

Reflections on *Ephemera*

As a relative newcomer to Vancouver arts community, it's always exciting to have the opportunity to learn more about the work that happens here. And so earlier this week I hopped on the SkyTrain and made my way to Burnaby to check out the archive of *Ephemera* with the task of acquainting myself with a self-archived history of sorts. Amongst the many things I learned, I would advise against the burrito place at SFU. It's fine... but like... not what you signed up for. (But they were very nice.)

Having been first immersed to Canadian Theatre (and, in fact, Theatre on the whole) during my time at the University of Toronto, it was great to be able to look at a specifically West Coast archive. My "education" was heavily weighted on the Eastern Canadian account. While there wasn't a ton of studio time at U of T, there was a pretty decent academic component. And I was fortunate that I had the opportunity to take a couple of courses pertaining to Canadian Theatre History. Of course, much like the minimal focus on equity-seeking peoples in most University syllabi, the history of Vancouver's scene was relatively thin. Perhaps that's because it seems the further east you go in Canada, the more obsessed they are with maintaining a "heritage".

On the other hand, the cultural scene on the West Coast was always portrayed as more of an experimental place, known mainly for formal innovation in a National context. It's difficult to say if that's necessarily a truism. My experience viewing the work that many Vancouver artists are up to this year shows (unsurprisingly) a wide spectrum of engagement of form and content that's actually too diverse to be put into any one box. In some ways it seems like Vancouver is uninterested in categorization, which makes it all the more interesting to be on a mission to go through meticulously archived and categorized materials. What was most satisfying was hearing from Melissa Salrin, Head of Special Collections and Rare Books at the SFU Library, that *Ephemera* posed a challenge to standard archiving practices, and so they tried to avoid categorization in favour of reflecting what the layout was that the community had assembled. I'm always up for a little disruption.

So here's my very reductive, quick analysis of what it seemed like this archive was telling me. (Caveat: This archive is, of course, based on the materials provided by the people who were able to participate in *Ephemera*):

Vancouver's theatre scene definitely seems to have gone through phases. It seems like in the late 70s there was a shift to creating or modifying spaces to house performance. Shortly after, by the early-mid 80s there was, let's call it an "alt-modern" scene. Canadian content was present for some time, and it was strongly focused on artistic creation with the larger general population. There is a strong sense of labour movements that seemed to work in partnership with the arts. A constant theme seems to be a fascination with engaging with space and the natural environment.

By the late 80s and early 90s there seems to be an influence of more "experimental" or "non-traditional" work. At this time it would seem like there was a very distinct interest in the

position of the artist in relation to its audience. By the late 90s and early 2000s there seemed to be a strong interest in artistic dialogue within the community. By the mid 2000s – something happened. If I know my history right, this would likely be some major budget cuts. And here is where collaboration between companies seems to really start to come into its own as a very standard practice. As we start to shift to the later 2000s into our current period (strange to say), it seems like the focus has shifted to the individual. Less about the individual in relation, but rather the individual's self-reflection, and the artistic growth of collectives, and voicing a focus on process.

Through it all, this archive tells me that Independent theatre practice (as archived) has long been a community engaged, process oriented, and highly collaborative ecology in Vancouver.

So what is lacking? What should we look to bring?

More artefacts. Things that speak to process by their existence. One of the clearest things I found was from James Long and Marcus Youssef's play *Winners and Losers* – a simple piece of craft paper with check boxes that so perfectly pointed to how the piece was made. So – more of that. If we're as in to process as we seem to like to say we are we could really benefit from archiving these rehearsal and creation papers that could easily be tossed. At the same time, I'm also interested to see more such artefacts that speak to what it is that's most valued by artists – strange loaded items. Another such piece that told me volumes about a company was a bit of moss from the Vines Arts Festival, which having read about the festival throughout the archive showed me what was important to them.

So bring your process and creation bits, your weird thing kicking around your office that can provoke an imagined story; hell – bring your strategic plans and let's see where we all think we're headed. Bring your bad reviews. Please bring your bad reviews. We all have them. And beyond being hilarious in retrospect, they speak a lot about the landscape we're creating in.

See ya there,

Jiv Parasram

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