

Pol Pelletier

From Politics to Spirituality: Toward a New Synthesis

In the seventies, "politics" or "the political", were not dirty words.

In the seventies, I was a woman of the theatre and an ardent feminist. I believed then as I do today that a work of art contains a vision of the world, and that this vision, in a very wide sense, has political connotations: it shows how power is distributed in outer reality and either supports and/or confirms this organisation or proposes another model. Artists who insisted on "pure art", on being "free", untainted by gross ideological concerns, were, as far as I was concerned, simply unaware of their relationships to power and of their representation of it. Feminists used to say: "the private is political", that is: private life is also ruled by games of power; the family, sexual roles, relationships, are a faithful mirror of what goes on in the outer world of business, government, etc.

It all boils down to a question of awareness: how aware am I as an artist of what I am transmitting? How much do I care?

Let me be precise. In the seventies, I co-founded a women's theatre which was known for its very audacious aesthetics. I did not produce what is known as "political theatre"; this type of theatre, in my country, was primarily concerned with a clear-cut "message" and a desire to achieve immediate, concrete results, for example, get a syndicate going, establish a day-care centre, etc. This type of practicality was not my path. Beauty is my quest. Poetry is my path. Images, sounds, forms.

But I truly believed then, and still do, that this beauty, that these images, have a deep influence on the spectator and can change the world.

I believed in change.

I wanted to create images that would change the meaning of the word "woman".

I think that I did quite a good job. Theatre in my country was profoundly changed by women's work. Consciousness was raised and aesthetics vastly transformed.

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But I grew tired. I grew sad. I was always angry. Always confronting the horrible outside world. Always struggling. I was also deeply dissatisfied and deeply hurt because of the way we interacted with each other. Infantile, cruel, unclear. So unclear.

I was being pulled within. I didn't know it yet. I didn't know what was pulling me. But the outside world no longer interested me.

I totally lost interest in the political. Other women, other men, organisation, injustice, blah, blah, blah.

In 1985, after ten years of work with women, I resigned from the theatre I had founded. And went on a new quest. Who am I? Deeper than "woman of the theatre", deeper than "feminist". How deep can one go? India, a master, meditation. Transformation.

I entered the world of spirit. Of eternity. The person who emerged was very different. In fact, this person was me, just me, my being uncovered, revealed, little by little, at last. I am coming home.

My relationship to the theatre was radically transformed. At age forty, I wished to start anew, with this new knowledge of what is "being", soul, spirit, presence.

On my return from India, I founded a training centre for actors. I developed a training method and a theory to visit the invisible. And strangely, although my goals were now apolitical - I wished to deeply comprehend my craft, to possess and master it - my observations of hundreds upon hundreds of actors led me to very interesting conclusions, which were, in part, political (I will explain this in more detail further on).

I now feel ready to make a synthesis of all the forces that directed my life and my work: aesthetics, politics, spirituality, pedagogy.

The political aspect of my work in the seventies was characterised by group con-

sciousness, common goals, solidarity, passionate exchanges. These elements have been cruelly missing in my life for many years. They are coming back with more and more force. Writing this article for *The Open Page*, which is a women's theatre journal, in an issue on "Theatre, Women, Politics" is in itself a political act. I am reaching out.

There is so much work to be done.

In my country, as I said before, theatre has been greatly transformed. There are now a fair number of women directors, set designers, playwrights, technicians, widely respected. But, most often, the content and the form of their work is very similar to the traditional male vision of the world. (Except for the playwrights. This is very significant. And female playwrights do not get staged very often.) Recently I saw an excellent production by a woman director. The text was by a male author. Out of the five characters, there was only one female character, and she was a stupid, sex-crazed maid who slept with everyone thus obtaining some measure of power over the men. To top it all, the character was played with total unawareness by the actress who evidently thought she had a very important, sexy role. So sad, so shameful. I was so ashamed.

This example is very characteristic of women's work in the theatre in my country. There is no doubt about the talent and expertise involved, but, evidently, women artists are still serving and enriching male visions, consciously and/or unconsciously.

Very specifically, also, I must admit I was propelled to write this article because the previous issue of *The Open Page* "Theatre, Women, Lives" left me with a general impression of low self-esteem (certain articles did not have this characteristic but they were the exception).

The theme of this particular issue was

the use of one's life to create theatre; in many articles, the women artists seemed to be grappling with the problem of "meaning"; make meaning, make sense, is it possible with this material? Does it have meaning? What is meaning? All male creators use their lives as food for creation, explicitly or not. But women do not attach value to their experiences. Doubt, confusion, fatigue, depression ... always seem to be lurking in the shadows.

One woman's article seemed to be very indicative of women's plight. This actress was struggling to create something which was inspired by an episode in her life. A male colleague suggested she uses *Oedipus in Colon* to flesh out her work. She was not attracted to this idea but was hesitant in using her own experience, afraid that her own life would be too "banal". What is the difference between the myth of Oedipus and the myth contained in this woman's life? She finally did end up by creating a theatre piece from her own material. Historically, this is a very important change. Not long ago, she would have used Oedipus, not knowing what else to do. How many woman directors want to stage Molière, Shakespeare, and other great names? These plays, most often, present images of women which are inferior or boring. How is it that women find them attractive? Politics. To be considered a powerful woman director, one has to take on the big male names, not some unimportant woman author. Power.

Power.

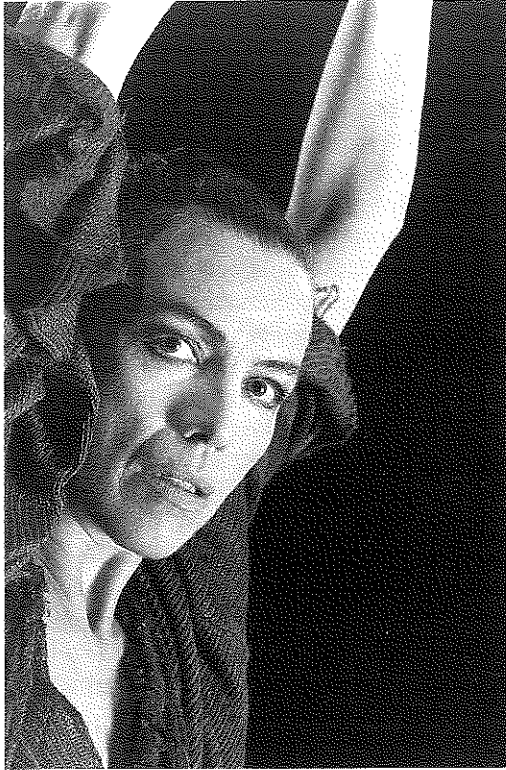
Another thing struck me in this issue of *The Open Page*. It is often stated that since actors started creating their own productions through improvisation, in the seventies, they have acquired some creative autonomy. In another article, one woman stated that, in those days, great attention was paid to form: *how* things were done seemed to be a guarantee of real change.

There is a lot of illusion in these assertions. I am the first to applaud the actor's move towards more autonomy, the traditional hierarchical situation being very uncreative and very boring. In my country, the democratisation of creation was effected through collective creation, all tasks being shared by everyone. But collective creation disappeared very brutally in Quebec in the eighties, for many complex reasons, one of them being the realisation that not everyone can do everything. Making theatre requires many skills. An actor is not necessarily a writer, or a producer, or a lighting designer.

I would like here to insist on the importance of language. Women will not achieve true power without using words. Putting things into clear form. In my country, before 1980, theatre had strong social and political links to reality, the language issue, the nationalist-separatist issue. It used words profusely. In the 1980s, after the referendum on the independence issue was lost, theatre became very image-oriented, stopped using words. "I am not being heard", the artists seemed to be saying. As one analyst said: "Words are very confronting. Images can lead to many interpretations." I do not necessarily agree with this totally. But I wish to affirm that works of theatre that systematically avoid words will reflect powerlessness, and/or confusion.

In the past, I have known women theatre artists from New York who were very active in the beginning phenomenon of experimental theatre. They realised that in those early groups where everyone was supposedly equal, the process of experimenting with form did not lead to real change. Behind these "new" forms lay the same symbols that keep women inferiorised.

When I started working with women, I insisted on the importance of each woman creating a personal mythology that would



Pol Pelletier in *Océan*. Photo: Y. Provencher

fuel new images and new meanings. Form and content, body and soul, private and political, cannot be separated, they are reflections of one another. But first the inner world must be rich. The inner world of most women is poor, filled with degrading images, self-loathing, or empty stereotypes.

I have delved deeply into this darkness, into my own unconscious and what I call the female collective unconscious. I have encountered lots of pain. I have emerged with strength and self-esteem. And creative abundance.

In recent years, I have written a series of solo plays which were based on autobiographical material. I refuse to see any difference in value between this material and any other. All of my plays were great successes. One journalist said: "How can she manage

to speak of such unfashionable subjects as feminism and spirituality and totally fascinate us?" They are *my* references. I am a woman. Another journalist said: "It doesn't matter what her subject matter is. It's what she does with it. She is an artist."

I wish to stress, however, that the material and the form of my plays, coming from a woman, are vastly different from what is generally presented and that success was a long time coming. Even now I am viewed with a great deal of ambiguity. I am called a "marginal actress" ("who creates beautiful shows ..."), whilst I have been co-founder and co-director of two very important theatres in Quebec, I am also an author, a director, a pedagogue, a theoretician. This is not clearly recognised. It is probably safer for many people to view me in a powerless and relatively unimportant way. And there is nothing more powerless than an "actress".

The voice of women has not been heard yet. We are just beginning. Whispering still. Before the status of women is vastly improved - it may take centuries - everything a woman does in the public domain will have a political meaning. And be threatening? Or be misinterpreted?

(I will open a parenthesis here to speak of a film written and directed by a woman that is a good example of the political, moral and aesthetic power of a work of art: *The Piano*, by Jane Campion, a revolutionary film which presents a vision of the world that explodes all of our currently accepted views of male, female, sex, childhood, native people, art, death, happiness. At last, I see an artistic representation of reality, which has some connection to my inner world. Thank you, Jane Campion.)

I wish to come back to the issue of "meaning" which I found so prevalent in *The Open Page*. The search for "meaning" and the difficulty of finding "meaning" seems to me to be the basic cultural trait of

the twentieth century. In our century, God died, and since then society and art have been haunted by a feeling of purposelessness. For women, and women artists, the subject has an added dimension which can be paralysing. How can I, an insignificant woman, create meaning when the whole universe is devoid of it?

In the past, I have been plagued, like most women, with the torture of "Why?" You write two pages and then: "Why go on?" "For whom?" "What does it mean?" "It is worthless ..." The feeling of being in a void, so alone, so disconnected. The "why" is characteristic of the mind which always searches for causes, consequences, logical structures, predictability. But the act of creating means entering into the unknown; the limiting qualities of the mind, especially the female mind, are not the right allies for this endeavour.

Entering into the unknown requires a great deal of self-love.

My voyage into spirituality totally changed my relationship to meaning. My voyage into spirituality is a voyage out of the mind, out of the cultural values of my society. I no longer have any anguish about: "Why am I here?" "What is the meaning of life?" "It is all so absurd, living, dying, creating, for what?"... I have encountered my soul. I have one certainty: that I am immortal. Everything I live, feel, perceive, is deeply meaningful and related to the whole universe. I feel totally related. I am here for a reason.

What propels me forward in my work now is pleasure, desire, excitement, intuition. Devotion. Trust. I trust the inner voice. I do not ask: "Why?"

The heart does not ask: "Why?" The heart jumps.

From politics to spirituality, there seems to be an abyss. Spirituality, the atemporal world, the invisible, the silent. Politics

belongs to the world of appearances, the fluctuating ripples on the surface of reality. For many years now, I have stopped reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and I do not own a television. "Politics" in the sense of "politicians" and "governments" totally disgust me and I do not understand why people give them so much attention and energy. I filter out the noise of the world. I wish to stay connected to the essential, to the very precious.

But listening to my inner voice, I know I am here to bring about change. It is not an idea. But an inner surge.

In my training method for actors, the relationship to the mind is fundamental. The purpose of the training is to bring about an altered state in body and spirit. I will not explain the method in detail; it has many dimensions. Let it suffice to say that one of the characteristics of this altered state is to no longer be governed by the mind, to attain a state of "beingness", where something else speaks, not the mind, which is the known, the cultural, the limitation, the negativity.

When actors are in this altered state, and are left free to improvise, the results have an aesthetic and socio-political significance that is astonishing.

One of the first things that I observed during these improvisations: human beings do not need to be "governed". As a true anarchist who does not believe in the State, I was enchanted to see that when people are truly free, there is a self-regulatory process that operates. Hundreds and hundreds of improvisations never led to a single act of violence; jealousy, rivalry, competition, and all kinds of opposition come to the surface, but they are transitory, like waves in the ocean, and never lead to all-out war, unless there is repression. This is fundamental. In one single case, the repression of a sexual feeling of one man for a woman led to a violent

episode between two men. These experiments have far-reaching implications. They could totally change our understanding of war, education, governments and leaders.

The actors participating in these sessions were awe-struck by the beauty and the deep significance of these improvisations which happen between people who do not know each other and who are not following imposed themes or rules of any kind. No "direction", no constraints, no psychology. "But you don't *do* anything! You don't *say* anything! It is a miracle!"

The important thing to be remembered is that these improvisations are preceded by a long training period in which the actor's inner and outer state is totally transformed. (Is this heightened awareness state our natural, but long lost, state of being?)

Other observations that I have made: men and women are very different; testosterone leads to more active, confrontational behaviour, but this behaviour is generally very playful. Playfulness seems to be a basic human characteristic. Vitality, joyous sensuality and sexuality (I have never seen anything vulgar, ugly, exploitative, whilst sexual impulses are omnipresent), endless invention and creativity (no clichés, no false emotional effects), lots of body expression, lots of touching, jumping up and down, laughing, rolling around on the ground, singing and dancing in all kinds of forms but without the weight of "performance", unpredictability, humour, movement, change, nothing remains the same. Also, depending on the type of training used, and the parts of the spirit-body which are stimulated, other aspects, such as: contemplation, silence, magnetism, telepathy.

Generally in these improvisations, there is not an over-abundance of anguish, violence, grief, confusion, hatred, which are the main subjects of occidental art. Pain, solitude, feelings of frustration and inferiority are pre-

sent, evidently, but they are transitory, like waves in the ocean, like planets meeting and separating, flowers blooming and fading.

The work is mostly joyous. And always beautiful to look at. (Always? How is this possible? Without a director?) And deeply nourishing. Which I think is what art should do: nourish. And heal.

I will not go into further detail on the subject of actor's training which is far too vast for the scope of this article. In the future, I plan to use all this material in a theatrical presentation which will make everything much clearer.

For the moment, I will synthesise my path as follows: I left the outer world to find the inner voice. I then wished to transmit a method which permits other artists to meet this inner voice. Truth exists. It is a resonance. When one is faithful to this inner resonance, quite surprisingly, one finds oneself in harmony with the whole. For the moment, I find this political conclusion quite enchanting.

POL PELLETIER (Canada) was born in Ottawa in 1947. From 1975 to 1985 she founded and co-directed two theatre troupes: the Théâtre expérimental de Montréal (75-79) and the Théâtre expérimental de femmes (79-85). In '85 she left the latter and began a radical revision of her theatre practice. After several years of travel, study and training she then, in '88, founded the Compagnie de Théâtre Degré Zéro and the *Dojo pour acteurs*, an actors' training. *Joie*, a show representing the culmination of twenty years work was written and performed by her in 1992. In 1993 she founded the Compagnie Pol Pelletier, in order to present her work in Québec and abroad. In '95 she presented *Océan* and in '97 *Or*.