

## **‘The Work is the Fix’: An Email Conversation with Darren O’Donnell, Artistic Director of Mammalian Diving Reflex**

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY LIAM JARVIS

### **Introduction**

Mammalian Diving Reflex (MDR) is an internationally renowned research-art atelier based in Toronto, Canada. Formed in 1993, the company’s mandate outlines a dedication to investigating the social sphere, producing one-off events, theatre-based performance, theoretical texts and community happenings. The company is led by Artistic Director Darren O’Donnell, and comprised of Producer Natalie De Vito, Associate Producer Eva Verity and a number of other collaborators who are invited to contribute their skills towards the creation of different projects. Over the last 17 years, the company have generated a series of events that induce interactions between strangers in public, dismantling barriers between individuals and fostering a dialogue between audience members. The company’s performances have occurred in diverse configurations and contexts all over the world, including live art and contemporary performance festivals in the UK and Ireland; MDR have performed at events which include Wunderbar, the LIFT Festival (London International Festival of Theatre), Cork Midsummer and the Norwich and Norfolk Festival. Recently in the UK, *Haircuts by Children* was performed in July 2010 as part of LIFT. This work gave children from the neighbouring communities of Canning Town the unique opportunity to work with the company to develop their hairdressing skills, before offering free haircuts to members of the public at a local hair salon in Hoxton, East London. The advertising copy described the event as playfully engaging with ‘the empowerment of children, with trust in the younger generation and with the thrills and chills of vanity.’ In this interview, conducted via email between 12<sup>th</sup> August and 14<sup>th</sup> September 2010, the company’s Artistic Director, Darren O’Donnell, kindly took time out of his commitments to respond to some questions.

### **Interview**

LIAM: Firstly, I wanted to ask about the internal community of the company; how did you meet? How do you work together? Does the formation of a new project come through process of discussion, an initial writing-led process or some other means of developing ideas?

DARREN: I started the company in 1993 to produce my own scripts. In 1998 Naomi Campbell joined to produce a show, *White Mice*, and stayed on until 2007, building the company from a project-based entity to one with an operating budget and multi-year funding. Natalie De Vito, who used to run Mercer Union, a gallery that I spent a lot of time at, stepped in when Naomi left. We have two more administrative co-ordinators and a bunch of project managers who can realize a few of the projects without my, or Nat's, involvement. We also have a bunch of collaborators who we engage on a case-by-case basis, depending on what we need: sound, video, graphics, editing, etc. At this point, most of the creative content comes from me, with plenty of input and contribution from everyone else. But since the devil is in the details, whoever is realizing something on the ground lays in the most important layer of artistry. An art project, like *Haircuts by Children*, occurs in the producing - it's not like the producer develops the context, raises the funds and then the artists lock themselves in a rehearsal hall and come up with the goods. The producing is the art.

LIAM: On the company website, your *Social Acupuncture* series of work is described as an exploration into 'an aesthetic of civic engagement: the artistic use of the institutions of civil society - of community centres, schools, seniors' centres, sports clubs, the media and public spaces.' Could you tell me a bit about the impulse behind this series of work involving consensual participation within communities?

DARREN: It was very personal; I wanted to have a deeper connection with the people in my immediate surroundings. I felt I was living on the surface of the city and I wanted to change that.

LIAM: I was very fortunate to experience *Haircuts by Children* at LIFT 2010 this summer. I know that this event (amongst others of your work) has toured extensively around the world. It is

fascinating that despite the international reach of these events, they exist at the level of local face-to-face encounters. Why do you choose to work in this way (when, for example, some companies choose to explore the live possibilities of digital modes of communication)?

DARREN: Because it's the most radical, and I mean the word literally: it's at the root. Material, same space/same time encounters are what it's all about. I mean, to be extreme about it, without them, it's all over; a face-to-face encounter is the only domain that belongs exclusively to theatre/performance. It's what makes the work special, so maximizing that attribute seems like a worthwhile and interesting project.

LIAM: What kinds of challenges does producing these events bring?

DARREN: Mostly what you would expect; permission forms from parents, paranoia, background checks, some questioning of the utility of the work, the very occasional accusation that we're somehow unethical. But the problems are usually standard personality problems. We often collaborate with organizations that have never worked with an artist before, which, for the most part is completely fine, but occasionally can result in small turf wars. We have a few requirements that are very unusual and can be challenging for a host organization, the primary one being that we like to work with a diverse group of kids. How that gets translated and realized can look very different from locale to locale, and it is a site of constant negotiation.

LIAM: You mentioned that your work was a personal response to feeling like you were living on the surface of the city, and wanting to change this. Could you tell me a bit about the local community of Toronto that gave rise to both these feelings and your unique practice?

DARREN: I often call Toronto a teenager - it's a big city with a big inferiority complex. It's big enough to want to party with the adults but still feels it's a bit too young: that exciting stuff is

always happening elsewhere. So part of the impetus behind some of the stuff I've been doing is to develop and share a sense of civic pride that could be considered particular to Toronto. Whether or not I'll be successful is probably not something that I'll ever be able to quantify; it's just fun to try. Tied in with this is the fact that, for the most part, people who live in Toronto were not born here so there's very little feeling of a shared history or shared identity, therefore even small casual social connections are difficult. It's difficult not to feel like a guest in Toronto, even after having lived here for so long. The thing about a guest is that you're never sure if what you're doing is correct, if you fit in. My work tried to directly engage with that by providing situations where people can develop their social intelligence, tackle some nervousness and experience contact with people who they may not ordinarily.

LIAM: So were there specific local problems (or globalised problems) that suggested the need for work that has an active social function?

DARREN: There are a lot of people from a lot of different places and considering how important ones city can be in ones self-identity what we have here is a lot of people who are looking to make things happen, but are deeply suspicious that they may be in the wrong place at the wrong time: that there are other more exciting places to be. This sort of calls for an intervention that attempts to take the focus off certain indexes (wealth, fame, influence), and onto some others (modesty, friendship, acceptance). But that's just a starting point; the desire to create socially engaged work stems, primarily, from the belief that in terms of artistic material, people and relationships, are great and exciting to work with.

LIAM: Would you say that the socially engaged work that you create is a response that is particular to city life and urban spaces?

DARREN: Socially engaged work always works better if there are people around and cities certainly have that, but social practice, in general, can happen anywhere, any how. The particulars of some of my concerns - racial diversity, for example - are probably a result of my exposure to the city but, on the other hand, that's a big reason why I came here, so it's a bit of a chicken/egg. Cities as places to encounter the magical complexity of other people is something that has always attracted me, something I trace back to my pre-school encounter with *Sesame Street*.

LIAM: In what particular ways do the local community engage with what you do, both in terms of participation in performance and beyond?

DARREN: They get involved in a variety of ways from passive audience to active participant: attending dinners, award ceremonies or just getting involved in a conversation. We are also studied by a lot of different students: theatre, performance, visual art, geography, children's studies, urban planning. I'm currently launching a pilot project with a bunch of 14 year-olds in my neighbourhood - the idea being that I involve them in as many of the local requests for performance I received, and I will try to turn the event to their advantage. For example, I've been asked to do a performance on a bus that will be taking people to a remote gallery at York University, one hour north of downtown. So I'm bringing along a few kids and asking the passengers on the bus (who are expecting a performance from me) to divide themselves into those who think they have something to offer 14 year-olds, and those who don't. Then I will facilitate a networking session between the kids and those who feel they have something to offer.

LIAM: Has the company's relationship to the local community in Toronto evolved over the years?

DARREN: We used to present scripts that I wrote, now we organize night markets, get 80 year olds onstage to talk about their orgasms - it's a complete shift. And it happened quite suddenly, with the series of projects we call *Social Acupuncture* back in 2003 and after years of banging my head against the conventions of theatre. Turning to the visual arts and, in particular, all the buzz around relational aesthetics and social practice, led to the breakthrough that really moved the work in this new direction.

LIAM: What sort of local responses have you had to the company's work?

DARREN: Most people really appreciate it and find it to be a refreshing, and sometimes confusing departure from theatre, but generally the response to us has been very positive. The company and I have been profiled in most of the major news outlets, occasionally making the "Best Of" lists for various things. Some people are suspicious and feel that we may be opportunistically using the kids we work with, but their analysis is usually silly, for example one critic suggesting that if we "really" cared about the kids, we would do something really meaningful like find their parents jobs. We're artists, not social workers, for goodness sake. We make whimsical, hopeful, utopian projects and we'd love to make the world a better place, but we're in no position to find people employment and nor should anyone expect us to. We also break a few classic community arts rules, which can upset people - classics like the artist should not take credit for work that is intended to provide some social benefit.

LIAM: The modality of your work is highly diverse, with performances occurring in theatre spaces, various public spaces, each creating entirely different kinds of interactions with different sectors of communities. Do you take a very different approach to the process of creating a particular event, and are there any commonalities?

DARREN: Each event has its own demands but, for all of them, we want to bring people together in unusual ways, generating social generosity and an exciting encounter. Diversity is very important, not out of some sense of do-gooderism, but simply because heterogeneous encounters are more enriching for everyone.

LIAM: Although I didn't get the opportunity to attend, I was struck by stories I'd overheard of the process of research that led to *The Best Sex I Ever Had*; a performance which focused on the taboo of sex and old age, for which you interviewed people aged over 65 about their sexual encounters (a work-in-progress of this show was performed earlier this year at the Pazz Festival, Oldenburg, Germany). Could you tell us a bit about the process that led to this performance? Where do you begin when entering into a community to facilitate discussion over potentially complex and sensitive subject matter?

DARREN: This project begins with a bunch of ads stuck up on poles all around the city. This, much to our surprise, turned into a performance in and of itself, getting people talking. We worked alongside a variety of organizations, senior groups, health organizations, etc. Then we have meetings that move along very slowly and gently.

LIAM: You mentioned that the process of gathering information for *The Best Sex I Ever Had* became its own performance. I was interested to ask what the transition was like from internal discussion with participants to public exhibition of the personal stories that were shared. How did the work change at that point?

DARREN: Since all the participants were required to tell their stories to each other - strangers - they were immediately in performance mode. We just coached, encouraged, dramaturged and invited in an audience. So the public moment was not such a big deal. The only thing that was

significant was that the participants are always doubtful about the interest an audience might have in their stories and they're always really surprised when it goes really well. They sometimes seem to view me as a bit of a magician. But it's nothing magical - people are interesting.

LIAM: In brochure copy for your company's work you have been described as 'lending a voice to those who are not normally heard, in particular children, youngsters and the elderly.' The social responsibility of the arts is something recognised in the company's mission statement also. How do you currently see the role of the artist, and are there any particular ways in which your practice has changed over the 17 years you have been creating work?

DARREN: I don't think artists have any more responsibility than anyone else, in fact, I would say that artists are also obliged to explore things like lack of responsibility but, personally, as someone who is interested in exploring how my day to day activities can contribute toward making life on earth a more pleasant experience, artistic endeavours can participate in shaping the day-to-day in exciting ways, because of the licence we have to do strange, useless things. A change in my attitude has been a shift from thinking I can make work about my concerns to thinking I can make work that resolves my concerns. The work is the fix.

Further information on MDR's *Social Acupuncture* series of work can be found both on the company's website ([www.mammalian.ca](http://www.mammalian.ca)) and in Darren O'Donnell's book, *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia*, published by Coach House Books. This publication includes the full text of *A Suicide-Site Guide to the City*, a show which plays with autobiography to explore life as a performance, and an extensive essay on the notion of civic engagement and social interaction as an aesthetic.