



STUDY ON THE FARM SHOW: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN COLLECTIVE CREATION

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ABSTRACT

The best and most typical example of collective creation in the sociological genre, The Farm Show, was premiered by the Theatre Passe Muraille in August 1972 to an audience of farmers and locals in an abandoned barn near Clinton, Ontario. This event marked the beginning of the dominant form of Canadian documentary. The production was first developed for a small rural village close to Clinton by a group of exceptionally creative and clever actors. It was so successful that the troupe brought it to Toronto and then went on tour, performing for several communities in Saskatchewan and Ottawa. Additionally, it was broadcast on radio, and Michael Ondaatje captured its development on film. It was genuinely amazing how popular this play was with audiences all over the world. Its spontaneity, simplicity, and genuine characters and circumstances captivated the urban audience. As a play and a cultural phenomenon, The Farm Show is both avant-garde and groundbreaking. One of the best pieces of Canadian theater, it served as the model for a type of community documentary theater that was based on the actors' individual reactions to the original performance. The performance sparked a lot of imitations across Canada, the majority of which used collective creation processes that Paul Thompson, the artistic director of Passe Muraille, had devised. As with Passe Muraille's subsequent efforts in the genre, few of his followers were as dramatically intelligent as the original. The play's genius can be attributed to a number of factors, but ultimately to Paul Thompson's innovative creativity in developing the topic and directing the production. In the sociological genre, this play is often regarded as the best and most representative example of the Passe Muraille style.

KEY WORDS: *Farm Show, Sociological Perspective, Collective Creation, Farmers.*

INTRODUCTION

The Farm Show is a patchwork of scenarios that are literally "recorded" in the neighborhood. A statement stating that "All characters in this play are non-fictional" follows the list of characters. "Any likeness to living individuals is entirely deliberate" (Thompson, introduction 12). The project's success appears to refute the

conventional critical belief that, in order to be effective, a dramatic idiom must be meticulously crafted to provide the appearance of realism rather than being drawn "raw" from reality. However, it's clear that even though the company used the words "given" to them by the residents of Cannon, a selection process was conducted, which undoubtedly increased the impact of those words. The scenes' arrangement and selection were also meticulously planned, as evidenced by the different scenes.

Beginning with *The Farm Show* in 1972, Theatre Passe Muraille's later sociological collectives in Ontario avoided the geographical distance between Doukhobors and their subject community. In the initial performances, at least (*The Farm Show* in Ray Bird's bam near Clinton, *Under the Greywacke* in Cobah [1973], and *Oil* in Petrolia [1974]), they used the performance location and the subject community as the audience as authenticating "objects." Beyond the validating approbation of the audiences who served as their sources and subjects, these performances, like so many other later sociological collectives by the Mulgrave Road Co-op, 25th Street House, required little documentary validation. It is noteworthy, though, that *Under the Greywacke* and *Oil* did not travel, unlike *The Farm Show*, and that they had little other claims to authenticity.

Even though the collaborative creation movement is a component of the broader anti-naturalistic movement of the modern era, Passe Muraille's social exhibition truly embodies the pinnacle of naturalism—a exact copy of life. According to Thompson, his productions reflect the "real spirit" and "essence" of the communities they depict, going beyond mere mimicry. His method is akin to the type of photographic depiction of reality that the naturalists were criticized for by modernists. His plays' success attests to the realistic/naturalistic mode's ongoing appeal, despite its shift in focus and style from a psychological issue to a sociological one, and from an authorially produced play to a group production. Thompson's naturalism, which has a distinct local and modern flavor, is a post-Brechtian variation of Ibsen's school.

CREATIVE TREATMENT OF REALITY

The play *The Farm Show* had a shocking beginning since, aside from the notion of writing a play on the type of farming community in Ontario, there was no source material or preconceived notion about the play's direction. All the performers needed to do was gather the Clinton community's material and write the play as it came to them. As a result, *The Farm Show* has changed from being an artistic representation of reality to a work of fiction that blends actual and fictional people and tales. According to an interviewer, Thompson himself stated that "the going out to communities is from things we'd read about happening in China".

"Someone said one day, making fun of your communist attitude, by the way, "next time you'll be doing a show like they have in Russia, about some guy in love with his tractor," he stated in 1974 when describing the origins of the play. "That's an idea," he said. (Filewood, 35). Thompson made this comment while instructing a Brock University theater course. In order to move a company of actors to Clinton, where Ted Johns had a relative who in turn had an empty farmhouse that Thompson would be able to utilize, he first discussed his thoughts with Ted Johns, a colleague instructor who then offered a specific proposal. The success of the play is largely due to this intimate relationship and a group of exceptionally talented and perceptive actors. Ted Johns, a member of the company and sporadic dramatist in his own right, prepared the version of the play that was published in 1976. Two notes, one by Ted Johns and the other by Paul Thompson, precede the text. The theory and procedures of *Passe Muraille* are well explained in both prefaces. "This is a record of our version of 'grass roots' theatre," writes Thompson. The plan was to take a group of actors to an agricultural village and use what we saw and learned to create a play. No "story" or "plot" in the traditional sense exists (Preface 7).

Descriptions of the development process are included in the introduction to the play's published script: These draw our attention to some noteworthy characteristics: The plan was to bring a group of performers to an agricultural village close to Clinton, Ontario, and have them create a play based on what they saw and learned. The piece evolved through improvisations, visits, and interviews rather than being documented. Along with their stories, the community provided us with the majority of the words utilized. A significant amount of our time was devoted to attempting to mimic these individuals' speech and movement patterns. This seemed to be the most effective technique to capture the essence of who they were. The players had no idea what they were doing in the early summer of 1972. The actors' attempts to represent their insights during daily improvisational sessions gave rise to the dramatic approaches and the songs. The outcome initially didn't seem like a play: hay bales for seats, a bam for a theater, no lights, no costumes, and no set. Performance, pure and simple (Preface 7).

The play's relationship to reality is established by these introductions: it is about real people in a real community and uses their words. The play itself makes frequent claims to its own truth during the performance. The Farm Show's special force lies in the fact that it's not just about a farming community; it's also about strangers coming together in a life-long way—farmers, actors, and farmers with actors. The experience the players had while studying the material is the subject of the play. The play chronicles the players' developing awareness as they interpret the farmers' life. The actors are a community observing a community in that sense.

The three actors and three actresses from Toronto enchanted their audience with songs, poems, sketches, interpretive exercises, and monologues. In actuality, the majority of the scenes' neighbors were recognizable to the local audience members. The straw bleachers erupted in howls of laughter and sighs of embarrassment. And somehow, the actors were able to avoid offending anyone (they hope) and giving false testimony about the characteristics of any of their new acquaintances while exposing the community's characters to the public (Wallace, Up the 121).

The Farm Show has an episodic or anecdotal format. According to Paul Thompson, the play's structure is "more akin to a Canadian Sunday school or Christmas concert, where one performer recites, another sings, a third performs a skit, etc." (Preface 7). In the opening monologue, for example, he says that "the show kind of bounces along one way or another and then it stops" (TFS 19). He might perhaps be referring to the structures of the majority of collective works, which are frequently referred to as "free-form" or "revue-style" entertainment by critics. Each of the play's two acts contains ten scenes.

Every scene in the play depicts a different aspect of farm life, ranging from the portrayal of everyday routine to significant societal issues, since it is a living portrait of an agricultural community. There are moments intended to dispel the idealistic and naive beliefs that city inhabitants have about country living in between poeticized depictions of rural life. The audience is given the essential details of the six-week trip to the Clinton region in the first scene. Claims such as "we got to know," "we wanted to go around to some of the different farmers," "we went," "we saw," and so forth are made throughout the play. Furthermore, the play's opening scene foreshadows just what the particular nature of that relationship to reality will be. The stage, which is arranged like a map of the district with markers showing where many of the characters in the play live imitated or were mentioned, attracts the audience's attention. This stage has several identities because it is a non-representational playing area that may be changed into bams, farms, houses, Goderich's town square, and more.

However, as a map, it retains its connection to reality despite all of these changes. Thompson himself, or "one of the more laid-back members of the cast," appears on a map of the village that is the subject of the documentary at the beginning of the play to explain to the audience the nature of the teamwork that created the program: We went to an agricultural town close to Clinton, Ontario, last summer. Approximately 120 kilometers to the west of Toronto is Clinton. If this location existed on this map, it would be directly off the front of stage left. You travel down to Kitcheners and then follow the number eight highway to Stratford, Mitchell, Seaforth, and Clinton. Our village is now located next to the number eight freeway. The roads and

the names of the several farmers in the area are displayed on this map (which is marked on the nude stage) (TFS 19).

Following his explanation of the nature of the partnership, the actor goes on to provide a list of real farm equipment, validating properties that represent the reality that the performance (like the stage map) purports to depict: We... returned from Clinton with a few items. This is a component of a dryer. Not to be confused with the hay bales you will learn about later, these are straw bales. A can of old cream. A few cartons. A real grocery cart from Clinton (TFS 19).

The crates draped in white fabric in the "Winter Scene" become a winter scene, the shopping cart becomes an automobile, and a postal box becomes a snowmobile, among other transformations, because these items are utilized as props in the play. However, despite all of these changes, they continue to be items from Clinton. They offer linkages to reality and humorous honesty. At the deep structural level, they enable the scenes to have meaning and provide reality the capacity to influence society. The play's paradoxical relationship to reality is demonstrated by the stage and props, which keep reminding the audience of the reality behind the performance's façade while maintaining a distance from representational realism. As a result, each performer portrays a variety of community members, both past and present, as well as trees, animals, machinery, and landscapes, while being present to the audience as a particular individual who visited Clinton and contributed to the creation of the play.

The farmer can't understand why Miles Potter would want to construct a coffee table out of the old planks of his barn or why he expects "organic vegetables from your garden and all, far out!" when he is informed that supertime has arrived. His big city enthusiasm leaves the farmer speechless. This scene is notable for two reasons: first, it solidifies the play's aggressive, humorous tone; second, the conversation between these two guys reveals how first-hand experience shaped everything in the play. Thirdly, this is the first scene of mimetic exchanges and the first of many that will occur. It acts as the cornerstone of the play's empathetic and comic tone. The two actors' contrast serves as a reminder of the distance the players have traveled while creating the play. The company has adhered to the inherent constraints of its material while creating the play. People have shown them and told them what they were prepared to show and tell. In the same way that the locals were prepared to show themselves to strangers, the play reveals its topics. The play's "Round the Bend" scene, which consists of a number of pictures of the individuals who live around the bend of the road at their places of employment, establishes this practice. It appears as though the seventeen figures in this scenario are introducing

themselves to the performers. Of these brief speeches, Betty Feagan's is the most explicit: "Oh hi! Enter now! No, we're not occupied. Over there, we noticed the light was on. We didn't go over, but we know you were there. We had no idea what to anticipate, you know. Janet must be you. Ross, look who's arrived!" (TFS 26).

This speech's reserved warmth is a defining feature of all the play's monologues. Through mime (a yucca tree and a chicken being fed) and sound (agricultural equipment and a dog barking), they recreate the scene. Additionally, audience engagement and improvisation are welcome. Interaction between performers and the audience may or may not take place, depending on the circumstances or atmosphere of the evening. For instance, the actor playing a small child named Stephen Lobb tosses the ball he is playing with into the audience. The company's initial hesitant glances of the farm people's own viewpoints—their way of life, their thoughts on farming, and their cautious display of goodwill toward the guests—are suggested by the scene's numerous voices. The play's strength and diversity stem from its modesty and restraint. It does not, however, go beyond the bounds set by the briefness of the contact. This is especially evident when irony is absent. In other words, the performer's understanding of the character and what they convey to the audience corresponds to the character's level of self-awareness. To an audience, the performer "demonstrating" a character has already been seen as "demonstrating" themselves. This congruence between the process of collecting the material from hesitant people over a short period of time and the final product emerging is primarily responsible for the authentic impression that the presentation portrays.

Later audiences see the original audience while the actors are greeting them, and the original audience sees themselves reflected through the actors in this scene. The other actors who were acting out the objects and activities in their scenes were with the actors when this scene was performed. After focusing on their abilities, the actors start the play's most poetic and lyrical moment, "Winter Scene", in the following episode. This scene, which is divided into three sections with a poetry and mime segment at the start and a conclusion framing the main position, describes what it was like to live through a snowfall in the country for the entire day. This scenario, which features three players, begins with one actor presenting two lines from the "Winter Poem": It was midwinter. Everything is cozy, warm, and compact within.

Two all-purpose crates are covered with a wide white sheet to create the winter scene. The other two performers portray a variety of male and female characters that depict agricultural family life. Taking on a dozen roles as men, women, and kids at work and play, they act out all the different activities of a windy day: breakfast inside

the house, chores in the bam, various errands in town, and a square dance at night with the voice of winter, which includes miming "window," "frost," "icicles," and "snow."

The impressionistic and rhythmically timed sequences lead the actors' words and the objects' movements to overlap and flow in parallel directions. The containers serve as a house and a bam in different ways. A bean dryer indicates that the mother is driving her son to the hockey arena in a Clinton grocery cart. The farmer's snow mobile is represented by an old mailbox, which serves as another multipurpose prop. All of these items combined with the normal conversation of daily life give the presentation's pretend play a humorous authenticity. After the scenario concludes with the lively atmosphere of a square dance party, the two protagonists mim "moon" and "snow" before returning to the opening poetic tone. It has been demonstrated that this sequence has required a great deal of expertise, adaptability, and vocal timing from the actors.

In their roles as paraders and onlookers, the performers and the audience are both aware that the Protestants' customary celebration of King William's well-known crossing of the Boyne is largely a thing of the past. The parade's decorations and ceremony have received a lot of attention:

LODGE MEMBER

I'm grateful, Mr. Mckinley. (Strongly shakes his hand) Thank you very much. We would like you to keep in mind that Mr. Mckinley is the Member of Parliament for this area, and we are extremely proud to have him. True Blue cuts them off as they leave backstage with Mckinley.

TRUE BLUE

Banner! Faithful Orange Lodge The Seventh Oh, one. our forebears' faith. Instead than submitting to popism, they died. A crucifix is in front of the Boys of Deny and a few monks who are kneeling.

GRAND MARSHALL

King William of Orange (actor portraying a man astride a boisterous and rambunctious horse) on a white horse. Grand Marshall, Goderich, Loyal Orange Lodge. (The procession continues at a slower pace with fewer participants.)

SPEAKER

Now, let me share one of those Newfie jokes with you. The interaction between farmers and actors, which forms the play's content, and the interaction of documentary and theatrical norms, which forms its form, create the framework of The Farm Show. The "Charlie Wilson" scene will be useful if one attempts to analyze how this structure communicates itself because it is in this scene that the collective effort and shared creativity reach their most potent expression. The scene starts by restating its factual foundation and remembering the actual procedure by which it came to be:

We asked one of the farmers last summers if he knew anyone in the neighborhood who was regarded as strange. Someone from outside the community and a little odd. He claimed that Charlie Wilson was the only man that sprang to mind. To find out what people recalled about Charlie, we went around asking people.

"Some of his tools, his letters, and his hat" are items that belonged to the hermit and were utilized as props in this scene. The scenes' theatrical sense coexists with these connections to a normal sense. With just putting on the old man's hat, one actor, David Fox, changes his appearance on stage to become Charlie Wilson, transforming the small group into a living collage of the farmers whose memories they collected. "Well, I can tell you one thing about Charlie Wilson - he's dead" is one of two strong statements that frame the situation. "He was odd and kept apart, but he's in heaven".

However, these testimonies of Charlie Wilson's absence are poignantly contradicted by the scene's effect, which makes the deceased man present. Upon contemplating the reanimation of Charlie Wilson in this scene, it becomes evident that the performers and the residents of the Clinton region are its co-creators. From the banality of "oh, Charlie was a croker, he'd get off some good ones" (TFS 59) to the spare poetry of this recollection: I can tell you exactly what Charlie looked like, the people who keep Charlie Wilson alive in their memories are partially responsible for his incredibly moving presence. He had a long, thin face that appeared to have been cut from a white elm. He had a square jaw, a slightly protruding chin, and was extremely pale. Although he was always clean-shaven, there were times when his beard was visible and it was white (TFS 59).

The performers' labor intersects with that of the farm people. Because their models were present in the original crowd, the recalls are done by persons whose mimicking skills were severely tested. Given that the character that emerged in David Fox's mind had been a familiar figure to many audience members for their entire lives, his portrayal of Charlie Wilson was both a greater creative endeavor and a risk.

Last but not least, the scene is a testament to the company's creative efforts, as it is in charge of the material's arrangement and selection. The overall impact of its arrangement and selection is far higher than the sum of its individual components. Many people think of a hermit; he is portrayed in a performance; these various threads are braided to produce, ironically, a potent image of community at the levels of social structure and community from Charlie Wilson's loneliness. One could consider his loneliness to be a social role. His relationship to the community is defined by his outsider status, although he is by no means an outsider. After hearing several people describe that relationship in terms of frequent house calls, his handyman function, and his standing as a self-educated man, we have a powerful impression of the community as a whole. The final line of the scenario, "wishing you the compliments of the season and again thanking you for your kindness, I remain, your friend, Charlie Wilson," is significant since it depicts a social interaction.

The agricultural workers are shown at work in the final two scenes of the first act, "Man on a Tractor" and "Washing Woman." In the former, a farmer, who is positioned on the shoulders of the middle actor, controls a tractor that is formed by three actors standing in a row, making the proper noises while he makes his point. "There's always a bit of danger involved," the farmer added, adding that "you gotta be awake, you gotta be alert, you gotta be watching." The audience, who believed that farming was a happy occupation, learned about the difficulties and risks involved with operating a tractor when they heard the sentence, "I don't know anybody on this line hasn't turned his tractor." (TFS 62). An illustrative performance results from the performers' imitation of the tractor sound and their gestures, which correspond with the farmer's speech.

FIRST GIRL

After completing my 13th grade, I made the decision that I do not wish to attend college. I work for an insurance firm in London, and because I've never lived off the farm before, I'm particularly looking forward to London life. I have no idea whether or not I will return to the farm.

SECOND GIRL

I met a boy a few years ago, and we made the decision to tie the knot. I left home after a fight with my parents because they didn't like him. We currently reside in Toronto, and I haven't visited the small area of territory that runs from Windsor to the vicinity of Montreal. The strip land, which ranges in depth from ten to seventy miles, supplies food for over 40% of the country and is losing land at a rate of 43 acres every hour. Although

I've never been good at math, that's roughly a million acres year based on quick calculations. You know, that's quite quick. That's incredibly quick! (TFS 100).

Bruce Pallett passionately highlights the several additional economic hardships that farmers endure in a thought-provoking speech. Urban "bellyachers" who believe that farming "should be a public utility, and that everybody should supply food for free" (TFS 101) appear to be more conscious of it. His furious outburst at the end of the scene demonstrates his dedication to farming and represents the company's response to farmers facing hardship.

The challenges of farming forced him to consider ways to cultivate the land efficiently. Lastly, he creates the tractor. According to TFS 104, "they were laughin' and screamin' and holdin' their sides" when the other agricultural workers saw this "infernal machine." All of the farmers rushed to the riverside to try to save the boys as a poor widow yelled that both of her sons were trapped in the flash flood, but the torrent engulfed them. In order to release the lads, they returned with the horses, but they remained motionless because they were terrified of thunder and lightning. John Deere eventually emerged from his barn on the tractor, went to the youngsters' aid, and saved their lives. However, once more, he attached the kitten to his indefensible machine before the "white water upstream" tragically dragged him away to a watery demise when he attempted to save the girl's pet kitty. Since then, people have remembered John Deere's valiant conduct, and the tractor has been branded with his name in remembrance of this courageous deed. The "Ballad of John Deere" marks the pinnacle of the play's myth-making as a creative discovery process in a fittingly rustic manner.

When the Farm play was initially performed, it was much more than just a play; it actually changed the dynamic between the performers who produced it, the farming community that the show was about, and its initial audience. Furthermore, the play's structure and content embody this metamorphosis, which can be replicated and reenacted in later productions.

It becomes clear that something really important was happening when one reads or hears about the original performance. Neither group had any idea what to anticipate before to the performance. The performers were unsure of how their mimicry would be received, and the farmers had no idea what they would witness. It is clear that the performance itself created a powerful energy exchange that left everyone speaking of it in the highest possible terms. The performance's liminality actually took the event quite near to the ritual pole. Additionally, the "communitas" experience was shared inside this field. This sensation was partly brought on

by the actors' direct mirroring of their listeners and their theatrical performance style, which emphasized their identities as performers.

Despite The Farm Show's photographic reproduction approach, the placement of the reproductions has been carefully considered to provide the intended effect on the viewer. One of the reasons for its success is the play's internal structure, which subtly manipulates the public's emotions.

A comprehensive assessment of the play's strengths and weaknesses has likely been impeded by The Farm Show's entertainment value and subsequent success, especially in locations far from Clinton. The Farm Show, according to some critics, is more sociological than dramatic. Its form is undoubtedly more of an assemblage than a creative endeavor. However, when performed by the original ensemble, the piece exuded a loving sense of humor, a charming energy, and an obvious sincerity. It was actually novel, appealing, and fresh. Overnight, copycats of this group effort appeared everywhere, and for a moment, playwriting appeared to be in danger of becoming obsolete. simultaneously. The crowd was captivated by The Farm Show. The fall of the family farm was perceived as a loss by urban audiences in particular, who were just now catching up to the back-to-earth movement of a few years earlier. In what may have otherwise been an agit-prop event, the players' evident love for their farming pals diminished the bitterness of the circumstances of this loss. In many respects, the Farm Show is representative of the significant options that the Theatre Passe Muraille, led by Paul Thompson, had to decide on. The show was able to tour because of the demand it generated.

Additionally, because of its actor-centered, non-scenic presentation, it could be performed anywhere there was a crowd, including formal theater venues, livestock barns, community halls, and sales bams. The Farm Show was an indigenous kind of popular theater that had disappeared with the invention of the movie theater, according to the residents of theatrically remote regions.

The play is undoubtedly superficial if one only evaluates it based on how well it examines a rural community. The process by which the play was created—that is, the company's six-week interaction with the agricultural community, the interviews, the preparation, and the first performance—is what it principally portrays, if one pays attention to the play itself.

CONCLUSION

The Farm Show does a fantastic job of capturing the unique sense of community that grew over the course of the six-week encounter and culminated in the first performance, regardless of its merit as a living depiction of a farming community. Here, "special experience" refers to the community's experience wherein various groups, who are typically kept apart by their social responsibilities, come together in a unique time that goes beyond social roles and the bounds of everyday social life. The Farm Show combines the documentary and the ceremonial by capturing a bit of the unique nature of this transitional state. Consequently, when evaluated as a performance's theatrical statement. Because the players were able to capture the community from within, The Farm Show is a sophisticated piece of art that works. Despite its very elaborate production and its misleading surface simplicity, the play remains a subjective account of a personal contact with farmers. It is unquestionably the most popular of its kind that Passe Muraille has manufactured. In the category of cooperatively produced sociological plays, the play under investigation is the best example.

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