

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Was It An Earthquake?

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, January 26th, 2012

I first saw [Rinde Eckert](#) in *Slow Fire* at the Mark Taper Forum sometime in the mid-1980's. Having gone to graduate school in theatre and having spent the six years since then working in Los Angeles and Chicago, I thought I had a solid foundation in the world of theatre. I'd read SO many plays from the Western canon. I'd learned how to analyze text and interpret it. I'd experienced early Steppenwolf Realism. I'D GONE TO GRADUATE SCHOOL, for heaven's sake!

Slow Fire changed all of that. Onstage at the Taper (which, having grown up in Southern California, I idolized), there was a man alone onstage: Bob. There was a voice: Dad. And wrapped around these characters were secrets and memories and music. The world of the city contrasted with the land. Precious objects of consumer life transformed into mythical objects. It was a story of a father and son, but rather than shut me out (like so much realism), it invited me in. It matched its description: "*Slow Fire* conjures up the imbalances and dark passions lurking behind the 'normal' veneer of middle class American life." *Slow Fire* shattered every expectation I had about what theatre could be.

I suppose I must have seen the Taper workshop of *Slow Fire*. I was stunned, enchanted, amazed that theatre could be like this: alive, electric, startling and familiar all at once. I laughed with surprise, I relaxed into familiar words framed in images that both contradicted and embraced the language. The music was... everywhere. And in the center of all of this: a tall man swinging work lights and singing (or at least the swinging work lights are the most vivid image I retain now). The voice of God – an angel at the very least.

My world turned inside out. This was possible?? This was what theatre and performance and music and words could do? Truly?

I felt my brain stretch. I felt my aesthetic shift like the earth beneath my child-feet (I grew up near the San Andreas fault).

Years later, when I ran my own theatre in San Francisco, I tried to find a way to work with Paul Dresher and Rinde. Hopefully, I could. Hopefully, I could stretch my brain again. Alas time and money, the twin devils that beset artistic directors, got the better of all of us.

Many of the colleagues and friends I most admire – director Richard E.T. White, composer [Paul Dresher](#), playwright and actor Ellen McLaughlin, director David Schweizer — I can follow those breadcrumbs to the phenomenal Rinde Eckert. The eye-opening, brain-stretching Rinde; his shockingly beautiful voice, his intoxicating images, using words and music and physical space as lullabies and alarm clocks. Graceful with edge. Makes me giddy to remember it.

Rinde Eckert changed my aesthetic. Completely. I have never been the same. I'm grateful that when I entered the world of *Slow Fire*, I became fully aware of what theatre can be when one lets go of the rules: words and images can accumulate inside the music and tell a non-linear, impressionistic story.

If you happen to glance at the audience at the upcoming performances of *And God Created Great Whales* ([Jan. 25-29 in Los Angeles at REDCAT](#), [Feb. 9-April 1 in New York at Culture Project](#)) you may notice a middle-aged dramaturg utterly engaged in everything about this performance. You may see the tears that only come with the rapture of an art form that so desperately needs more Rinde's. And you will certainly hear me laugh: joy, surprise, recognition, brain-stretching delight. It's the sound of a world made deeper. Thanks, Rinde.

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