

# CAS 2014

## ARTIST'S REFLECTIONS BY NOAH RICHLER

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"Canadian Arts Summit, *Artist's Reflections*," (D2)

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I've made a living in the arts and related fields for most of my life and was the beneficiary, early on, from my father's good advice. My father was a writer but also a practical man – an artist *good with numbers*, it might surprise you. And he gave me his own three bits' worth.

Make yourself useful, he said. Take the job for what it's worth – and make friends with the accountant.

Still, I never took his advice quite as far or as brilliantly as Shannon Litzenberger did, surely having assured herself an easy Line of Credit with her piece, 'The Bank Notes'.

I enjoyed Shannon's contribution to the Canadian Arts Summit immensely, as I did Krystal's from Flin Flon, now the town that's surely the next Canadian tourist destination of most of us. I'm not kidding at all when I suggest there's a case to be made for scheduling this conference anywhere in Canada that takes a couple of flights and a twelve-hour bus ride to reach. It is to the flourishing of the arts in these small towns that our attention should also be paid.

I enjoyed these pieces, as I did Michael Green's 'Treaty 7' Project and Sylvain Emond's 'Grand Continentale' because they were welcome intrusions into our routines that have too often become exercises in mere survival rather than the play that brought us to the artistic fields that we love in the first place. They are reminders of art and of the purpose of what each of us is doing in 'the business' –that loaded word. Such moments buoy the spirit and make us young again. Sylvain's dance piece, I'll remind you, enjoyed today's first clap.

And in these two days, all of these pieces were necessary moments. For the truth of it is that as any of us progresses in our fields – gets older; becomes more entrenched; is more susceptible to demands and obligations – we need to concentrate harder and harder remember whatever that thing is, or was, that we were first trying to do. What was it that excited and inspired us? How would we behave in our respective métiers not if we had organizations to sustain, and families and mortgages to support, but if today were our very first, excited day. How mischievous, rebellious and righteous, or optimistic would we feel? What would be the normal situations and circumstances that we would take for granted, or want to upset?

We stray from these ideas, and see as much in our institutions. We see it as the result of successes that plot their own juggernaut's course.

I don't mean to be a spoiler as the Banff Centre and Jeff, alongside the Summit and Business and the Arts, have been terrific hosts but, every time I visit this place, I cannot help being unsettled by the ways in which success can alter purpose. There are small studios here that used to be off in the woods. They are very famous and when I was a teenager in the valley you weren't allowed to walk by these studios in which gorgeous and talented teenage cellists from the Midwest played and, I'll come clan, acted as heady incentive for trail workers like me with dinner theatre jobs wanting to crash these classy gates someday. The studios were enveloped by woods, they were designed to be places of creative solitude. You needed to walk a short distance from the residences to get to them, and they felt apart – a part of the mountain, a part of the ecology.

But now they sit chock-a-block next to the Centre's three story parking lot and a service road. They stand in crowded ignominy and certainly *appear* to come second to the business of people such as us, paying good money to have a conference. Fair enough. The Banff Centre is for 'incubation', not a bad thing at all. But I can be struck by how the idea of those spaces for art have been diminished by the over-riding job that the Centre has of growing – of doing more than merely *sustaining* itself – as, meanwhile, we delegates speak of outreach without having ventured outside a couple of buildings let alone into the valley below.

I offer up this observation – it's not more than that, it's not a complaint – as something to keep in mind while we are asking, this year's theme, 'How Can We Make a Difference?'

It's a question I applaud.

You are asking it, as you should be, even as you are doing a terrific job. For I believe, as Jeff Melanson stated earlier today, that copping to things being *okay* and even *good* out there might even help them get better. We're living in a magical time. In truth, we are fabulously well served (and look how well we have been eating). Nobody in their right historical mind, except perhaps our German pal, Luminato's Jorn Weisbrodt, should ever be caught saying, "We never had it so good," but it's not a bad thing to admit to and *enjoy* our opportunities, and our successes.

But this business of 'making a difference' is a complicated one. Last week I had the treat of chairing a panel with all three editors-in-chief of our most important newspapers – the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, the *Toronto Star* – and the business of making a difference was on their minds too. Two of those newspaper editors-in-chief had replaced predecessors fired days before. No worry about succession plans there; 'disruptive innovation' is taken for granted in other media organizations and that's what you also are, and let's not forget it. You too, are publishers. You too, manage content. A lot of you publish it in buildings, but publishing the work of artists is still the game you're in.

To the end of doing that job better, I'd encourage you to open up your Arts Summit somewhat. I understand that you have thresholds, and that often it makes sense to confer with a narrower idea of your own, but I'm interested that there are not a couple of *bona fide* publishers here, or any of Canada's pioneering independent music labels – Arts & Crafts, say. We learn from each other, and across ramparts. Across the divisions of Canada Council granting bodies that we end up adopting, for government's sake, in our professional lives.

And so we overlook the things we have in common and the discrepancies in attitudes and experience and solutions that may be instructive. What Jeff Melanson had to say about advocacy - about winning the *sympathies* of government providers rather than making them feel boorish or philistine is not just this sector's challenge.

Or, as Matthew Teitelbaum pointed out, already the lot of us might have learned that we can throw our arms wide open to the world via hand-held devices – as much as we do in theatre, and that there are lessons for us there. My partner Sarah, as canny when it comes to the use of social networks in business as she is in her family life, is fond of saying that we behave no differently on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram than we do in person – which is why she has now pretty well forbidden me to use any of them. Too easy for me to harangue, as I did about Québec with some unfortunate at my table last night, I apologize.

But really, the point is that fathoming the knowledge of colleagues in kindred but not immediately related fields, is a boon. It allows us to take huge strides and to understand the unfamiliar. You might have someone tell you, for instance, that an enormous portion of youth is now quite put off the social networks that funding bodies such as the Canada Council are suddenly and very enthusiastically seizing upon and wanting to make a part of their models. That alone is something that should give you pause: once government or some well-entrenched institution declared something to be revolutionary, then you should probably assume that it is not.

And about those lobsters.

Me, I was keen on Jorn's North Korean and *Anschluss* views. Sure, I was disturbed that, full disclosure, my new boss evidently does not know which Canadian Atlantic province sits across the Gulf of Maine, but I forgive him this because the very style of his debate was proof that inviting foreigners in is another ineluctably good idea. Us Canadians, it's in our nature to worry about the questions – we spent two days invoking the Clarity Act in here – but Jorn, good on him, was teaching us a different idiom.

But, if you don't mind, another word about those lobsters – not least as I'd wager that I'm the only fella in the room who has actually worked the lobster fishing season on the Bay of Fundy in December. I can remember, when finally there was a moment to chat, just how astounded the fisher from Maine, working across from me on the deck, was at the size and the variety of lobsters we were pulling out the water. Enormous they were, some of them, their crusher claw as big as my forearm. He explained to me that he did not have that in Maine, he said, where they fish year round and every lobster they are able to take out of the water is the regulation minimum a pound.

That's not the way things are in – brace yourself, Jorn, *Nova Scotian* waters – and I see the Bay's same variety and cornucopia replicated in Canada's arts "ecology," as I think you call it. That, because in Canada we dance this interesting line between the private and not-for-profit spheres – because we *do* have a Canada Council and understand its importance to Canadian self-expression and have a vibrant *for profit* sector too. The ecology is healthy and, unlikely even a few decades ago, we are capable now both of fostering works such as 'Treaty 7', ones that may or may not have only regional reach, though also of *exporting* work as we were reminded Québec has been doing for ages. More importantly, we are capable of creating works that best sell *at home*: Soulepepper's production of Ins Choi's "Kim's Convenience"; Joe Boyden's *The Orenda*, in the book publishing world.

That last example is interesting to me. It's not Boyden's best book, to my mind, but it tapped into the extraordinary will for social change that – despite the enormity and the shame of this country's aboriginal issues – has always existed among Canadians at large vis-à-vis First Nations and First Nations cultures.

This is interesting to me for two reasons. The first of these is *inclusion* – and I commend the Arts Summit for doing what is more usual on the West Coast and virtually non-existent in Ontario, which is to have gone out of your way to effect it. Still, there were Blackfoot in the bar last night and there was no easy conversation with them, which is to say that most of us have failed, in our art, in building the *means* of speaking to one another that was so evidently a concern for Larry Goldman and his NJPAC project. Issues concerning Canadians' relations with the First Nations are, I believe, the most important that face Canada and, clearly, I'm not alone in believing it, a truth of which Boyden's novel *The Orenda* winning CBC's "Canada Reads" contest is but one demonstration.

This brings me to the second point and back to Shannon's 'Bank Notes' again. The inclusion we are failing at is also a massive failed commercial opportunity. How is it that Thomas King can win the nation's most lucrative non-fiction book prize for *The Inconvenient Indian*, and Boyden "Canada Reads" for *The Orenda*, but next to nothing exists in our repertoire, even for the strictly box-office minded among you, to take advantage and dip into this tide? How is it that only exceptionally do I turn my head and see faces that are not white in theatre and dance audiences – a situation that seems all the more preposterous, all the more the barometer of our not getting things right – when I see, in Shannon's video, that nine of the ten amateur dancers (monied, educated, integrated and keen) are not white?

I am not demanding a "Kim's Convenience" for every Canadian ethnic group, or a year of First Nations apology, but remarking on the blazing opportunities for evolution or revolution or disruptive innovation or equity and inclusion and diversity (your terms) that *already exist!!* Don't *forget* about your management consultants or your boards and your fund-raising and your leadership and creative industries programs, I'd say, but do step out and put up a sign in "No Frill's" or the "IGA" or whatever is the new Canadians' first-stop equivalent in Edmonton or Surrey or here in impoverished Banff and put up a sign that says, WANT OUT? LET'S TALK. The gift of foreign blood works at all levels of entry.

On the one hand, your business, a well-chosen word here, depends upon your *outreach*, the response of the community, the relationships, the number of people that dance with you or come to see the shows you stage.

But, on the other hand – and I am not telling you what you do not already know – your job is to surprise people, shock them, upset them with what you do. I actually feel that, along with Porter and Christiansen and whoever is the pushed guru of the moment with a clever turn of phrase, that every artistic director, CEO and board member who hasn't, would be better to understand the challenge of achieving these two measures of success were he or she to read the first chapter – you don't need to read more than that – of the dyspeptic American journalist Chris Hedges' book, *The Death of the Liberal Class*, in which he outlines the complete and willing subjugation of artists and their producers to the very forces they should be upsetting.

Hedges tends to be a little dire, but it's short and illuminating reading that explicates articulately the quandary of theatrical companies and arts organizations tied to buildings or festivals that cost a million dollars just to run, or about what happens when foundations or revenue streams become the dominant imperatives. Your spaces for creation end up next to a Joni Mitchell parking lot.

But you are concerned and so these issues are on your agenda. Art need not shock or foment rebellion every time, though I love the idea that the mere existence of a crowd in Newark's Theatre Square is enough for the police to arrive with their cordons and shields. The truth about art, as my partner Sarah first said to me about books, is that it has a long life.

In these Rockies, I'll tell you the thing I remember: trekking out to Two-Jack Lake, just nearby, at four in the morning nearly thirty years ago now, and in the darkness joining a steadily growing line of men and women and families with blankets over their shoulders to watch "Princess of the Stars," Murray Schaffer's interpretation of a First Nations' creation myth performed by cadets in traditional canoes and an orchestra hidden in the woods that culminated in the audience looking up at the rising sun illuminating Cascade Mountain as if the dawn was something Schaffer had personally arranged. That was an achievement.

You will sort out the issue of succession. You will sort out the challenges of advocacy. You are addressing it. That is good.

Thank you.