

Preface

In the beginning the project was not that unreasonable – well, okay...the concept of adapting Shakespeare into a live rugby match probably would not have won any “Vulcan of the Year Award” – but I was firmly convinced that the production was to begin and end there. No Hollywood sequels for this artist. No resting on creative laurels and capitalizing on one-hit wonders. No rehashing old jokes to new contexts. No siree bob. Will not happen. (*Pause; silence except for distant single cough*)

COCULUZZI You see – it’s not a sequel...we’ll adapt the entire Works of Shakespeare into live sporting events...once every year for five years...with casts of 30-40...and productions no more than 75 minutes long. We’ll have tons of stage combat, broad physical humour, movement pieces, improvised sport play, improvised play-by-play, authentic team jerseys, a sound design to rival John Williams and Saturday morning cartoons...we’ll revolutionize the very concept of theatre!

TONER Couldn’t we just do a sequel?

The Inspiration...

For a long time I was interested in exploring spectacle theatre. I am a great admirer of Max Reinhardt and how he can not be pegged down into one category. His creations ranged from intimate experimental shows to large productions involving hundreds of performers. My limited experiences with spectacle (in musicals and other large theatrical productions) were disappointing in that there was a clear hierarchy in place – especially amongst performers – that did not sit well with my participatory democratic heart. Therefore, my interest was to create a large cast production where if any social groupings occurred, they would be the result of free association and not based on some kind of artificial caste system. As well, I wanted to create a show that promoted the *show* rather than any individual face or talent.

I have long been fascinated with and studied the period of British History commonly referred to as the Wars of the Roses and I often thought about staging that conflict as some kind of sporting event. My own take on sports is that I love to participate, not watch. As a kid I played every sport that was offered and would often rush through dinner to get back on one kind of field or another. I am often disheartened with the division between theatre arts and physical education and often the prejudices of the participants of

both. The stereotypes of “jocks” and “artsies” are quite unfortunate considering that the athlete should have a well-developed, creative mind and the artist should have a well-developed, healthy body. I have to admit, the educator in me desired to break down these stereotyped barriers.

My first thought was soccer/football, mainly because I enjoy the game and I was searching for a sport that could be associated with England. However, I didn't think it could best represent the ruggedness of the plot. So I turned to other sports such as North American football and even Australian Rules football, but none of them seemed exactly right. Then I remembered being exposed to a bizarre game back in my middle school years called rugby. From what I could remember, it seemed like it would be a good fit but I needed to do a bit more research.

But I still had another dilemma on my hands: would I write an original script or adapt one? And if either, would I do it alone or seek a collaborator? It just so happened that at that time Matt and I were doing some informal work on Shakespeare – readings and textual analysis sorts of things – and I really enjoyed the sessions and the work that we did. I had yet to explore Shakespeare's material on the Wars of the Roses and so I pitched the idea to Matt of adapting those plays into a live rugby match and that I was looking for an interested partner. It turned out Matt was the ideal collaborator, for not only did he have a keen interest, a strong familiarity with Shakespeare's texts and fight training, but he had also played rugby in University! Once we discussed a lot of the concepts, it turned out rugby was indeed the sport of choice and we agreed to give it a go.

Of course, the most challenging hurdle would be to make it financially viable; a pretty difficult task for such a large production. However, the Toronto Fringe Festival (like all Fringe Festivals) promotes unique and original concepts, has reasonable rates of entry, and an audience traditionally receptive to new ideas. Therefore, it seemed like the perfect context to test the waters, so we climbed to the highest platform and dove right in.

Let's just say that producing *Shakespeare's Rugby Wars* was a bit of a challenge. Many people did not know what to make of it and for some time performer turnover was high; add to this a problem securing our venue due to a bureaucratic nightmare that erupted a few weeks prior to open, and it often felt like we would drown. However, there was a core group of us who really believed in and was attracted to the concept of “Sport Theatre” and if nothing else, we were still having fun and laughing at ourselves by dress rehearsal. In spite of the obstacles (or perhaps because of them) it worked: we had fun, the audience had fun, even the critics had fun, and Matt and I were content to leave it there.

Flash forward to a few weeks before the 2002 Fringe deadline and we were pondering what our next project might be. We were interested in

collaborating again on something and were kicking around a few ideas but nothing that was as inspiring as *Rugby Wars*.

Enter the international perspective...

It just so happened that my family and I were hosting a couple of International students: one from Brazil and another from Korea. One evening over dinner we began discussing the then upcoming 2002 World Cup to be co-hosted by Korea and Japan. That night I had football on the brain...and Fringe on the brain...and within a few hours I had *Shakespeare's World Cup* on the brain: an adaptation of the Bard's top tragedies vying for tragic soccer dominance. It was the association of the plays with their resident countries (*Hamlet*–Denmark, *Lear*–England, *Macbeth*–Scotland, and *Othello*–Italy) that sold the idea and the minute I pitched it to Matt he said, “Giddy up!”

But the wheels didn't stop turning then. I was determined to go all the way with this concept – finish the game as it were. I became inspired to adapt the entire Canon in this manner and a few days later had worked out the basic premises of *Gladiator Games*, *Comic Olympics* and *NHL (National History League)* to be presented consecutively on an annual basis at the Toronto Fringe Festival. And as Yul said, “So let it be written, so let it be done.”

Five years have passed and the *Sports Canon* is complete – well, almost, but we're not doing the sonnets, poems or apocrypha! It has been an exciting and educative ride and an honour to have worked with the more than one hundred artists who participated over the years bringing ideas to life that were sometimes confusing and muddy, and whose combined efforts brought clarity and enjoyment for all. A special note of thanks goes out to all of my collaborators: directors, designers, and writers – especially Mr. Toner; and my warmest gratitude to my companion Kathy and our children Cabiria, Lórien, and Paisley for their love and support.

A note for educators...

These shows were designed from a desire to create low budget spectacle theatre, to tear down the stereotypes and borders of Theatre and Sports, as well as to develop a more “team” experience. Surprisingly, “education” was not a conscious motivator or inspiration. It was only after my eldest daughter (who has seen all of the productions) began to naturally associate the word “Shakespeare” with “fun,” as well as a number of audience members expressing their wish that they had learned Shakespeare in school in this manner, that my eyes were opened to what we had created. Here are shows that introduce Shakespeare's language in a very accessible manner, combine physical education with theatre arts, allow for casts of a

thousand, and do it all in a little over an hour: a perfect recipe for middle and high school productions.

With such a connection to education, I considered re-writing the scripts to edit out the “adult” humour, but then decided that to remove the bawdy from these tributes to the Bard would be to deny the whole Bard. Now, I’m not suggesting school productions must incorporate them. In fact, given a lot of the censorship constraints in education, I understand the need to edit a lot of the bawdy content out. However, I think it important for fellow educators and possibly students to understand the original intention and source so they can use their own judgment and creativity when it comes to making any changes. So for example, the streaking Jack Cade in *Rugby Wars* in some productions may be left out, whereas in others he/she might become a disruptive fan, or alternatively others may have someone dressed but with a “censored” sign in strategic areas. The important thing is that these scripts are here to inspire local productions, and when granting performance rights we support edits to meet cultural or geographical needs and differences that local audiences will appreciate and identify with.

I feel that the success of these shows is the combination of their light and frivolous nature with the infectious physical energy of a large group of people simply having fun. Mind you, I don’t want to give the impression that putting these shows together is “simple.” They definitely require a strong physical commitment as well as self and group discipline, but the result – a positive group dynamic – is similar to the benefits attained from many team sports where self-esteem grows from individual contributions to the group and a pride in accomplishment shared by all.

Finally, a word about Shakespeare. A large part of Canadian humour is built around satire and pulling down of icons. Shakespeare is a mighty icon and is arguably the easiest target but may also be our most loved. The Toronto Fringe has a “Beer Tent” and the casts of these shows supported that libation centre with enthusiasm. I always reflected on Shakespeare’s own times – how he probably never considered immortality through his work – simply a guy who got to express himself and then went to the pub to celebrate and socialize. That for me is what makes him “universal” and why I pay tribute to him with a laugh and a tip of my glass.

Toronto, July, 2005