

EODL SPRING FESTIVAL 2009

Introductory Comments by Bea Quarrie, Adjudicator

Ladies and Gentlemen

Why are we here today? Why do we spend years planning, months organizing, weeks making calls, days rehearsing, hours finalizing for mere minutes on stage? I am certain that each person has a personal story about how they were recruited, or coerced or had a special moment when they felt The Call to work in theatre.

My experience harkens back to a very special event that happened in a refugee camp in Italy fifty years ago. On a foggy December night in 1956 my family had escaped through mine fields eluding guard dogs search lights and machine guns, walking across the border from Hungary to Austria. We were dispatched to a refugee camp first in Eisenstadt and then moved to a holding Red Cross camp in Rome Italy.

At this camp of about 400 people we were lucky enough to have a dozen musicians and singers from Hungary's National Opera House. Christmas was approaching and we had nothing- no money, no jobs and no country that would take us in. Even the Italian staff had only contempt for us Huns, calling us names, accusing us of sponging off their government. So as a hopeful gesture, the tenor's wife decided to organize a Christmas concert. I was delegated to sing Silent night, since as a curious 11 year old, I was constantly present at all the rehearsals. The conductor, Istvan Kertesz, destined to be Von Karajan's successor at the Berliner Philharmonic, rehearsed feverishly for weeks leading up to the Big Event.

The night of the concert, I stood on stage and watched the audience as they all shuffled into the big dining hall for dinner. We had decorated the space with a donated tree bedecked with hundreds of white paper doves. We had also been given candles to light during Silent Night. As soloists, singers and instrumentalists took the stage, the Italian kitchen staff were going about loudly clearing up dishes, causing quite a din with pots and pans. Someone was dispatched to the kitchen to ask them to be quiet and that poor messenger was thrust back out of the kitchen area with a taunting call-“Barbarians!”

Undaunted, the concert went on as planned.

Soon the sweet aching music of a violin solo filled the room, and works by Puccini, Verdi, Donizetti soon mingled with Liszt, Brahms and Kodaly. The coloratura soprano's rendition of Gounod's Ave Maria left everyone breathless. One by one, I could see the kitchen staff silently sneaking out to line the walls behind the audience. By the time I had to perform they were all there, looking bewildered and filled with disbelief. Then I surrendered myself to the music and gave my all to the song. Soon people joined in and the hall rang with glorious sounds.

Someone sang the national Anthem, and we all had a good cry before hugs followed as people told each other about their past Christmases. Exchanges of pleasantries took place for about an hour or so.

Then, suddenly, the doors to the dining hall burst open. There stood the entire Italian kitchen staff with huge vinyl bags in hand. They mobbed the conductor, kissing him, and started giving out gifts, toys for every child in that camp. You could hear “Puccini, Verdi!” echoing as they swarmed the performers with their exuberant, joyful thanks. “Buon Natale!” Someone sang an Italian Christmas carol, which was followed by a Hungarian one. Everyone was overcome with a kind of euphoria that comes from sharing an unexpected event.

I still get goose bumps when I remember that night. I knew then in my bones that I wanted to be part of that kind of experience in my future. In a place where everyone was focused on survival, on bare necessities, the obvious conclusion to be drawn from that event and events like it, is that art must be essential to life. In that camp we were without prospects, and even without basic respect, but we were not without art. Art is a part of survival; art is a part of the human spirit, an expression of who we are. Art connects us as humans, it is the way we say “I am alive and my life has meaning.”

From that early childhood experience I have come to understand that the arts- in my case the visual and theatre arts- is not “entertainment”(as some media would like to relegate these forms to its Arts and Entertainment pages). It is not an elitist diversion, a luxury that gets funding from leftovers in municipal, provincial or federal budgets. It is not a disposable plaything, or a hobby or amusement- it is a basic need for human survival.

People the world over have a fundamental need for a sense of order and purpose in their lives, and the arts and religion serve to meet that need. After all, our creative and spiritual being comes from the same source. Theatre, in our case amateur - for the love of it - is one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words of our own, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we cannot with our minds.

So why are we here? Well, we are not here to sell ourselves, although we are often asked to do so by funding bodies. The truth is we really do not have products to sell, because if we become complacent and seek simply to satisfy our sense of ease and comfort, we immediately become irrelevant and useless. We are each one of us- whether backstage or on, in the lighting booth or the carpentry shop or the ticket booth- we are engaged in a process that helps us and those round us to see if we can come into harmony with ourselves and be healthy and happy and well.

Because if there is a future wave of wellness on this ailing, shrinking planet, if there is to be harmony and peace, equality, mutual respect and fairness, I do not expect it to come from governments, or the military, and definitely not from large corporations. If there is a future of peace for our strange species, if there is to be understanding of how invisible internal things inside us should fit together, I expect it will come from creative people the world over, the artist that is inside each one of us here today.

Why else would Suzart exist? Why would two dedicated women do so much work to make theatre training happen for young people in Ottawa?

Why would Tara Players go to so much searching and soul searching to maintain their Irish cultural heritage, to connect to their roots and make clearer their sense of who they are?

Why would Domino Players, turfed out of their beautiful little theatre on the waterfront struggle to stay alive and relevant by producing a complex and demanding play in a space that is no more than a little black box?

And Ottawa and Peterborough Little Theatres, comfortable in their exclusive theatres, why would they feel the need to test themselves, to step out of their comfort zones and enter a festival in order to clarify what is a fresh look at themselves and their work?

You know, if we were paramedics, doctors and nurses in ER, we would take our work very seriously, and so would everyone else, right? Well, at 8 pm on any given night of our performances, someone could walk into our theatre with a very heavy heart, feeling disconnected and isolated, overwhelmed by life and weary in their souls. Whether they go out feeling a little restored, feeling connected and maybe even a little less burdened depends entirely on how well we do our craft.

Today we are here to celebrate the fact that our work matters. It matters a great deal to all of us, to our families, to our communities and to our country.

Bea Quarrie
Kemptville, ON
March 29, 2009