

alt theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

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Canada's Theatre of War

by Edward Little

Clearly twenty bucks isn't worth what it used to be when novelist Gabrielle Roy's rhetorical question "Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?" was added to the backside of our twenty-dollar bill. It's a question that Stephen Harper appeared to take literally while on the campaign trail during the Fall 2008 election. Essentially claiming that the arts don't resonate with "ordinary people," Harper chided Canadian artists for attending rich galas while complaining about a lack of subsidies. Harper's remarks followed hard on the heels of some \$45 million in federal funding reductions to arts and culture—cuts that many believe cost Harper's Conservatives a majority government.¹ In spite of public protest—particularly in Quebec—and in spite of government-commissioned studies demonstrating the efficacy of the arts in areas including social cohesion and job creation, the Harper government continues to deny the arts a role in our economic recovery. Apparently for the PM, Roy's sentiments are not worth the paper they are written on.

At the time of his \$45 million in cuts, Harper claimed that his government was actually *increasing* funding to arts and culture by adding 8 percent

to Canadian Heritage's budget. According to a Canadian Arts Coalition study, what Harper did not point out is that Heritage conveniently separates culture into distinct funding categories known as "Strategic Outcomes." SO1—the site of the cuts—supports "Canadians in expressing their cultural experiences to each other and the world." This is the envelope for arts and culture (including the appropriation for the Canada Council for the Arts) and the hub of what the Canadian Conference of the Arts refers to as Canada's "creative economy." SO2 and 3—the sites of the increase—promote "Canada as an inclusive, diverse society, focusing on such objectives as intercultural understanding, citizen participation and sports"—notably for 2009-2010, this included funding for the Vancouver Olympics (Bradshaw).²

While both strategic outcomes might be seen as laudable, Heritage awards support at the discretion of officials who report directly to the minister of Heritage—unlike the peer jury system used by arms-length funding bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts. The Harper government's emphasis on centralized vetting and control of the societal aspects of culture at the expense of our

creative economy has disturbing ideological links to the government's growing preoccupation with controlling precisely how their political message is to be read by the Canadian public.

While Canada's PM plays piano on the stages of the National Arts Centre, a neglected and disparaged creative economy burns to ember. Meanwhile, the flames of Canada's theatre of war grow ever brighter—celebrated by “spin” and fuelled by increases in government budgets, loans, grants, and investments in our military sector.

Correlations

Clearly, we are a nation at war. Our battlefields, however, include not only Afghanistan, but also the global currency and stock markets that Ursula Franklin characterizes as the site of the post-Cold War international transposition of warfare to “another key”—the struggle for global commercial and economic dominance (Reader 115). As Franklin points out, the privatization of public domains—health care, education, prisons, *and culture* (my emphasis)—is a principal strategy of an economic warfare that essentially pits private interests against the common good: “Whatever cannot be merely bought and sold, whatever cannot be expressed in terms of money and gain-loss transactions stands in the way of the ‘market’ as enemy territory to be occupied, transformed and conquered” (118). In today's theatre of war, victorious marketeers function as occupying forces served by “puppet governments who run the country for the benefit of the occupiers” (125).

A Military Gala

In May 2009, Defence Minister Peter MacKay pledged that Canada's current military budget of \$19 billion would increase to \$30 billion by 2027 with \$60 billion “locked in” for new military hardware” (qtd. in Blanchfield). Richard Sanders of the Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade (COAT) reports that in the last two years alone Industry Canada's Strategic Aerospace and Defense Initiative has bankrolled eleven players in our already highly profitable military industry to the tune of \$425 million (Canadian 12).

That Canadian investment is heavily focused on the development of technologies is self-evident. As Franklin warns us, however, technology is not simply machines, surveillance, state-of-the-art electronic guidance systems, or better widgets. It is most importantly “a mindset” characterized by

two, often opposed, worldviews—the holistic and the prescriptive (Real 10-12). Holistic technologies employ diverse and pluralistic approaches wherein individuals such as intellectuals, artists, or artisans envision the creation and realization of their work from start to finish. Prescriptive technologies demand large-scale centrally controlled production where workers—trained and specialized on a “need-to-know” basis—execute autonomous, sequential tasks under the direct supervision of a boss or manager. Franklin argues that a dominance of prescriptive technologies discourages critical thinking and promotes “a culture of compliance” (Real 17, 19).

Prime Minister Harper denies that that he is ideologically opposed to arts. Yet clearly the PM must be uncomfortable with what the arts have to say about his government's ideology. As Sherrill Grace points out, Canadian plays about war (at least those canonized in the two volumes of *Canada and the Theatre of War*) generally move from a perspective of innocence and nostalgia (plays about WWII), to an “increasingly guilt-laden confrontation with Canada's past failures and complicities in the World War II plays,” and on to strident criticism of Canada's involvement in contemporary wars. The latter turns “our image of ourselves—as romantic, idealistic heroes, or colonial peace-loving victims—inside out to expose our complicity with prejudice and barbarism and to remind us that we are part of a larger world for which we share responsibility and to which we are accountable” (Grace iv).

I'm certainly not suggesting that Stephen Harper is reading Canadian plays or criticism any more than Yann Martel is reporting that Harper reads the bi-weekly novels that Martel sends to the PMO.³ Art's role in challenging a culture of compliance, however, is clearly at odds with a government that is deploying Message Event Proposals (MEPs)—essentially centrally scripted and obligatory talking points—to an unprecedented degree to ensure that ministers and bureaucrats stay on message (CBC PMO). The “message”—in spin as national security, economic recovery, job creation, and austerity—is being used to justify growing militarization, the environmental disaster spewing from government's military-related investment in the Alberta Tar Sands, the apparent lack of money available for arts and social programs, and the increases in funding to implement a “tough-on-crime” stance that essentially blames the victims. As social unrest and desperation born of poverty and an inequitable distribution of wealth inevitably grow, economic warfare is responding by increasing budgets to police and prisons. Thus, our poor and disenfranchised are strategically enlisted to justify what Franklin characterizes as “the technological imperative” through the creation of an enemy as a permanent social institution (Reader 58).

“As the waterhole gets smaller, the animals get meaner” (qtd. in Finn).

Meanwhile, Sleth Klein and Armine Yalnizyan ask, “By what twisted economic logic, in a nation with a total annual income of about 1.6 trillion, are we allegedly unable to take a serious run at the poverty in our midst?” (1). Ed Finn lays the blame at the feet of a premeditated neoliberal agenda to “deliberately and callously” shrink our “economic and social waterhole.” This certainly appears to be profiting our meaner animals. The CBC reports that we now hold the dubious distinction of being “the sixth-biggest supplier of military goods to the world” (Canada’s), and Sanders tallies up “billions in grants, unpaid loans, and ‘investments’” to our military industries—with at least \$7.4 billion in export to 88 foreign governments between 2003 and 2006 (“Canadian” 12).

Creative Excellence in the Theatre of War

Perhaps our most significant contribution in this category is former PM Jean Chrétien’s Responsibility to Project (R2P) doctrine as adopted by the United Nations. R2P outlines the “acceptable” conditions for violating the UN principles of “state sovereignty and military non-aggression.” Since its premiere on the UN stage, R2P has been creatively deployed to rationalize military invasions as “humanitarian interventions against failed states.” Consider, for example, the overthrow of Haiti’s democratically elected government in 2004 (Sanders “Top”).

Apart from this kind of creative manipulation, the scripts of Canada’s theatre of war today are frankly derivative. They depend on formulaic plots, their primary authors are foreign powers, and they feature stock characters, tired nationalist rhetoric, and self-aggrandizing claims of social benefit.

The Plot

A target country—The Victim—is characterized as a hotbed of human suffering and injustice. The country’s government—The Villain—is portrayed as a morally bankrupt, anti-democratic despot. The Heroes (key international players) plot together to either a) manufacture disinformation about the “discovery” of a threat to our national security, or b)

reduce aid, impose sanctions, and otherwise create the conditions for a “failed state.” The plot moves forward as the Heroes beat the drums of war. When a chorus of public opinion heavily orchestrated by Government and Corporate Media rises to fever pitch, the Heroes invade, take control of the “failed state,” and wreak massive “collateral damage.” In the dénouement, the Heroes claim defeat over the Villains, the enduring love of the liberated “ordinary people,” and roll out the carpet for the entrance of the “Profits” of Big Business. The play ends with a feast—the Heroes and the Profits award lucrative reconstruction contracts to themselves and their friends, appoint “democratically elected” leaders to win carefully controlled elections, impose international trade agreements, and deregulate the hell out of the local economy to ensure that subjugated governments can never become majority stockholders of their country’s natural resources, and that undernourished victims run no risk of choking on the rich spoils of war.

Canadian Aftermath

The Harper government campaigned on a platform of accountability, yet it works to mystify the ideological links between neoliberalism and war. Money spent on militarization is “spun” as contributing to economic stimulation and job creation—in spite of evidence to the contrary and government-commissioned studies showing that sectors including housing construction, mass transit, education, and the arts are 50 to 200 percent more effective.⁴ National security is cited to avoid releasing documents pertaining to the government’s role in the torture of Afghani detainees, and parliament is prorogued with impunity. The government effectively “spins” its own survival and self-interest as the interest and security of the Nation.

As Helen Forsey reminds us, the Governor General has an obligation to act when our elected government fails to uphold the interest of the common good. Perhaps the GG could intervene to recommend periodic updates to the text on our currency that would serve as a kind of mini MEP for ministers, bureaucrats, and “ordinary people”—a readily accessible *aide-mémoire* illustrating transparency and accountability in terms of government spending and values. Figures could be rounded so that one-dollar represents \$1 billion in spending of our \$280.5 billion budget. Our \$100 bill could say, “reserved for neoliberal use only”—it’s not readily accepted as tender anyway. Health care and education (about \$48 and \$34 billion respectively) could each have a side of our fifty. Roy’s text on our twenty could be replaced with

something commemorating our \$19 billion military budget—something like, “one for you, a billion for the military.” A new three-dollar bill could replace our five to represent the \$3.3 billion spent on all cultural funding combined.⁵ A new .002-cent piece for the \$181 million dollar allocation to the Canada Council for the Arts would need to be large enough for the text, “Ordinary People Don’t Care about the Arts.” For our Loonie, I propose Harper’s head on both sides—with perhaps a special 2010 issue commemorating the \$1 billion security budget for the G8/G10 summit meetings.

NOTES

- ¹ Harper’s remarks were widely reported as “I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren’t high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up, I’m not sure that’s something that resonates with ordinary people.” On the impact of these remarks on the election, see Cernetig.
- ² The CCA commissioned a comprehensive examination of the concept of the creative economy for the *International Forum on the Creative Economy* held in Gatineau, Quebec in March 2008. The report is available at: www.ccarts.ca/en/advocacy/publications/policy/economiecreative.htm.
- ³ Visit Martel’s website: www.whatisstephenharperreading.ca/
- ⁴ See Sanders, Canadian; Cernetig.
- ⁵ This includes all funding for the Department of Canadian Heritage and its agencies and institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the National Arts Centre.

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