

Spirit of the Narrows: Storytelling and Music, Academia and the Stage

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Monique Giroux

In 1985 and 1986, Anne Lederman went to Manitoba to record and learn about fiddle traditions. She found a thriving tradition in Metis and First Nations communities that was little-known to the outside world. She released four vinyl records of her field recordings in 1987, called *Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba*. In 2002, The Canadian Museum of Civilization reissued the recordings on their Archive Series as a double CD. In the mid-1990s, Anne wrote a stage piece of stories and music based on her field notes and recordings, called *Spirit of the Narrows*, which she performed solo in many venues throughout Canada and some in the British Isles. In 2004, the Blyth Theatre Festival invited Anne to recast the piece for herself (playing herself and her Aboriginal mentors) and another actor/musician, Capucine Onn (playing “young” Anne). It was staged at Blyth for two successive seasons (2004, 2005), and was remounted in December 2015 at the Pearl Company in Hamilton, with both original actors. It received excellent reviews and was named “Best of 2015” by the Hamilton Arts paper *View*.

In discussion, Anne Lederman and Monique Giroux decided to explore the ways in which a performance piece like *Spirit of the Narrows* fits into the overall worlds of both fiddling in Canada today and the ethnomusicological study of music. This genre (variously referred to as ethnodrama, ethnotheatre, verbatim theatre, or documentary theatre), has drawn considerable interest from scholars in a wide range of fields who have used it as a method of research dissemination and space for further research. *Spirit of the Narrows* is, however, the only play that we are aware of that draws on ethnomusicological research as its source material. What follows is a free-ranging conversation about some of the issues involved. The conversation focused on aspects of the play and its creation, but more importantly, on the nature of storytelling itself in different contexts and the value (and potential challenges) of using theatre to spread greater knowledge and awareness of a musical culture. We have selected excerpts of the conversation to highlight these ideas.

Interview

Anne Lederman: My sense is that you’re coming at this as an ethnomusicologist who’s interested in other

ways of spreading knowledge and information, possibly through performance, and I am coming at it as someone who is and has been an ethnomusicologist but has always been a performer first and foremost.

Monique Giroux: Yeah, absolutely. Did you want to maybe start by telling me what inspired you to write *Spirit of the Narrows*? Did you wake up one morning and say, “I’m going to write a play about my research”?

AL: Well, it wasn’t a play at first. It wasn’t anything at first, [and] I didn’t know whether it would turn into anything at all. It was about ten years after I’d been there, I had a few days on my hands, and I felt like I needed to remember it and explore it more for myself. It was a hugely significant thing in my life, going there, meeting the musicians and learning to play that music. I was learning a style that I couldn’t get any other way. It wasn’t on recordings; I didn’t even know it was a style when I first went there. I didn’t know whether it wasn’t just one strange guy who had a weird, unusual way of playing. Then I met many, many fiddlers. That was all very exciting, that there was this gold mine of history and music out there on the Prairies. I did what I was supposed to do – I wrote the thesis, I made the recordings, I was teaching, I was being a musician again, I was doing all that stuff, [but] it was very hard to feel that it had gotten the attention it deserved. I felt like I needed to spend more time with it, and thought that I would start writing down stories; if they were any good, I thought I could at least tell them on stage, myself. And then I surprised myself, because when I got to the end, I realized that it had a real form – as if it were a piece of fiction. It had motifs that kept coming up, it structured itself as an artistic form, with things that kept referring back to each other, and motifs that ran through it, and things that were funny. There were these sort of long-running jokes – certain things that people would say that would keep coming up over and over again.

MG: Like, “It’s about a mile down the road” [a reference that comes up frequently in the play in relation to distance, explained at one point as “anything that’s out of sight, whether it’s just around a bend in the corner or ten miles up”].

AL: Yeah, and those were wonderful little things you could hinge the story around, like motifs [in a] folk tale, even though everything in there was true. So,

that was very exciting, that I had started out writing down a bunch of true stuff about what happened, and that it ended up taking this wonderful form, as if it was this mythical story. I thought, then, that it had to be done as a piece.

MG: When you started presenting it as the one-person show, were you doing it because people were asking you to do a show related to Metis music?

AL: Yeah, partly. Every situation was different. Because I was living with one foot in the academic world and one foot in the performing world, sometimes people would ask me to come and do a talk on Metis music, and I'd say, "Well, why don't I do this instead?" Or they'd be asking for a performance. Any situation that was focused on Metis stuff, and [where] I was going to be on my own, this was what I wanted to do. You know, it's hard to pull off a solo concert on the fiddle, so, in a sense, I really felt that I needed these stories to make a solo performance work. It was a wonderful adventure for me, because if you tell people a good story, they're much more interested in the music [laughs].

MG: And it becomes more memorable as well.

AL: Yeah, I mean I'd been playing Metis tunes in concert ever since I'd learned them, but it's all out of context, right? You play a set of Metis tunes [then] you do something else. You can't really tell them everything you want to tell them about where this music is coming from and why I was so excited by it.

MG: So the context was really important for you, and presenting it in this way [as a performance piece] allowed you to do that?

AL: Yeah, the stories were really important. Then this year, after ten years, doing it again, proved to me that people are far more excited when you include them in a story, in a journey – you take them on a journey.

MG: That's one of the things that I'm interested in. How much interest have you had in Metis music? How much interest have you seen, how many people have asked you to come out and perform Metis music? Because I look at something like my dissertation, which is not available online. I've had a couple of people ask me to send it to them, so I know that about five people [maybe ten] have read it. So it's had very small impact, right? [laughs] And, of course, once some of this material's available in journals, I should get broader distribution, but it's still a very small number of people.

AL: I think I was in the same position; my thesis wasn't even available online for years. People knew about my work because of smaller articles that I was publishing. It was way too much trouble to go and try and get the thesis and read it. But I've had a lot of interest. If I were Metis I would be performing all the time. I could have easily made my living performing

Metis music and getting grants and doing things and performing in Aboriginal communities and for Metis groups. Not being Metis puts a much greater restriction on that, and that's a difficulty with the play and the CD that I just made of Grandy's music.¹

We're still in a very cautious state in Canada about cross-cultural things in general, cross-cultural events, people from outside a culture playing music that comes from a culture that [is] perceived as being less advantaged. So that's a huge issue, [but] I've done a fair number of performances for Metis groups who just say that they don't care. "We know that you know this, and we want to hear what you have to say, so come." The first day of the play, a woman from Six Nations called and said she'd like to come and bring her husband, but she wanted to make sure that there was nothing that would be offensive to Native people before she came. So, you pick up the paper if you're a First Nations person, or Metis, and you see that some white person is doing a play about Metis culture, are you likely to go? Whose stories are you listening to, for one thing? I always try to ask, if there's Aboriginal people in the audience, how they feel about someone from the outside telling stories like this.

MG: And what kind of response have you gotten?

AL: I always get a really positive response. And I have done it for an almost entirely Aboriginal audience. I did it at the Metis Friendship Centre in Owen Sound and the whole Cape Croker Community was there, including the elders, and we had a dance afterwards. They hung out and they watched the dancing and I talked to them, and they laughed at my funny Ojibwe accent, because I use, as you know, some Ojibwe words in the play. I've never gotten a negative reaction. [But] the only one who's in the play who's seen it is Teddy Boy Houle.

MG: What was his response?

AL: I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. You know, you're watching somebody else portray you on stage and that must be a fairly weird experience. But he's also flattered, I know that. He could have stopped it, if he were offended by anything I'd said, he could have said, "This is wrong, I don't want you to do it," and I would have stopped immediately, or would have changed it until he was happy. So he's happy that it's happening because he also feels that it's really important for people to know these stories. You know, I'm quoting him from memory, because an awful lot of conversations that I had with Teddy Boy would happen in the car when we were driving places.

MG: Some of the play, then, is based on the general ideas that he presented, rather than direct quotes?

AL: Yes, [it's] based on my impressions of what he was trying to communicate to me. You have to re-

construct conversations from your imagination, which also gets us into interesting territory. I mean, I was very much trying to tell real stories. I didn't want to get any of the facts wrong. Getting the facts right, at least, was very important.

MG: So, when you wrote *Spirit of the Narrows*, you wanted to get the facts right ...

AL: I did, and it's a little uncomfortable writing conversations that I didn't have recorded. Ninety percent of the [fiddlers'] words in that play are from recordings, and I took them word-for-word from the actual original conversations. I couldn't do that with Teddy Boy, so I had to go for the emotional truth of it, you know, the effect it was having on me and what I took away from it. I know that he wouldn't have said a lot of that stuff to me if he had been being recorded, because he was talking about a lot of deeply held spiritual things. And I hope I'm not misrepresenting him to say that he knew darn well that I wasn't going to be able to remember three-quarters of what he said later, and that was ok.

MG: So he told you more because ...

AL: I believe he would say that I remembered what I needed to remember, or what was important to remember, or what I was able to learn at the time. Because, I think that was part of his belief system ... "You talk, you teach, and they take away what they're ready to receive." So, in that sense, I felt I was being true to the spirit of our encounter, of our relationship. This is what I got out of it and I have to write it in a way that he could have said, he might have said those things. [Laughs]

MG: Did you feel like there was a tension there? I was reading an article about two [scholars] who had done exactly this kind of thing, turned their data into a theatrical piece – a story, and that was one of the tensions they were concerned about. "How do we represent these facts, but still make it a performance that people want to see?"

AL: Yeah, well, I'm very happy with the way mine turned out in that regard. It did turn out to be a performance that actually moved people. And, of course, I was concerned about the same thing. Even when I was first writing, I thought, "Maybe it'll just be boring, just stories about people who live in the country and play the fiddle. Is that going to keep people entertained for an hour and a half?" [But] I was fuelled by a long-held belief that I've had that everybody's story is interesting. I'd been involved in storytelling events and the whole idea of storytelling for a long time. I think you could tell the story of anybody's life in a way that would be completely fascinating and entertaining. Most people don't believe that about themselves. They can't even understand why you would want to interview them, right? "I never did anything, I'm not important," right?

MG: I think that this is part of the potential of it.

AL: They're ordinary and extraordinary at the same time.

MG: I think that part of the potential of what you did with *Spirit of the Narrows* is that it makes these people come to life and seem like they're real people again. They're not just people who are in a book, in an academic article someplace.

AL: Also, academics are so restricted by having to stick to defensible facts. You know, I've been thinking about this a lot in anticipation of our work here [this interview/article]. You can never tell everything, right? There's so much information going on around you all the time that we're always selecting out what to tell. Academics tend to select out just the bare facts of people's lives. I mean, one of the questions you had written down was whether I thought certain aspects would be communicated better theatrically than in academic work? Absolutely, and I realize that the reason is because you're telling entirely different kinds of stories. If I were writing academically, I wouldn't talk about Carl's trip to the hospital and the fire, because none of that is directly relevant to the study of the music. I wouldn't be telling those stories in an academic context.

MG: So why was it important for you to do that in *Spirit of the Narrows*, tell those stories? What was the purpose of telling those stories?

AL: Because I needed them [the audience] to be fascinated by this person and his life. You're establishing a character, and you've only got two minutes. This whole piece consists of a lot of characters that we have to establish very quickly, so you tell a few key instances in his life that very quickly give people an idea of what sort of man this is. But you don't bother with that in academics. You just go right to the stuff about the music.

MG: I think there has been a lot of movement to tell more of the stories behind the music.

AL: Yeah, you're right. So, that's unfair. [Laughs]

MG: Well, it's a fair point in that when you present it as theatre you do have a different opportunity to present characters in a way where they don't seem like they're disappearing into the analysis. Where they're front and centre, I suppose.

AL: And the lesson we learn from that is that it makes people more interested in the music, which is really neat to see. I also realize there's different kinds of stories that get told in academics. To me, it is all just different kinds of stories, which I think is an interesting idea to explore. Ethnomusicologists tell a certain kind of story for their ethnomusicological audience. Then we get into the kinds of stories that I would tell on stage, or the kinds of stories that I would tell in a theatre piece. They have different purposes. One of my purposes was to help people be

interested in this music. I want them to like the music, to understand the music, to be excited about the music.

MG: Did you see yourself then kind of a cultural go-between?

AL: Oh, absolutely. I always have. That's always been my role in all of this. I just think it's fantastic music. I love the fact that it's a blend of influences from several different cultures, including ones that people would allow me to identify with, like European-Canadian culture. I grew up on the prairies, and it so much captures the history of the life of the prairies. To me the music is a complete mirror of prairie culture, of the interactions between the cultures. You can see it all just by listening to the music, if you know what you're listening for. It's great music.

MG: It is, absolutely. The first time I heard Grandy's music, I heard all these things that I knew I wasn't supposed to like about it, but I just was drawn to it.

AL: Like what? Now I'm curious. [Laughs]

MG: Well, like the tuning wasn't good, [the tone] was scratchy, all that kind of thing, things that are supposed to make me say, "That's not good," but there was still something about it that just drew me in.

AL: I know, and it would be so lovely if we understood what that was. Many people have that reaction. In fact when I first did the play, Paul Thompson saw it, who's kind of the godfather of Canadian collective theatre. I've worked with him a lot. In fact, I met him out in Saskatchewan at the Batoche 100th Anniversary [in 1985], when they were having a big ten-day festival. He was there collecting material for a play that he wanted to do about the Metis Rebellion. When he first saw me do my show he said, "Would you ever consider making the playing less 'good', making it a little more scratchy, a little more rough around the edges?"

MG: And what did you say?

AL: I said, "Yeah, I guess maybe I should." You're always concerned about whether people will think you're any good as a fiddler, right? But I started to incorporate more into the play, the physical position that they play in, which is often very different from mine, holding the fiddle vertically and down on their chest, and that solved the problem instantly. As soon as I did that, I was scratchier, and more out of tune [laughs], and I sounded more Grandy, as soon as I adopted his physical posture.

MG: Do you think that changed other aspects of it? You said it made it scratchier and more out of tune, but did it do anything else?

AL: Well, I felt like it helped me feel more like Grandy. It definitely helped me as an actor, feel like I was inhabiting him more. If I did everything I could to adopt his physical posture – imagine being as tall

as he was, the way he sat, the way he held the fiddle ...

MG: Do you think [*Spirit of the Narrows*] will ever be able to be put on by anybody else? Because in a way, it's completely tied to you.

AL: Yes, I actually think it could be. But you're right, I get to imagine those real people that I knew, which helps me, especially as a non-actor. A more experienced actor has to imagine the people and won't have as clear a picture of them as real human beings. We don't have much videotape, we only have photos and voices on tape. Even watching Cappy, here we are, we have a play where there's someone playing me on stage, right? I watch it and I say, "That's not really me; I don't really talk like that, I'm not really that enthusiastic." And, it's true, it isn't really me, it's a heightened version of me.

MG: Well, she's trying to present a kind of – I mean one of the things I got from it is a kind of (correct me if I'm wrong), but a kind of naivety when you were going into those communities ...

AL: You have to decide what quality you're trying to portray and let an actor portray that in their own way, that's my understanding of how acting works. So it may not be a true, exact embodiment of that human being, but it's an embodiment of the qualities of that human being that you need to get across, in the way that the actor can do it. It's certain emotional qualities. So, here we have this white woman playing all these First Nations/Aboriginal [male] fiddlers, so there's no question that we're [not] trying to be realistic, but I did know these people, and I'm doing my best to kind of channel them in the way that I can.

MG: You said right at the beginning [of our conversation] that you had done your research, it's about ten years later, and you wanted to explore it more. What did you learn [by] exploring it through theatre? What did you learn through that process?

AL: The thesis was all about the music, and the history of the people, how [it] evolved, what actually happened. It was very much about analyzing the music. I think I wanted to honour the people in some way [with the play]. These people had a big influence in my life. And they were characters. They were different kinds of people than you would normally meet living in downtown Toronto. The fact that I got to spend that much time with a man who had lived on his family farm his whole life, and that he became a friend even though he was 50 years older than me, that by the end of this process, I could call them my friends though their background was so different than mine and they were from different generations ...

MG: What do you think allowed you to build that relationship with them?

AL: Well, just being open and interested and non-threatening. I had no ego about any of this. I just

wanted to learn, right? Even telling the stories, I had no idea whether the stories would be interesting, you just trust, you just enter the process and see what comes out. I feel like when I was out there, I kind of approached it the same way. I didn't care whether I ever wrote a thesis about it. I had no idea, the first year I went, whether I would, or whether it would [work].

MG: The other issue too, though, is that there must have been a sense, at first, when you came in that, "Is she going to be interested in us for a few months, and take what she wants, and then we're done?" So that sense of commitment on your part – did you get the feeling that they wanted to see that you actually were dedicated to this and weren't going to just come in and take something and then never see them again?

AL: Yes, but I think there's many aspects to that. Yes, when you come back a year later, the reaction is very different. "Oh, here's somebody we know, she's back." That does make a difference.

MG: We didn't scare them away ...

AL: ... But, in a sense, they want to scare you away. In many cases, they don't trust people like me. There's a historical antipathy, especially between Native communities and anyone they perceive as an anthropologist in any way. It was even worse that I was recording, because they have an image of the music business and that people become rich and famous in the music business, and that I was going to somehow rip them off and make a lot of money. So why on earth would they give me their music? I'd like to hear what you think too. Academics tend to come in and gather these stories, and take them away. Everybody tells stories, everybody lives by stories, I think. We spend most of our day telling stories of one sort or another, if not to other people, to ourselves, in our heads. And, most of our social interaction with people revolves around telling stories of one sort or another. But here's somebody who wants to come in and hear your stories, but isn't offering one of their own. Usually it's not a two-way street; and then they [anthropologists, academics] go away with your stories, and tell them to other people.

MG: Well, I think that's why, more recently, there's been a lot of movement to more dialogic research, where there is that chance for the person, your consultant, to talk back to what you wrote.

AL: ... Which I think is fantastic.

MG: So, "let's see what you wrote, these are parts that I disagree with." Even if you don't, as an academic, change it, at least you can acknowledge that you're interpreting it from this [perspective], but your consultant disagrees and so you have a much more complicated [analysis] ... an open conversation or dialogue.

AL: I think that's all for the better, and I can see that having changed over the course of my lifetime. I remember the first time that I went to an ethnomusicology conference, I was a musician. To me, ethnomusicologists and performing musicians should be the best of friends; we're all interested in the same stuff. But for some reason, I went to this conference and I felt weirdly out of place, I felt like I was making the academics uncomfortable.

MG: I guess, for academics, maybe there was a sense of protectionism ...

AL: Protecting what?

MG: In the past a lot of the work that academics did was so theoretically dense, and it still is [often]. Unless you're always reading this material, you're not going to be interested in reading [it].

AL: There's a different language, it's like translating. Not only are you taking people's stories, but you're translating them into some other language for another culture, which is how I think you should look at it – that academic culture is its own culture, and has its own language, and its own way of speaking. It's true, people from the outside might not understand it, like any other culture. And I guess it's kind of embarrassing to then be witnessed by the original culture in your translated version.

MG: Fear that maybe you were misrepresenting?

AL: Well, there is that. There is the danger that you will say things that they don't agree with. Sometimes it's historical fact, sometimes it's some things that are in the music, and people in the culture don't want to believe [them]. They tell themselves different stories than the ones that I'm telling about the music. They don't want your story to be true, even if it is. That's not the story that they're telling themselves. How do you deal with that?

MG: Highlighting things that are not important to them, or that they don't want highlighted?

AL: It's not that they don't want it highlighted. They actually don't believe it. It's not the story they tell. For example, one that I could share is [Aboriginal people in Manitoba's] relationship with their French history. Again, this doesn't apply to everybody, but some of them have a really problematic relationship with their French history. They don't want to think of themselves as French, they don't want to think their music is coming from the French, and, in many [ways], it really strongly does. Their history is French, but that's not what they want to think about themselves, and if I say that, they will deny it. So how do you deal with that kind of situation?

MG: I see that in the context of the story of the "Red River Jig", where it's pretty clear that it comes from "La Grande Gigue Simple".

AL: Yes, there's a perfect example. Yet they would much rather say that it comes from Scotland, because

they're, for some reason, inordinately proud of their Scottish heritage.

MG: Really, I haven't seen that part of it. But yeah, the story is, of course, that it emerged at the Forks [in Winnipeg], listening to a bagpipe player. [...] I see it as a desire to understand that Metis culture emerged in that space. It's not a story about where the song comes from. It's a story about where Metis people come from.

AL: I agree. You know, stories have many different purposes and telling the facts is often not the most important thing about a story. Telling an emotional truth or a truth about your identity or ...

MG: Exactly. So that's how I always see that story. I sort of state, "Yeah, it comes from Quebec." But what people want to emphasize is that [they] are from this particular place. This is the particular place that's important to us. I guess, from my perspective, I don't really care if [the stories] are "true" or not. I care about what the stories tell me about Metis identity.

AL: And maybe the people telling you those stories would want you to take that as given fact, and maybe they wouldn't. Maybe they're also willing to accept that it's a story, that we don't know for sure.

MG: What made you want to tell the story from your point of view, because you could have gone ahead and written yourself out and just written the characters.

AL: Yeah, well, there's times when I still am a little uncomfortable with that. Ultimately, this is really my story, and it seems awfully egocentric. I still have that script running in my head, frequently – "This is just all about you." I could look at it objectively and say I think that it helps non-Aboriginal people get into it, because they can identify with me. But that's a cop-out, that's what Hollywood does, we can't tell stories about other cultures unless we have a white blonde hero to be the one we can identify with. Why can't we just identify with the people from the other culture themselves, without having someone from our culture be the way in? And all that is true. But you know, I don't know how else to tell the story, so in a sense, it's the only honest way I can do it. I can't pretend to tell the story from anyone else's point of view except mine. People do find a way in with this naive girl, because that's how most of us feel ... on the outside of Aboriginal culture. We all feel kind of naive and stupid and we'd like to find a way in, a way to have a relationship, and it's very difficult. If I keep doing the play, I feel we could have this conversation again in a couple of years and I would have more stories. One of the questions you'd written down was, "Do I want to do it in Aboriginal communities?" Absolutely, that's my main priority. I would like to be doing it for them, because, I know how much, at least the older people still love that music

and they don't get to hear it much, live, played by anyone. Even young Metis players are not playing the old style of fiddle. And it's too bad that it has to be a white girl from the city, but I can't help that. I loved it and wanted to learn it and there aren't a huge number of [young] Aboriginal fiddlers who were doing that. That's my main aim: to take the play to the communities and bring the local fiddlers up after or before to be part of it.

MG: That would be really interesting.

AL: Yeah, so that it's all part of an event.

MG: Do you think the play would have to change? I mean, it would change if you brought [Aboriginal fiddlers] up after. We talked about you being a way for white non-Aboriginal Canadians to enter, through your story ...

AL: Ok, so let's look at it from the point of view of a Native audience. Again, I don't know that I can do anything differently. I can't pretend to be doing anything other than telling my story, and even Aboriginal audiences seem to appreciate that. It gets us away from the whole appropriation issue, because, essentially, I'm telling my story and they respect that. "You have a story, and your story involves coming to try to learn about our culture," and that actually seems to work for Aboriginal audiences. If they know who I am, what is my story, where I'm from ... The whole play helps them understand why I would be interested. In fact, I don't entirely understand why it was so fascinating to me, but they get to find out as much as I know.

MG: Something I really appreciated about what you did is that you had the question-and-answer period afterward. Is that something you typically do? Because I think it's a really important way to acknowledge that *Spirit of the Narrows* is ... it's a conversation that you're starting.

AL: Yeah. Well, we didn't in Blyth. What we did in Blyth was have local performers come up. They were not Aboriginal performers, but still, it acknowledged that this was a community event in a sense. So, I would be following that model still in Aboriginal communities, with local performers. So now I have to think about how to do both.

MG: I think that would be fantastic.

AL: A little talkback and a musical party.

MG: I think if you did that, it [would] really position it as one story. [It would show that] there are all these other fiddlers who have their own stories. I think it positions it as something dynamic, instead of something that's just, "this is [Metis fiddling] and that's it." Rather, if you bring in fiddlers, then it's saying, "Yeah, it's connected to this community." [...] You said you were back in the community recently, or one of the communities recently, or relatively recently, and played some of the music you learned.

AL: I was with the Frontier Fiddlers. Yes, that was very exciting.

MG: What was the reaction?

AL: They were excited, because I told them I was playing tunes I had learned from elders in their community in 1985. Some of them were old enough to have known him [Grandy] and the older people certainly remembered that style of fiddling, and they don't get to hear it much. There have been no commercial recordings made from their community, other than mine (if you can call them commercial – mine was a collection of living-room recordings, really). Actually, that's not entirely true. The youngest player from that community, Rene Ferland, made a record, later, after I left, that was sold in the community. In any case, the older people in Camperville were very excited, especially to see someone who comes from Toronto come there and play them some of their old tunes.

MG: It legitimizes it?

AL: I take it as a compliment, that they really felt that I had done justice to their tunes.

MG: What I hear in Grandy's playing is an energy. I think it's coming from that point of energy, and that's the centre [of his playing] rather than every little note, every little unit ...

AL: Yeah. You can hear that he's a musician at heart, whatever that means, that he's entered this stream where the music flows through him. He's no longer trying to make it happen.

MG: Exactly.

AL: He's one of those people who just lets it come through him. I think that's pretty cool.

Final Thoughts

So where does that leave us?

MG: Given the exceptionally positive response from the audience as well as the relatively large number of people who have learned about Metis music through this play (somewhere in the vicinity of 2,000 people total, while it ran at Blyth), this play demonstrates the potential of using theatre to disseminate research. It does, nonetheless, raise questions that I believe merit further discussion. Although performance brings the characters to life (or perhaps because it does), how can we ensure that audiences fully grasp the mediated nature of a form that, while drawing on real life, is constructed through the lens of the playwright? (The technique of having two Annes, as well as having Anne play all of the other characters went a long way in demonstrating the mediated nature of the performance.) I'd also like to return to what Anne said about whose stories we're listening to (and potentially whose stories we're telling). How might we include more Indigenous stories? Having Indigenous fiddlers

perform before or after the play was an idea that emerged in the above conversation; combining such a performance with a question-and-answer period (what Anne called a "talkback and a musical party") might allow audiences to better situate the play as one story among many.

AL: My experience with *Spirit of the Narrows* leads me to believe that, done in the right way, a theatre piece that simply tells a story, that brings people to life on the stage, can illuminate an entire traditional art form simply through what people say and how others respond. It can not only spread awareness, but move people emotionally and arouse passionate interest, just by hearing small parts of others' life stories and the stories they tell themselves. The interaction between people within a culture and one or more outsiders seems to be essential to make this work, offering, as it does, a way in for audience members, no matter what culture they identify with, how old they are, or whether or not they know anything about the music or art form involved. Moreover, performances like this can be a way to affirm community while at the same time inspiring important new dialogue around often sensitive issues of respect and appropriation. Good music also helps.

Notes

¹ Grandy Fagnan, from Camperville, Manitoba, was the first Metis fiddler Anne heard, and the oldest person she recorded. He also had the most extensive repertoire.



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