

When the Whistle Blows: Performing the Paper-Making Process¹

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In 2008, I began a research project titled “Hum on the Humber: Industrialization, Shifting Local Soundscapes, and Expressive Culture in Western Newfoundland”.² The project largely focuses on the mill whistle at the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. For someone who grew up in “the Brook”, this project is a labour of love. Each year, I devote about a week of my vacation time to the project (since my position as senior research associate at Cape Breton University keeps me busy with other projects in the areas of Aboriginal economic development and best business practices). I’ve administered a survey; conducted interviews; engaged in archival research; located references to the mill and whistle in poetry, short stories, novels, films, and popular songs; and made field recordings of the whistle from various locations in the community. My interest revolves around the sonic impact of industrialization in a company town on community identity, daily life, and artistic expression.

One of my great finds came in 2012, while interviewing an employee at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College (now officially known as Memorial University – Grenfell Campus). When I asked whether she knew of any novels, poems, films, or songs that reference the whistle, she recalled a production in the theatre program in the mid-1990s. She believed that students had interviewed community members and then written a series of vignettes that were performed in Corner Brook and Grand Falls (the two mill towns in the province at that time). She thought that there was a song that went along with it. Armed with this information, I began emailing contacts in the theatre community to see if anyone recalled this performance.

Later that week, I sat down over supper with a friend who had, through the anonymous mill whistle survey, self-identified as willing to participate in an interview. She had attended the theatre program at Grenfell while I was in high school, so I asked her whether she had ever heard of such a production. You can imagine my surprise when she told me that she had performed in it! It had been a master class comprised of third- and fourth-year students. While she couldn’t remember the director’s name, she could remember the refrain to the song – which was also the title of the play – and sang it for me: “When the Whistle Blows”.

That night, I took to Twitter to see if anyone in Corner Brook had more information. One individual sent me a message to say he could remember the per-

formance. He vividly recalled an actor playing the part of a log! I also began Googling to see if I could find the name of the director. Thanks to an old (long-abandoned) website,³ I found a name: Tessa Mendel. I contacted her via Facebook and she very kindly sent me a VHS of one of the rehearsals. Recording in hand, I immediately sought out Christopher Jones at the Centre for Cape Breton Studies⁴ at Cape Breton University, who digitized the recording and burned a DVD for me and a copy for Tessa, which I sent to her with thanks and a small gift. But I didn’t watch the DVD then. Instead, I waited until my next research trip. In summer 2013, I sat down again with my friend who had been part of the master class and we watched the rehearsal tape. For her, it was a trip down memory lane, and for me, it was an opportunity to learn more about the production and how it came to be.

Naturally, it being a rehearsal video, the parts weren’t memorized, staging was still in flux, and even the order of scenes wasn’t yet set in stone, but the two-hour video provided a very good understanding of the content of the production, which included reflections on the establishment of the mill and the growth of Corner Brook as a company town. My friend explained the background of the project (students were involved in research, writing, and staging), described the dress of actors in performance, and pointed out where the scene order was changed. She also managed to identify all of the performers!

Two parts stood out for me. First, the gentleman who had Tweeted me the year before was exactly right: there was an absolutely hilarious scene that demonstrated the paper-making process. Actors mimicked machinery – both in sound and movement – and one even played the part of a log going through the chipper. Second, there was a great scene where an elderly man reflecting on life said, “I listen for when the whistle blows and then I know I’m home” – a sentiment that was prominent in both my survey and my interviews. It’s during this scene that the original song, with the refrain “When the whistle blows”, was sung by the cast, accompanied by guitar. It’s a pretty and poignant song.

I can only imagine what the final production looked like and how it might have been received both in Corner Brook and in other towns like Grand Falls (which at the time of the performance still had an operating mill). Fortunately, I’ll soon know. Yesterday I checked my mailbox and found in it three DVDs sent to me by Todd Hennessey, a theatre in-

structor at Grenfell who tracked down a video of the performance for me. I can't wait to see it!

I am perhaps dreaming, but I can't help but think it would be great fun to stage this production again (or at least parts of it) in the old courtroom of the Corner Brook Museum & Archives as part of the installation I'm working on in relation to this project. My sincere thanks to everyone who has been involved with this project thus far!

Woooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!

Notes

¹ This article draws on my *Hum on the Humber* blogs, available at millwhistle.blogspot.ca

² This project is generously funded by the J.R. Smallwood Foundation at Memorial University and has been supported in the past with a research grant from the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at Memorial University.

³ <http://www2.swgc.mun.ca/theatre/old%20theatre/94-95.htm>, accessed 6 September 2013.

⁴ <http://culture.cbu.ca/ccbs/>, accessed 6 September 2013.



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