

# COMMUNICATING THROUGH ART

## 1. DRAMA:

### Understanding Communication

"A lot of people say to me, you must really love your work and you must be really lucky. I do and I am very fortunate because in some ways life and art are one for me and they are mixed.

"One thing that I really want students to learn is that drama allows you to understand communication. What I'm getting at here is, when you start working in on a play and you are acting out human relationships and ideas they sometimes can filter into, how then would you react in a situation in your life. I think that's why you're fascinated with films and why we're fascinated with stories and why we're drawn into them.

"Drama to me, you learn about your general awareness—an awareness of how you think, how you feel. What's your instinct? How is your imagination connected to the way that you interpret things? How do you see things? Drama to me, it tells you so much about how you think, how you feel, how you move.

"Sometimes I do an exercise where I ask you to do things like, try and pick up that person's rhythm and walk. How do you feel when you pick up into that person's rhythm and walk? What's prevented you from getting into that person's rhythm and walk? It's not about right or wrong it's like questioning a general awareness of how you operate because, to me, that's connected to how you develop your creative process."

## 2. DANCE

### Language of Art

"When people are working from deep sources of imagination or deep emotion, deep memory, there's a kind of weight or resonance that is perhaps stronger and also is often really universal.

"I've found over and over again, I'll look at an abstract painting, it doesn't mean anything, it's not supposed to mean anything but I get this sensation, and then I'll talk to five other people and they get this sensation. They're not describing the same thing that I'm describing. But, it's something very deep. It's something from long long ago or it has a very particular connection to a part of history or a part of life.

"I don't think that artists have haphazardly tapped into this and been doing this for centuries and centuries and centuries. There's a language of art that I believe, has been ongoing, since the beginning of time."

### 3. VISUAL

#### Visual Language

"I think with visual language, gestures of paint, there's some things that you can express much better than written language.

"To me there is a language of form. When you look at a painting, there are relationships between forms and work. There's also relationships—because in a way that's what a language is; it's a series of relationships—there are also relationships in terms of all the colours; they're all playing with one another. And hopefully, if it's a reasonably successful painting, those elements will fit together. So I think that the colours and the form are also a form of expression that sometimes we don't think of.

"I think, when you look at visual art, one of the things that it can do is, it can open up part of our experiences that we don't think about because sometimes spoken and written language can restrict us. We become too conscious of things. Whereas, at least in my experience—if I was to tell you about my paintings—is painting allows you to go below the surface and explore the meaning, the symbols, the experiences that we often don't think about."

#### — Symbols

"As people, as we walk from our homes to school to work, we're bombarded with images. Our senses are overloaded. Our dreams are full of images as well.

"One of the reasons that I like using symbolism is that it helps organize all of those experiences, because otherwise it would just be chaos. It would be a constant stream of colours and forms whereas symbols, to me, help organize all of that.

"I think that every artist—depending on their upbringing, depending on where they have lived, depending upon their experiences—will have a whole bank of symbols that they can draw upon.

"I think one of the challenges of being a painter as you look at my work would be that I would want you to know the meaning of the symbols that I use. Because you might not be Cree. You might not know what a Wíhtiko is, or a Thunderbird, or who Big Bear was.

So I think a successful painting will make all those symbols clear to people who look at them."

#### — Storytelling

"I'm not into art that is so intellectual and so mysterious and so symbolic that only three people in the world will understand it if you explain it for three hours.

"What I think is more interesting is art that people can relate to as soon as they walk into the room. If I could communicate a story to you that would be what I would call a successful painting; then painting becomes just another way of telling a story, passing on information—very different than writing an academic essay or book.

"The beauty of painting is that it's immediate. You don't have to spend two hours reading a book. You just walk into a room and there you have your story."

#### 4. DRAMA

##### Language

"When we talk about language and theatre within language, this is fascinating subject for me and this is another thing that spurs me and it's also connected to symbol.

"We think that all plays are connected only through text or through word but I'm also fascinated by what is the language of the eye, and what is the language of gesture, and what is the language of silent communication. Also what is the language of energy and experience. And, what I mean by that one is maybe you're outside the building and then you walk into a building where two people are in a room and all of a sudden they're quiet but you walk in and you feel that something has happened in there, because you can feel it and you can sense it. To me that's a language too. I like to play with that.

"Sometimes in theatre, the work that I do, some of it is talkie talkie talkie. Sometimes it's only a communication through a gesture. Sometimes it's only a communication through an eye movement. I guess what saying is that I'm not a firm believer within theatre, that words can always express what we have to say. That's how I look at language."

##### — Symbols

*(More in Artist's Practices)*

"There's a poem in there where she realizes that her lover is messing around on her and so I had a round piece of wood – because I'm playing with the circle of desire and then I put above the heart and I put the vessel on top of that and I'm saying the poem and singing it like a tango song and I place it down in the middle of the circle of the red carpet and I tango and then I stomp on it with tango shoes and then I leave it. So each action in there is a symbol for several things. I leave that for people to interpret. I don't want to say that it means that. That's for you to look at and go, hmmm... That's when I talk about what provokes you, what challenges you, what makes your imagination work, what's your visceral response.

"What is the purpose of symbol within work. How come I'm attracted to the idea of symbol as opposed to laying everything out for you and saying, this is what you have to work with, you don't have to worry about interpreting or using your imagination within it because every idea is put out for you.

"And I ask you—do you enjoy an experience like that? What is going to make your imagination work? What is going to make you become involved with the relationship between spectator and performer or audience member and performer. When I work with symbol that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to make you work to get inside the experience so that you feel something, because that's what I think is the strength of theatre. That's what I actually think is the strength of art."

## 5. MUSIC

### Communicating an Emotion

"You know, irony—music is a universal language so I can play a piece of suspenseful music for any person from any culture on the planet, virtually, and I would elicit the same emotion from them of suspense and possibly fear.

"So it's a universal language but it's also so abstract. I mean, there's no words to it, you're not communicating a specific idea, you're communicating an emotion. So you know it's a strange relationship. Music is such a powerful communicator but how do you put your finger on it; there's no words."

## 6. DRAMA

### Expressing an Idea

"How do I use my medium—which is theatre, which happens to be performance—how do I use that to get across an idea that is important to me, to the general public. And, I go back to the question of what is performance, what is the experience about, and, it goes back to me about public and private space."

#### — The space

"You all know we all have private space, where private space is me in my own space—and then there's the public space that anybody can own. What can you do in a public space? Can I just perform on the street? Do I have to have a permit to perform on the street because the street is a public place?"

"When I did *Frozen Lady*—in that performance I'm talking about land and connection to land and one's sense of community—and I found out that when I researched through the RM (Rural Municipality) that the ditch is owned by everybody. Nobody owns the ditch. The ditch goes from the centre of the grid road to the edge of the farmer's property. And, I started to think about how come we treat it so bad, when we all own it and I created a performance on that idea.

"So playing with—where can you put a performance?"

#### — What can you do?

"What can you do within a performance? Say there's an issue with your student council that you want to get across, rather than just doing a protest sign, can you station that throughout the school. What's the most important issue for you?"

"Example: do you want better soap in your bathrooms? Can you make soapboxes and put them around in the school and ask people to make donations. In a sense for me that is an active, a performative action, which then becomes a point of theatre for me, which also then becomes a point of manipulation.

## — Tools and techniques

"What media, what objects, what tangible things are you going to create with to make your art. The media I work with within theatre can be plastic that I work with, can be text that I work with—and that can be my propaganda tools or my persuasion tools. My gesture can be my tools. The way my eye moves. The way I choose to face you on the audience. I like to break that notion that the performer does not always have to be facing the audience.

"Lots of times we're caught—and that's what I call kitchen sink drama—we're caught in the idea from the 1950s within Canadian theatre that all theatre is strictly presentational, which is not necessarily true.

"When you look at the forms of Peter Brook that you guys can go look up, who you guys would absolutely love. He's one of the people within the theatre world that made the discovery that objects are actually not props. They're actual characters and part of the whole thing and I see that as a propaganda and persuasion technique too. The chair just isn't the chair. The chair can become many things.

"So, think for you. Think for you in your school what objects you can use, a symbol—which relates back to symbol, which relates back to propaganda—how that can work for you."

## 7. DRAMA

### Engaging the audience

"When does a performance start, and when does a performance end, and how come you need to know that. How come you have to feel that you have to be organized and put into this procession to go see something. How many performances have you seen naturally in the street happen and then you stop and you become engaged. I'm interested in that little moment.

"There is no fourth wall for me. There is no—oh, here's the performer and here's the audience—I'll come out and I'll just start talking to you. Sometimes I'll put my costume on right in front of you. Sometimes I'm in costume and you don't even know I'm in costume. And then I'll be talking to you, asking you how your day is and then flip into it.

"I like the idea of putting you into a little bit of a state of imbalance so that you have to make a decision on where you want to be. Because I feel that when you have to make anyone who's watching any kind of performance or going to a gallery or music, when you are in a place where you have to make a decision, then I go—Boom! You're engaged with me and your imagination is starting to work!"