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Root Vegetables and Reflections on West Coast Culture: Radix's BEUTFL CARATS for Progress Lab

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Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 155, Summer 2013, pp. 98-101 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: [10.1353/ctr.2013.0053](https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.2013.0053)



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first Prague Quadrennial in 1967 contributed to the founding of this more specialized branch of the ITI in the spring of 1968. The first membership countries were Czechoslovakia, Canada, Israel, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United States (see "A Brief History of OISTAT").

5. World Stage Design is held every four years, between the editions of the Prague Quadrennial, and is sponsored by OISTAT and organized by a national centre. The WSG differs from the Prague Quadrennial since designers submit their work individually rather than appearing within the context of a national exhibition. In 2005 the first WSD was held in Toronto; in 2009 in Seoul, Korea; and in 2013 in Cardiff, Wales (see "World Stage Design 2013").
6. An inserted erratum note corrects the date of this production as 1984.
7. Designs by Cameron Porteous for *Oedipus Rex* (1978) at the Vancouver Playhouse shows his use of 2,000 pounds of sand (101) in contrast to a built environment for *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1983) at the Festival Theatre of the Shaw Festival (187).

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Root Vegetables and Reflections on West Coast Culture: Radix's *BEUTFL CARATS* for Progress Lab

by Melissa Poll

When it comes to the well-being of Vancouver theatre, the past year has been rife with challenges. The first large-scale upheaval occurred in March 2012, with the Vancouver Playhouse closing due to bankruptcy just months shy of its fiftieth anniversary. Though local artists initially rallied in support of the Playhouse and the media launched an enquiry (which, despite positive intentions, ultimately descended into a tail-chasing blame-game), the fact remained that one of Canada's longest-standing

regional theatres, known for premiering canon-defining work by playwrights such as George Ryga, Joan Macleod, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Morris Panych, was closing its doors for the foreseeable future. Further disruption followed on the heels of the Playhouse's collapse. In January 2013, news surfaced that the city's iconic Waldorf Hotel, which reopened in 2010 as a cultural hot spot offering art installations, concerts, and play readings, had been sold to a real estate developer with no interest in maintaining the hotel's arts venues. Though the hotel has since been designated a heritage site by the City of Vancouver, this doesn't necessarily guarantee its survival. Beyond the loss of the Playhouse and the potential demise of the Waldorf, the pending sale of the Centre in Vancouver for the Performing Arts to the Westside Church has thrown the city's cultural landscape into further flux.

Given these major shifts in Vancouver's theatre ecology, the likelihood that local artists would willingly submit to further challenges seems doubtful. And yet, this is exactly what ten of the city's small theatre companies are doing. Vancouver's Obstructions performance series is the brainchild of local ad hoc arts organization Progress Lab, which has assembled a host of companies over the past ten years to create an environment driven by mutual support and artistic growth, resulting in innovative work such as *HIVE* 1, 2, and 3,¹ a trilogy of interactive theatre cabarets. Progress Lab's participating companies include Boca Del Lupo, Electric Company, Felix Culpa, Leaky Heaven Circus, Newworld Theatre, Only Animal, Pi Theatre, Radix, Rumble, Theatre Conspiracy, and Theatre Replacement. Radix's July 2012 Obstructions performance, *BEUTFL CARATS*, functioned to reiterate the strength, ingenuity, and persistence of vision defining Vancouver's theatre community by not only responding to a set of obstacles formulated by Progress Lab but also by initiating a discussion that acknowledged the collaborative role of local spectators and critics.

Based on the 2003 Danish Film *The Five Obstructions*, which charts Jørgen Goth's attempt to meet five filmic challenges set by his mentee (the enduring enfant terrible), Lars von Trier, Progress Lab's Obstructions series subscribes to the theory that constraints breed creativity and asks theatre companies to craft devised performances defined by specific obstructions (Progress Lab). This work in progress is then performed and judged by artists within the organization. As members of Progress Lab are well-versed in each others' theatrical aesthetics, particularly given their ten years of co-creating theatre installations, obstructions are doled out with the intention of pushing long-standing boundaries (although gentle comic needling also seems to inform the project). Radix, a company known for site-specific work with a social conscience,² faced the following three obstructions:

1. [Artistic director] Andrew Laurenson must revisit and answer the central question of *BEUTFL PRBLMS*

2. In the style of French farce
3. Using a set made of carrots. (Newworld Theatre)

The first obstruction is a response to Radix's 2011 production, *BEUTFL PRBLMS*. *BEUTFL PRBLMS* used Laurenson's family history and the 1997 victory of an IBM computer, Deep Blue, over international chess champion Garry Kasparov to explore the complexity of Internet-dominated lifestyles, the symbiotic relationship between people and the environment, and questions surrounding ecological sustainability in the twenty-first century. Aware that Laurenson was interested in possibly revisiting *BEUTFL PRBLMS*, the members of Progress Lab decided to build this element into the Obstructions challenge. The second obstruction worked to push Radix out of a stylistic comfort zone, challenging the company to engage with a simpler genre and be uncharacteristically farcical in the style of French farce. For its part, the third obstruction came with a backstory. Some years ago, select members of Progress Lab overheard Laurenson and his collaborators jokingly discussing the idea of using a set made of carrots. Little did Laurenson know at the time that this discussion would have long-term comic repercussions, becoming the concept for Radix's third obstruction (Newworld Theatre). The result of these collective obstructions? Radix's *BEUTFL CARATS*, the story of a king who, against the advice of counsel and his daughter, Princess Carotene, greedily monopolizes his territory's greatest resource—carrots (which Laurenson uses as a stand-in for peak oil). Ultimately, the king finds himself alone with the only remaining evidence of his once fecund kingdom: a mouthful of carrot peelings.

An analysis of tropes featured in Radix's *BEUTFL CARATS* would provide rich insights into larger issues at work in Radix's oeuvre, particularly by exploring the implications of comically restyling *BEUTFL PRBLMS*' argument linking resource depletion and human disposition. Nonetheless, my interests here lie in the post-show discussion that ensued between the judges, artists, and audience. This conversation challenged assumptions about what it means to be a spectator and critic while upending reports that Vancouver's arts community was enduring a "crisis of confidence" and "giving up on" its own cultural scene (Lederman). In fact, the crowd at Radix's *BEUTFL CARATS* engaged with the work in a way that directly countered critiques positing Vancouver's status as a "cultural backwater" where the arts have "always taken a back seat" (Lederman).³

This being said, I must admit that my expectations for the post-show discussion were considerably low. Graduate studies had taken me away from Vancouver since 2009, and in that time, I didn't bother ferreting out individual artists' opinions on what the media were characterizing as Vancouver's imminent artistic collapse. Instead, I bought into the mainstream press's aforementioned rhetoric claiming that Vancouver's apathy for the arts was at an all-time high. The discussion that followed Radix's *BEUTFL CARATS*, however,



Radix's *BEUTFL CARATS* for Vancouver's Progress Lab at its rehearsal and development hub, Progress Lab 1422, in 2011: The Carrot King (Andrew Laurenson) succumbs to a serious carrot juice addiction. Clips from the performance are available at http://youtu.be/TIDmtw_CgVg. Photo courtesy of Andrew Laurenson and Radix Theatre



BEUTFL CARATS: The Carrot King (Andrew Laurenson) asserts the superiority of his kingdom's namesake above all other root vegetables (with Jessica Harvey, the "Advisor," and Ron Samworth, the "Musician," in the background). Photo courtesy of Andrew Laurenson and Radix Theatre

trumped these expectations. Thanks to University of British Columbia PhD student Alex Ferguson, who assumed roving microphone duties with a delicious dose of wit and insight, conscientious spectators well-versed in Radix's oeuvre were eager to speak up and literally talk back, entering into a lively debate about the relevance of the obstructions prescribed by Progress Lab. Gone were the banalities of traditional talkbacks (i.e., How do you learn all those lines? What's your real job?); instead, spectators detailed their individual responses to the original *BEUTFL PRBLMS*, a show that continued to trouble Laurenson due to what he perceived as his own failure to answer the play's central questions (Laurenson, "Skype Interview").

As spectators took the reins and challenged the judges over their decision to obstruct Radix based on the absence of concrete solutions provided by *BEUTFL PRBLMS*, Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectator came to mind. Those who spoke described the personal meanings they had crafted in response to *BEUTFL PRBLMS*' questioning of the symbiotic relationship between human psychology and environmental



BEUTFL CARATS: Garry Carrotspov (Conor Wylie), star-crossed lover to Princess Carotene (Natalie Schneck), reveals his true identity to the King (Andrew Laurenson).

Photo courtesy of Andrew Laurenson and Radix Theatre

disruption, revealing an eagerness to rely on their own creative faculties to author meaning. This was not a group of spectators interested in having Radix limit *BEUTFL PRBLMS'* interpretive scope to the articulation of a single set of answers. By asserting the value of their individual authorships, these theatregoers, who revealed themselves to be theatre-makers in their own right, reiterated Rancière's assertion that the positioning of spectators as passive subjects belies their creative agency and, in my view, limits the parameters and complexity of art fashioned for their consumption.⁴

Beyond the spectators, this proved an equally validating experience for Laurenson, who was given the opportunity to receive feedback from a mix of known and unknown voices in the crowd. Having relied on his peers and theatre critics for an assessment of *BEUTFL PRBLMS*, he'd assumed his audience was equally frustrated by the piece's unresolved questions. Thanks to Progress Lab's forum, however, Laurenson found himself newly aware of spectators who readily and insightfully assumed co-authorship roles and therefore, whether known to Radix or not, had functioned as the company's collaborators all along.

As a theatre reviewer, I found that Radix's post-show discussion not only spoke to the spectator's role in theatre-making but also connected to current interests in broadening and redefining the discourse surrounding the role of informed, incisive arts criticism outside academia. A generation of post-baby boomer critics, or "writers-on-theatre" as they sometimes prefer to be called (Haydon), are making their voices heard through blogs such as Andrew Horwitz's *Culturebot* and Andrew Haydon's *Postcards from the Gods*, which have amassed loyal readerships by forgoing traditional review formats and giving critics the time and space necessary to contextualize and further politicize contemporary theatre.⁵ In "Reframing the Critic for the 21st Century," Horwitz writes,

Culturebot proposes a new framework for arts criticism that we refer to as "critical horizontalism." In this framework, criticism is a creative practice unto itself and the writer exists in subjective relation to the work of the artist. The writer's response is the continuation

of a dialogue initiated by the artist. If this response is then published on the Internet, this creates a horizontal field of discourse with the work. This model resists the commodification of the performing arts as "entertainment" but rather situates it as time-based art. The performance itself is an ephemeral nexus where audience, artist and ideas converge. The critic supports the continued investigation of the art event across multiple platforms. (Horwitz)

While Horwitz's extended theory⁶ fails to fully consider the politics of placing a critic in the rehearsal room and treads rather inconsiderately on the dramaturg's territory, the essence of what he details (critics as creative artists existing on a horizontal plain as collaborators with arts-makers) offers a twenty-first-century response to the traditional review format that could feasibly stand alongside, rather than usurp, its predecessor. Moreover, by fostering an uncensored online dialogue that ruminates on performance, this model provides an opportunity for artists, writers, and spectators alike to glean more from work such as Progress Lab's *Obstructions*, which all but demands this type of extended and thorough engagement.

Despite the actual obstructions experienced recently by Vancouver artists and spectators, the city is ushering in 2013 with a continued dedication to local arts. As supporters of the Waldorf Hotel rally outside city hall, backed by a 17,000-signature-strong petition, and steady streams of locals flock to PuSh—Vancouver's innovative, international theatre festival—claims that the city is giving up on culture ring false. In fact, Progress Lab's return this summer (with a new *Obstructions* series meant to further challenge loyal spectators-cum-collaborators) represents yet another opportunity to celebrate Vancouver's resilient cultural milieu, a place that has always felt unquestionably alive and vibrant for those of us who call the West Coast home.

Notes

1. Progress Labs made its mark with the HIVE series. For a detailed account of HIVE1, please see the Templeton and O'Donnell articles referenced below. Refer to Barton and Hansen for HIVE2.
2. For a comprehensive discussion of Radix's oeuvre, please refer to Laurenson, "Past" or <http://www.radixtheatre.org/past-events/>.
3. Peter Dickinson and Alana Gerecke's 2013 seminar on West Coast dance for the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research (CATR) takes similarly dismissive assumptions made by *The Globe & Mail's* dance critic, Paula Citron, as the forum's jumping off point. In her 2009 blog post "Overview of Dance in Canada," Citron posits that British Columbia's dance culture is characterized by "isolation," "naivety," and "a lack of sophistication."
4. For more on this, see Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011).
5. This is not to suggest, however, that the idea of the critic as embedded collaborator is a new phenomenon. G. E. Lessing

and Kenneth Tynan are among the critics who have assumed roles within arts organizations (in Hamburg and at England's National Theatre, respectively).

6. See Horwitz's "Reframing the Critic for the 21st Century" for further details.

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The Edge Project: Good to Go by Monica Prendergast

- 80 students
- 4 months
- 3 high schools
- 3 drama teachers
- 1 professional actor/playwright/director
- 1 professional Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) company
- 1 international performing arts festival
- 1 hero's journey

Add all these ingredients together, and it makes up one of the most innovative and exciting educational partnership projects I have ever seen. I have a strong interest in outreach

and audience education, so when I read through the program of Vancouver's 2013 PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, *The Edge Project* caught my eye and held it. What I learned, or more accurately relearned, along with Green Thumb Theatre's artistic associate Shawn Macdonald who directed this project, is "that teenagers can do pretty much anything. They don't necessarily believe that, but I'm quite sure of it at this point" (*The Edge Project*). What these three classes of drama students from three Greater Vancouver high schools accomplished—with the support of their respective drama teachers and Macdonald—was no less than writing, rehearsing, and presenting a ninety-five-minute play inspired by Joseph Campbell's hero journey structure and performed by all eighty students.

Green Thumb Theatre is one of Canada's longest-lived and foremost TYA companies. The company's long history stretches back to its founding in 1975 by playwright Dennis Foon and Jane Howard Barker. Over nearly forty years, Green Thumb has premiered many of Canada's best TYA plays, including many by Foon (*New Canadian Kid*, *Bedtimes and Bullies*, *Skin*), along with other well-known writers such as Joan MacLeod (*Little Sister*, *Shape of a Girl*), Morris Panych (*Co\$ of Living*, *Life Science*), and George F. Walker (*Problem Child*, *Tough!*). More recent Green Thumb productions have tackled timely topics such as drug addiction (*Cranked*), bullying and cyberbullying (*Night Light*, *tagged*), school violence (*Rage*), and homophobia (*Out in the Open*), under the continuing long-term artistic directorship of Patrick McDonald (1988 to present). GreenThumb's *The Edge Project* began three years ago as a way to bring together drama students from various high schools, working collaboratively with theatre professionals who specialize in theatre for children and youth.

Previous Edge Project shows were themed anthologies consisting of "a series of scenes, created in various disciplines (dance, monologue, poetry, movement), and created separately by four different schools" (*The Edge Project*). This year, playwright, actor, and director Shawn Macdonald felt that he'd like to see the students take on the challenge of writing a single narrative and turned to literary scholar Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey, or monomyth, found in many narrative structures across cultures and time. The hero's journey typically includes three stages: the call and departure; the journey and its tests and trials; and the homecoming.¹ Stories from *The Odyssey* to *Star Wars* fit the myth-making bill, and Macdonald sensed the hero's journey was an open story structure that the students in this year's Edge Project could employ to create their own narrative.

Once Macdonald had determined which schools (Cariboo, Lord Byng, and North Delta) and drama teachers (Trevor Found, Stacy Inglis, and Carol Mann) were onboard for this year's project, he introduced the three drama classes to Campbell's model and asked three or four students from each class to take on the task of being writing captains. The