre of the street.

In April 2000 I adapted *Henry the Fifth* to explore the mythical dynamics of a hockey arena, emblematic of the Canadian national identity, and to present my adaptation of the play itself, in the works for many years previously. The resulting epic on ice, *The King #5 Henry*, sought to evoke the spirits of the play by overlapping it in a charged environment. This palimpsest did not to interpret *Henry V* in light of any specific Canadian historical moment, but instead strove to place both actors and audience into a vortex of meaning, allowing each individual's experience of this spectacle to be differentiated in its similarity. Of course, my own meanings were presented, and my theatrical aims in merging these two forms were realized. In Canada, hockey is Shakespeare. From the speed of the skaters evoking horses, the use of the stick as a weapon, the hockey-helmeted armor, and so forth, including the arena itself, which is our Canadian "wooden O." In my adaptation, all of these tropes coincided at once.

We live in a society that sits on its intentions all day long. The physical apprehension of moving active creative people inspires everyone to move, to act, to create, in short, to live. When we witness people having fun, we naturally want to participate. I believe that each of us is a unique and active creative artist and that every day we each pull together an elaborate act which functions as both lens and filter to the world. We know this in the

theatre as the mask, as the *persona*. But make no mistake: The guile which actors claim as their own is as common as the dust from which we came. People can all act. They just need varying levels of polish to make it digestible to the observer.

As we witness each human institution transferred, one by one, from private experience to public circus via the next wave of reality based television programs, I am strongly advocating an opposing grassroots movement which will claim for each individual "the option" of telling their own real stories themselves. Therefore, I support a conscious and radical democratization of theatre in order to preserve last effective vehicle left for alternative and independent public expression. Let those of us with experience teach those who want to learn. Let us be open to making works that both involve and enliven local communities. Let us get small together and roll in field of our own invention. To do this, we must work to eradicate the hierarchical divisions that separate amateur from professional theatre. We are all expertly human enough, each with a story to tell, to be considered either.

In the *Flying Dog Show* episode "Shakespearean Prophecies," Bruce Wayne elegantly portrays this sentiment when he says, "The world's a stage and all the people on the earth are merely people acting." While Marshal McLuhan notes that under satellite conditions, we live in a global theatre where the population reverses from content or spectator into actor and participant.<sup>8</sup> If under the proscenium of the satellite, the world is indeed all a stage, then I respond with one simple direction:

## *ACTION*

There is a feeling we experience when we are together with one another watching people move their bodies to the truth of their thoughts, their feeling, their lives. This is an irreplaceable content in understanding ourselves. As we become more isolated in our vast mass connections, we must also remind ourselves to breathe together occasionally and share ourselves publicly for all to behold

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> McLuhan, Eric and Zingrone, Frank, eds. *The Essential McLuhan*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 1995, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One -Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> McLuhan, Marshall and Eric. *Laws of Media: The New Science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass.:MIT Press, 1991, p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> IBID, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> McLuhan and Zingrone, p.275

<sup>7</sup> See: [www.flyingdogshow.com](http://www.flyingdogshow.com)

<sup>8</sup> McLuhan. 1989, p. 150-1.