

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Impermanence of Live Performance

Eric · Wednesday, May 30th, 2018

I became an artist from a need deep inside—to find my voice, to express something I didn’t yet know, to explore, to explode, to rebel, to find my...self. I first became a modern dancer in the early 1970s, rejecting 15 years of schooling where all I was encouraged to develop was my...mind. In dance, I discovered my body, my instincts, improvisation, creativity, self expression, and what it meant to become an artist. My post-college, early adulthood was entirely filled with company dance classes, sweat, injury, healing, hard work, rehearsals, community, performing for the first time, and teaching dance to make a living, all within a fertile seven year period on the north side Chicago where I lived on a hundred dollars a week, house-sat, or lived on the top floor of the theater. Money? Who cared? When I got good press notices and people asked me, “Why didn’t you move to New York?” the answer was simple: “I was happy, satisfied, and challenged right where I was.” I didn’t need more money, more fame, or anything else I could think of. I was already more alive, more myself, than I had ever been before. I was part of an “alternative and cultural revolution,” and I was fulfilled living in the moment. I truly believed in Ram Dass’ “Be Here Now”.



Dance was, and still is, an ephemeral art. You did it, and do it, in the *now*. You performed it in the *now*. And then...it was over. Gone. Whoosh. With not many dance companies being recorded for posterity by *Great Performances* on PBS, most of us recorded our performances with a single video camera at the back of the house that was mounted on a tripod which never moved, where chess piece-size performers went in and out of frame, and when it was over, we never wanted to see or show the videotape to anyone ever again. It was part of the “magic” of the theater. Of live performance. We did it. And it was done. Until the next time we did it. Different from film and television. From radio. Different from books, literature, recorded music, painting, art that “endured” was permanent.



After modern dance, I was a professional clown for another seven years, which was also improvisational and therefore equally ephemeral. Then I spent the last 31 years teaching theater at USC. Creating and directing one person shows. Over those 31 years, sure, a few solo performers got their chances at immortality...being recorded on good equipment and having their work shown around the world. On film. On HBO. Spalding Gray, Whoopi Goldberg, Eric Bogosian, Danny Hoch, John Leguizamo, Mike Daisey... a few more... but you could count them on two hands. Both the technology and the hunger for content came together to make that a possibility and a

reality. But most of us, toiling away on our solo shows, or working in “the theatuh,” did it in relative obscurity. Yes, I brought my solo shows to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where it won awards, but that was in 1988. And in 1995. Where is that work now? In my memory. And maybe in the memory of some audience members who the work touched.



The same is true of the thousands, or millions, of “live shows” that have hit the boards over the millennium. From pre-history. To Greece. Rome. Beijing. Kyoto. London, New York, and LA. Because for every Brando or Streep “discovered” on stage and immortalized on film, most others have faded from memory. A few others have also been written into the collective consciousness of the art form: Eleanora Duse, Helen Hayes, Harry Houdini...while most of the rest of us, and our “live” performances, have disappeared from memory, like white rabbits from magic hats.



That’s ok. That’s the way it is. It’s the nature of the beast. I mean, the art. And like I said, I didn’t become an artist to become rich or famous or immortal. And in case you haven’t noticed, I haven’t. But when I moved to LA from my native New York in 1982, where I was still a “clown” (a real clown, I mean, I did it for a living), I suddenly realized that being an artist, or “making it” as an artist, was just about the hardest thing in the world to do. It was SO fricking competitive. So ruthless. And although I know that banking, real estate, video gaming, plumbing, and just about every other profession, may be equally competitive and ruthless, at least in LA, it just didn’t fit my personality, my idea of why I became an artist. Making art for art’s sake.

So now I have a podcast. I “make” a podcast. It’s my current “art form”. I’ve evolved. Morphed from one medium to another. From modern dance to clowning to poetry to filmmaking to solo performance to podcasting. I still don’t make any money doing it. Especially now that everyone and his brother (or sister) also has a podcast. It’s equally competitive. And ruthless. It’s only the few who are able to “monetize” their podcast... find sponsors, run their online businesses... like businesses. Become Marc Maron (who interviewed President Obama in his Eagle Rock garage sound studio), Adam Corolla, “Serial”... or whoever the podcaster, or podcast, of the day may be. But me? I do it because I still want to have a voice in the world. Be an artist... on my own terms.

The thing is, I realize that a podcast is...permanent. For as long as you pay a host to broadcast it on the world wide web. Or for as long as you, or your children, preserve the mp3. More people can hear your podcast’s single episode in a week than could see your sold out theater run for three months. Or a year. So...what I’m saying is...it’s worth the investment of time. And spirit. And money. To do it right. To pay a composer to create original music. To hire a sound designer to create beautiful sonic atmospheres for your stories. To record in a good sound studio with a professional engineer. To create something that is, or could be, in its own way... worthy of... immortality.



Not every podcaster thinks of it this way, I know. They record interviews in their closet, or in their bathroom or basement, or under a bedspread—to control the noise. They do, we do, the best we can. But art is only as good as the artist and how much he, or she, invests in the work. Then again, many podcasters are not making art at all. They’re making commerce. Or making...whatever it is they’re making. Each to his own, eh?

But now that I’m “retired,” I have the time. And time is a luxury. And a choice—how to spend.

I've been an artist now for almost half a century. It's been hard-earned. And wonderful. And it's the only thing I know. Other than life is "impermanent" too. Nobody knows what will happen. Or when. "The best laid of plans go astray." And "life is what happens while you're waiting for your plans to work out." John Lennon of The Beatles supposedly said that last one, but I think he actually overheard it from a little old lady in Liverpool.

In any event, as my improvisatory clown character, Gino Cumeezi, would say: "Why change now?"

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