
Interview with Joël Beddows

My name is Joël Beddows. I'm a director and translator. I'm also the artistic director of the Théâtre la Catapulte in Ottawa and an associate professor in the Theatre Department of the University of Ottawa.

As an artistic director, how would you describe your work with young theatre practitioners?

There are two elements to consider: while we have many emerging practitioners, our mandate also includes doing research-based theatre, theatre which is more avant-garde. The two are closely linked because young artists are often more daring, more open to experimenting and testing things. Very often, in fact most of the time, we'll use this irreverence to do theatre that is more avant-garde. The mandate to work with young artists preceded the one to do more experimental theatre, but it was a natural continuation. We need to better support young creators, give ourselves longer rehearsal periods and more time to discover a form that satisfies everyone. Also, because of our situation here in Ottawa, (we don't have a conservatory program), we often integrate workshops related to the artistic project to ensure that our creators are up to the task, particularly the young practitioners. They want to take a stand just like everyone else, they have something to say which may not be the same thing as someone who's got 30 or 40 years of experience.

I've discovered over the years that the more experienced practitioners often enjoy working with the younger ones because there's a very useful "contamination" on both sides. Young practitioners discover what hasn't work, and why, while the more experienced ones can learn that if you work a same idea from another paradigm, another perspective, or in another project, it just might work out today. Conversely, they can learn that if it didn't work ten years ago, it won't work today either, and for what reasons. Our mandate ultimately leads to many discussions and to a theatre of reflection involving emerging artists. We reflect a lot on what theatre is today. Why do theatre today? They are haunted by these questions when they arrive. I feel that, as theatre practitioners, they should be haunted by these questions all their lives.

There are actually no constraints; it's very freeing to work with emerging artists. Sometimes, they even have too many things to say! They want to include everything in one piece because it's their first creation. You have to tell them, "no, no, you must define your idea more clearly." However, I'd much rather have too many ideas around the table than none. If there are no ideas around the table, it's better for people to remain silent. Theatre that has nothing to say is generally not good theatre.

What subjects touch adolescents most particularly?

Wow! Very good question. Like all audiences, young people like to identify with what they see: they want links, hooks that will allow them to understand and feel connected. I've discovered over the years, however, that adolescents are open to all topics. They are a highly intelligent audience, just as intelligent as other audiences, but more honest. As soon as they're in the hall, if they don't like something, they'll let us know. Actors love this because they know exactly where they stand with their audience. Adolescents can take just about any topic, but you have to be careful with the codes you use because they don't have as much theatre culture. In fact, in many cases, they don't have any theatre culture at all because they've never been to the theatre, not even as children. So you have to make sure that the story comes across. That doesn't mean you have to maintain realism; you can do anything as long as the adolescents understand the codes that are used. Nor does it mean you have to simplify things. You just have to properly manage the theatre codes for this audience. Everything – from tragedies, comedies, poetry, and incest to the most outrageous topics – is possible. Once again, it's very liberating for me.

Theatre has different codes than film or television. Can you give us some examples?

Because theatre for adolescents is generally a young art form in Canada – whether it's in English or French – there's a preponderance of "mirror- theatre." This is true for other countries as well. The reason is because practitioners who do theatre for adolescents are often young themselves. The oldest companies are only about 15 years old. All theatre begins with mirror-theatre: Quebec theatre, English-Canadian theatre, Franco-Ontarian theatre – they all started out as mirror-theatres. However, within this mirror-theatre, young people need guidance; theatre isn't based on a two-dimensional logic, but a three-dimensional one. You often start with realistic situations that you dramatize using bold lighting and daring direction. The two realities co-exist on stage, even though they are realistic. The audience is confronted by the specificity of theatre at that precise moment. You need to call upon the adolescents' intelligence; to say, "here, you recognize the situation, the characters are often your own age, but, beyond that, this is a theatrical experience." The specificity of this art allows us, among other things, to tell stories that we can't tell with film or television. It's magical to see the moment of realization when they understand that concept.

The nicest compliment I've ever had in my life was from a 14-year-old who said: "This is a story that I could never have been told other than in the theatre." I told myself, "Aha! We've done our job." And it was a very realistic play.