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Vertical City: Staging Urban Discomfort

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Vertical City, created by Bruce Barton, Frank Cox-O'Connell, Pil Hansen, Lori Lemare, Diane McGrath, Ann Stadlmair, and Marc Tellez. HATCH at the Harbourfront York Quay Studio, Toronto. 20 April 2008.

By Kim Solga

When we set out to "stage" the city, just whose version of the city are we staging? As metropolitan centres around the world adopt the thinking of Richard Florida, the urban-policy theorist behind the now-ubiquitous "creative city" paradigm, civic politicians, arts administrators and private investors alike have begun to make the connection among wealth, clout and the power of performance. Thanks to Florida, it should be happy days for theatre artists in "creative" cities everywhere; in practice, things aren't always quite so rosy. In practice, an event like Toronto's high-profile Luminato festival wins $22.5 million in provincial funding, while the Ontario Arts Council, benefactor to hundreds of culture workers around the province, must make do with less than a quarter of that pot (Taylor). Increasingly, "staging" the city means what real estate agents think it means: fluffing the town for the global tourist gaze, getting the façade ready rather than supporting the structural backbone of the place. But with Richard Florida now ensconced at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and his "creative city" the talk of the town, what are the alternatives, in Toronto or beyond?

Along with my colleague Laura Levin, I have been thinking for some time about alternatives to fluffing the town – performances in and of the city that might excavate the tensions, struggles and unattractive lived circumstances that the creative-city paradigm, with its pernicious reliance on the bland and often slyly racist notions of "tolerance" and "multiculturalism," intentionally obfuscates. The problem, we have discovered, is that much work that calls itself alternative or activist urban dramaturgy is just as likely to rehearse the overtly celebratory mood and the covert politics of difference that shape what Levin and I, following Jamie Peck, call the "creative city script" (Peck 740). This "alternative" dramaturgy organizes walks in out-of-the-way neighbourhoods, encourages unexpected interactions between strangers and connects aspiring *flâneurs* with the hidden elements of their everyday environment. In the process, however, it often forgets that our urban communities are built not just on the positive artistic potential of the everyday but also through the hard, often unglamorous work of those for whom the "creative city" is barely on the radar. As I have dutifully walked Toronto for the last two years, attending performance after celebratory urban performance, I have often wondered: when and how will someone stage *that* city?

Then, one day in March 2008, I received an e-mail from Pil Hansen asking me to attend a workshop performance of a collaborative new piece called *Vertical City*. Immediately, I noticed that the promotional material for this work was unusual: it didn't employ the telltale vocabulary of the creative city, and it didn't imply a celebration. Instead, it posed questions of habit and suggested it would introduce spectators to the potential for productive discomfort generated when artists with radically different skill sets come together to make a performance that is, first and foremost, about making performance under difficult circumstances, and only secondarily about the vague and fraught concept of "the city."

And thus my scepticism gave way to intrigue. I arrived at the York Quay Studio Theatre, at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, on 20 April 2008, to find spectators taking their seats on either side of a very tight, very intimate performance area on the small studio stage. The performers sat on chairs at the four corners of the mat that marked the playing space; a ladder, some props and two sheets of black silk hanging from the lighting grid rounded out the view. After brief remarks from Bruce Barton about the exploratory, workshop-style nature of the performance (which was presented as part of Harbourfront's HATCH new-works program) and the feedback session that would take place immediately afterward, the lights came down. Then they came up again: on Lori Lemare, hanging upside down half-way up one of the silks, looking for all the world like she had been stood up, again, by the 501 streetcar.

Vertical City is a collaboration between two aerialists (Lemare and Diane McGrath), two actors (Frank Cox-O'Connell and Marc Tellez), a musician/composer (Anne Stadlmair) and two dramaturgs (Pil Hansen and Bruce Barton). Its point is not for all these artists to work together; its point is for all these artists to push against one another, push one another out of the comfort zone, teach one another how to navigate skills, spaces, habits differently. The entire show is structured around the possibility that collaborative work results from our openness to be hurt, to be vulnerable, to ache, to fall.

In its current incarnation, *Vertical City* tells a series of physical tales interwoven with two running narratives. One comes from Frank: he reads the story of 31 MIT engineering students who, in the 1960s, devised a plan for a utopian city called Romulus. The other narrative Lori tells; it is made up of two stories about animals trapped in the city. A raccoon gets stuck on the edge of a construction crane, and the construction workers laugh; a bird suffocates inside a plastic bag while Lori watches from her window. These are subtle stories, and they exist only in tandem with the physically arduous movement sets that shape them. Lori and Diane do a painfully slow movement up and down the silks before Diane falls, dramatically and unexpectedly and finds herself suspended in mid-air; Lori begins telling the story of the raccoon from her position up high and upside down in the silks while Diane dangles, tries to untangle, her heavy breathing pulsing the still air like an accidental soundtrack. The links between movement, story, breath and fall are left for us to make, and what we see – what I see – is an intense but also a quietly poetic sense of hurt that carries on: the struggle of any living thing to build, and then exist, in the city. This is what the utopian, "alternative" dramaturgies built on Florida's paradigm too often miss, what they sometimes overtly deny.

Bruce Barton says:

> The perceptual premise underpinning *Vertical City* holds that in a general sense, one of the main goals of most aerialist work is to create the impression that the performance is "effortless." The easier it looks, the fewer signs of exertion, the greater the spectacle. Another way of saying this is that aerial artists often try to make their routines look as if their bodies are weightless and they have somehow "escaped gravity." … However, this emphasis on spectacle also has the effect of isolating the aerialist from both the audience and her theatrical collaborators, both in terms of space and in terms of the potential for physical, conceptual and emotional connection.

His comments cut to the heart of what I loved about the performance I saw. As a piece of "urban" dramaturgy, *Vertical City* is peripheral, at best, to the kind of activist work undertaken, in Toronto at least, by organizations such as the *[murmur]* project, Newmindspace and Mammalian Diving Reflex. But it ultimately tells a richer, more complex story about the weave between performance and the evolution of contemporary urbanity. Rather than denying the role of vulnerability, risk and fear in that evolution, it makes those challenges central to its work. Barton writes that he and his co-creators "imagined a performance intentionally situated in the charged zones of shared unfamiliarity, of common destabilization, of the simultaneous potential for discovery and disaster that characterizes exploration of unknown territory." Rather than pretending the city is the same kind of experience for all subjects, *Vertical City* shapes its effort and its affect around the laborious, painful encounter among participants forced to perform (literally) on a limb in order to meet each other in the middle ground between their vastly different ability levels. This is a fresh, exciting representation of the politics of difference and of the hard work genuine human encounters across difference entail. It is a representation that has been noticeably absent from other urban performances I have seen that similarly claim to build their dramaturgy around risk, struggle and dangerous encounter.

During the feedback session I attended, Frank Cox-O'Connell told us that his work onstage was organized around trying and failing to do things. His job, he said, was just to try as hard as possible, even if it all came to nothing. Pushing, trying, struggling. Not celebrating, but working.

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