

Response to “Acting Together on the World Stage” documentary by Rena Sharon

Rena Sharon, Professor of Collaborative Piano Studies at UBC School of Music sent us a very moving email in response to our documentary, “Acting Together on the World Stage” after the March 2012 screening at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, where she is a Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. We received a permission to share Rena’s response with our readers.

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First of all, I want to thank Michelle LeBaron for bringing Dr. Cynthia Cohen to our midst, and Janis Sarra for creating space within the Peter Wall Institute for this important work, exploring ways in which Art practice becomes fused to the challenges of Social Justice work in service of post-trauma restoration, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding.

I have to say, I accepted this role in today's event without due diligence in considering who might be in the audience. Having watched the group arrive, I now regret my decision! While I'm a fervent advocate of this dynamic realm of art practice, I have no authority as a practitioner. There are people here who have done astonishing work in art activism, and I hope they will offer some insights to the ensuing discussion. I think the best framing of my connection to this work is as a philosophical groupie. This is a tremendously significant global initiative with an immense abundance of positive potential, and I'm grateful to have a moment to speak in honoring the trailblazers who are generating this work.

If I have a right to make comment here, it is perhaps on this basis: As scholar in residence at the Peter Wall Institute this year, my intended project has been to work on building bridges of understanding between artists and the rest of the academic community. It has been my contention—recently given ballast by the funding cuts imposed by the Canadian government—that Art wears a sort of invisible burka in our society—suppression fueled by overt contempt that perhaps belies a fear of Art's mysterious power to trigger passionate shifts in hearts and minds.

It has been my experience in academia that artists play the role of jesters—possessors of realms of wisdom that are annoyingly prescient and penetrative, and confoundingly unquantifiable! My year at the Institute has allowed me to understand the problems of understanding across vastly different modalities and processes from both sides of the rift. It has convinced me ever more deeply that improving the productive work relationship between artists and researchers is of crucial importance to the comprehensive and integrated understanding of the human entity. Art is not a thing separate from our quotidian necessities. It is intrinsic, so embedded in our daily life that it disappears precisely because it is so inextricable from our essential ways as individuals and communal beings. Look around anywhere and you will find its influence, everywhere, always. It is our fundamental way of expressing interior experience, and as Michelle LeBaron has said, the way in which the “deepest unnamed substrates of a culture can emerge alongside universal mutualities” (LeBaron, 2003).

The case for the place of Art within academia has rarely been made as eloquently as in this film. That Art exists, finding its place within every community on the planet in diverse and multitudinous expressions, is a phenomenon so ubiquitous that we must concede an instinctively-evinced human need for its expressive modalities. As we struggle to make sense of its communicative power, its capacity to generate shared understanding and emotional engagement IS a commonality of our species.

The film's demonstration of dynamic convergence of Art Practice with Social Justice initiatives makes evident the substantive richness mined through collaboration between artists and social scientists, activists and researchers in both realms. The inherent challenges of this sort of cross-disciplinary work have been dramatically articulated by Dr. Cohen—but is made stunningly clear throughout the film that the efforts undertaken are encompassingly purposeful. Artists can catalyze a level of collective expressive venturing, allowing deep insights to emerge with implications across a vast expanse of disciplinary domains and realms of action.

“Acting Together on the World Stage” is a layered art form—an artistically-wrought documentary which transforms our understanding through its compelling presentation of artistic creations. Its blend of passionate commentaries and beautifully filmed performances is so fluid that an hour passes without notice, while an immensity of profound new knowledge is absorbed and inhabited emotionally. The film presents such breadth, so much global history both known and erased, so many charged images and rich stories that to properly comment, we would either have to sit mute for hours in stunned awareness—or talk until dawn. But as I'm sure you would rather have more time to hear from Dr. Cohen, I'll just offer a few musings that struck me as I watched the courageous participants, artists, peacebuilders and audiences. I should begin by saying that I would like to thank all of them for their tremendous acts of heart, truth and conscience.

The Peruvian director tells the story of how people stayed in the street following a performance, and how the act of handing a flower to one woman resulted in the sudden co-creation of a ceremony flowing from the theatrical scenario—in which the audience and performers share space but are separate—into a merging of actors and audience, a combining of theatre and ritual into a merged realm of human processing. This is a moment when the domain of art becomes visible in its affect—a sudden leap beyond the structural impositions of social orderliness into behaviors that allow congress of the unconscious and conscious, the self and the collective, the community and the stranger, in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

As one director said, the theatrical space is a place to identify issues that are taboo in normal avenues of discussion and to cut them open with a knife of truth-telling. We listen in the theatrical space in ways that we cannot access in the lecture hall—were we even to attend the lectures made available to us. We visit the theatre because we are willing, in that ritual context, to make ourselves open to hearing the stories we have otherwise succeeded to deny, ignore, rationalize away. In that space, we recognize the reason for our evasions: we hide—because we cannot bear to face the pain of others whose lives have been invaded by the violations and atrocities of war and acts of oppression. "Through performance we can learn to listen to our neighbors, to mourn, to grieve." The act of listening becomes a way, as one director said, of transforming our collective sense of collusive guilt through inaction into a sense of responsibility through acknowledgment. It reminded me of a quote from T.S. Eliot about poetry, easily

transferable to this theatre work: "Poetry may make us a little more aware of the deeper unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves."

The images of "Sorry Day" in Australia provided a breathtaking juxtaposition of the daunting complexities of social justice with the simple truths of human hearts. I marveled that the bureaucrats responsible for creating that official day were persuaded to cut through customary verbal firewalls to choose such a primal word as "Sorry." I can only imagine the firestorm of cynicism and controversy that attended that decision, but as someone first learning of it in the context of this film, it seemed in its stark simplicity to be a sort of miracle of truthfulness stripped of protective adornment, an activation of the Aristotelian principles of Practical Wisdom (about which we've been hearing at the Peter Wall Institute this year through Maxwell Cameron's thoughtful series).

The axiom expressed in one country "the strong never apologize" was overturned in another —"sorry begins with acknowledgment." Against the backdrop of the Institute's recent Workshop on Fairness, I was particularly sensitized to Sorry Day's enactment of a basic principle of redress so difficult to achieve in the slow grindings of political processes and yet so fundamental to our basic sense of human trust: if I transgress, I must apologize or there is no real closure for either party. Perhaps the word Sorry seems like little comfort against the extent of traumatic loss and pain. But the processes that brought the word into the air must have required some small degree of concession of intractable stances. Cynics though we may be, one can imagine that standing together in momentary acknowledgment generated a profound shift for many among that nation's peoples that will have long-term outcomes.

Sorry Day could have only come about through story-telling undertaken and heard. Its meaning was made visceral through the Art-based ceremonies, and the visible impact on the audience bespoke the power of those practices. Its rituals became a national touchstone. If Sorry begins with acknowledgment, healing is, as one of the directors said, made possible by the provision of venue for stories to be told out loud, to be embodied by the performers and the listeners. As Polly Walker said, indigenous ceremony was de-exoticized as hearts released from the dissonance of denial were able to glimpse their neighbors' worldview from the vantage point of inclusivity. Perhaps there was even a brief realization that all rituals look exotic from outside one's familiar cultural context.

(And when it comes to the varied dances of our species, nothing will ever look as strange to me as the site of a thousand men in identical uniforms anywhere, strutting in lockstep to the music of military marches as they prepare for the killing fields.)

Acting Together demonstrates how the theatre of social activism provides safe haven for communal grieving and the cathartic empowerment of publicly-declared victim testimony. It catalyzes deeper levels of undefended listening for the bystander, informing minds, igniting hearts, integrating comprehension. One cannot presume to know the road that must be traveled by both victim and perpetrator in moving forward from catastrophe. But as the Ugandan director said, to have a moment of knowing "this is what it feels like to be in this situation" is a best hope in accessing our capacity for empathy, and those most elusive and desired of tools:

compassionate deterrents to future destruction. Artistic practices evoke shared awareness, allowing room for a collective re-imagining of relational interaction. When we feel each other's pain as our own, acts of violence become a collective excruciation, as should they always be.

When we feel collectively engaged in healing from harm we momentarily become each other's loving family—a state in which we shall perhaps one day live as an ongoing simple truth.

This is the realm of Art as it partners with the goals of Social Change. As the film makes abundantly clear, Art's power to linger within our psyches, to generate shifts, provide voice for victims, and create palpable links among groups who have been separated by bias, belief, or bloodshed transcends many other normative approaches to remediation. To quote a director, "by immersing ourselves in what is going on within us as well as what went on around us" we connect at the core of our beings, where the seeds of transformative renewal can find fertile ground.

Thank you, Dr. Cohen, for providing such an eloquent demonstration, and for telling so many needed stories.

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