Reflection on Upintheair Theatre’s *Inside the Seed*

Education advocate Sir Kenneth Robinson’s famously animated lecture on “Changing Educational Paradigms” mentions aesthetic experience as awakening the mind and the heart, and I feel as if this happens each time I enter a theatre and see something provocative. Tonight’s event, the second showing of the world premier of Jason Patrick Rothery’s *Inside the Seed* was a lived experience of Robinson’s words. The play is staged in the East Van Cultural Centre’s Culture Lab, a smaller blackbox connected to the main building. EVCC has lots of fond memories for me, as I took plenty of youth acting lessons on Saturday mornings (and then would usually be picked up by my dad, who would often stop off at Andy’s Bakery on Commercial Drive for yummy pastries). While the bakery was not part of the aesthetic experience tonight, my dad was able to watch the show with me, which is often more of a treat than any delicious baked good. He has lived a good part of his adult life working in the theatre, and was my inspiration for my interest in theatre and film. Taking him to see this play tonight was like going home, and yet someplace entire new – it wa the first show I have ever seen in this new space.

The theatre was set up like an office, with audience seating in three rows on both sides of the alley. One side of the stage had modern office furniture, while the other had corrugated-cardboard stools (nicknamed mushrooms, as I later found out at tonight’s talkback session). We took our seats in the first row of the far side, closest to the mushrooms. On the wall behind them was a section of a Ruben’s painting, something with sinewy men being persecuted by Hera: fitting as this play is supposed to be a modern adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*. The riddle-solving king is now a “golden grain” producing businessman, whose genetically modified rice seed will feed an entire continent of starving African, if only for the three outspoken nations refusing to buy the “poisoned” seeds. Much is made of this ancient yet very timely metaphor, all of it pointing toward the classic tragedy. The rest of the cast take their positions on the mushrooms, acting as the chorus until they are called up to perform their scenes with Foster Bryant (the adopted son of Manhattan Project scientist James Bryant Conant, perhaps the closest the play gets to ethnographic details while remaining completely fictional).

Yet it is through art that truth gets revealed, and while the UBC creative writing graduate Rothery does his best to update the grim details of Sophocles’ original, so much of the present-day details come straight out of documentary films, such as Joel Bakan, Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott’s 2003 *The Corporation*, Bethany McLean, Peter Elkind and Alex Gibney’s 2005 *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* and Sturla Gunnarsson’s 2010 *Force of Nature: The David Suzuki Movie*. Staying behind for the talkback session, I was able to confirm that the cast and production team had watched documentaries such as these (if not these ones specifically) during their three-week rehearsal period. Fellow LLED student Tetsuro Shigematsu gave a bravado performance as the play’s Tiresias, making the blind seer a hybrid of scientist David Suzuki’s aggressive activism and Enron executive Lou Pai’s over-indulgent corporate recklessness. The rest of the cast played their parts admirably, and as Patrick Sabongui (the actor playing Foster Bryant) claimed about his demanding role, for him it was more about responding to the people and their demands. It was wonderful to see how each actor got involved with what their scene partners needed.

During the talkback session, one of the cast members, Mia Ingimundson, asked the audience what they thought of the alley staging, most likely curious as she will be directing *Uncle Vanya* in the same space later this season. While she got an encouraging response from an audience member during the talkback, I had to mention, on the way out, a production of the Scottish play I had seen earlier this summer that used similar staging techniques. Having seen what I had seen, and being able to share that aesthetic experience with someone else whom would understand the power of intimate connection between actor and audience, made this evening production a wonderful learning moment. Out in the lobby, someone from the audience approached my dad and I, asking if we knew how *Inside the Seed* connects with *Oedipus Rex*. I gave the best answer I could, and it wasn’t so difficult to make connections for her, and there was a comforting feeling of another connection shared between two people – how many times after a show do strangers approach you wanting to talk about what they have seen? It actually happened a couple times for me, and interestingly enough, each of the documentaries listed above prompted someone in the audience to share what was on their mind. As Robinson’s reveals, an aesthetic experience is more about waking up the mind/body connection and making people feel more alive. Who wouldn’t want to share this feeling with others?