

Yanking Your Audience:  
An analysis of the Use of Metatheatrical, Aleatoric and Recursive Devices  
in Daniel MacIvor's Plays

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Metatheatrical, recursive and aleatoric. Just what do these mean and how do they relate to Daniel MacIvor's plays? MacIvor's writing embodies these very specific elements which are considered to be experimental and which affect his audiences and influence their willingness to become part of the story. The Canadian Encyclopedia Online states, "Daniel MacIvor is one of Canada's most innovative playwrights and yet his work is so broadly appealing that it has enjoyed a degree of popular success far beyond the range usually associated with so-called 'experimental theatre'". The reason is that in MacIvor's plays these devices do not come off as experimental; instead, they feel organic to his works. It is simply a way of writing a play, a scene, or a story that fits comfortably into our post-modern world. This quality of MacIvor's writing creates a psychological effect on his audience whose reaction to it helps to bridge the gap between the viewer and the viewed, eliminating the fourth wall of traditional theatre and creating a unifying experience.

The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia Online states, "His plays are highly metatheatrical; the characters observe their own performances." To describe MacIvor's works as "metatheatrical" would be to state that his works comment on themselves or use literary artifice. While I would heartily agree that his works comment on themselves, I would be hard pressed to agree that it is literary artifice. There is nothing of artifice about MacIvor's works. As well, there is nothing device-like in his plays; they genuinely reflect the characters that inhabit them, who in many ways resemble us, and the situations that the characters find themselves in. It is this quality that makes them work so well and allows him to reach out and yank the audience up through the fourth wall rather than having the actors move out across it in an attempt to create the unified experience. In

plays like *How it Works*, we, the audience, find ourselves present at the kitchen table with Al and Donna wondering just how it is that we are going to help our daughter with her drug problem, forgetting that we don't actually have a daughter and that the kitchen table we are sitting at is not our own.

The element of aleatory, or chance, is reliant upon both the audience and the actor adopting the role. Aleatory introduces an element of chaos to the performance right from first reading and subverts audience expectations as no one can be actually certain of what will happen given that so much is dependent upon the response of the audience and the response of the actor to the response of the audience. This is where the recursive element enters. Recursion is the repetition of an idea or motif. When the outcome of a play is reliant upon a repeating motif and the reactions to the reactions to it, a looping form of repetition occurs that destabilizes and adds to the chaos of the aleatory and metatheatrical devices already in play. However, despite all this chaos and destabilization, his plays work. Marlene Moser in *Twenty-first-century Canadian Writers* sums it up nicely, "MacIvor often uses broadly theatrical metaphors that demand the audience's or reader's collaboration for their interpretation...His works are metatheatrical but not abstract: the audience is of utmost importance to MacIvor and is acknowledged, surprised, challenged, and always entertained..." (334).

According to Jerry Wasserman who wrote the introduction to *Never Swim Alone* in *Volume II of Modern Canadian Plays*, MacIvor specializes in "Creating off-beat plays that intimately connect performer and audience..." (289). The opening dialogue of many of his plays such as *Never Swim Alone*, *This is a Play*, *Here Lies Henry* and *House Humans* actively engages the audience from the very first moment and indicates to those

who believe they are there to be entertained, that in reality everyone is in it together. In *Never Swim Alone* the two actors, Frank and Bill, “enter through the house, greeting the audience individually. Before stepping on stage they turn and greet the audience. “Hello. Good to see you. Glad you could come”” (293); in *Here Lies Henry*, Henry begins by regarding the audience fearfully and then with “a weak smile he nods hello to a couple of individuals” (13); in *House Humans*, Victor begins, “Hello. Thank you for coming. Thank you for not going someplace else. Thank you for not staying home and watching teevee. Thank you for coming here.” He then rolls a tiny invisible ball between his thumb and forefinger, stops and regards the audience once again before continuing his opening monologue, “I hate it when they don’t do that. Might as well say hello. We’re all just a room full of people so, hello.” (19 – 20); in *This is a Play* the actors begin as though it were an actual play, however twenty one lines in, one of the actors turns to the audience and engages them in a dialogue about the play itself, “Confused by the moody lighting and the empty stage? Nervous because you were expecting a comedy? “Oh no” you think “it’s experimental!” Relax!” You know me! I’m the Older, but still attractive, Female Actor; wise and gruff and charming, rough around the edges but soft on the inside. In actuality, I am a mother image for the playwright but a more perfect mother, not like his own who never understood his delicate artistic sensibilities. And now I deliver my first monologue...” (82). Even in reading these plays the reader is informed that they are “in” the play. Robert Wallace’s introduction to Victor, the subject of *House Humans* states in reference to reading MacIvor’s plays, “any reading of them, whether silent or out loud, should be considered performative” and while, “this is arguably true of all readings, not all texts push the reader to consider his or her role in the interpretive act.

*House Humans* does; and, to the degree that it forces the reader to recognize the way that his or her performance directly affects Victor's subjectivity, it succeeds." (7 – 8). There is just no way to avoid it, when it comes to MacIvor's works; the audience is part of the play.

What effect does yanking his audience up through the fourth wall have on the people who attend these plays? Well, first it is disconcerting. Audiences generally attend plays in the hopes of being entertained. There is an implicit contract that the actors on the stage, given the words, direction and props provided by the playwright, director, stage designer, and all the other people involved in the creation of the play, will do their utmost to entertain. The audience's role, safely ensconced in their seats, is to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show. They are not expected to do much beyond witnessing the efforts of the people up there on the stage. Therefore, it can come as quite a shock to have the actors, in their roles, or out, address the audience directly. I have witnessed this effect first hand. When attending *How it Works* at Performance Works Theatre on Granville Island, the audience demonstrated palpable discomfort when the character of Christine opened the play by talking directly to them about the damage that occurs to people through living. A sense of awkwardness took over the small audience, a feeling of "is she talking to me?" As Christine continued to speak, she moved toward us and directly looked at each one of us and told us that we all end up broken and that in being broken we end up separated from life and from each other. Audience members actually glanced at each other during this monologue as if to say, "hey, this isn't part of the contract; I'm not supposed to have to participate."

Having to participate is the second effect, the sense that one is no longer there to simply be entertained, but now has a responsibility to “do” something, to be something more than just a passive receptacle for the performance art. This results in an uneasiness for the audience, a sense of impending chaos. No longer are they “safe” in their seats, now they are exposed, vulnerable, open to judgment the same as the actors on the stage. It is the same discomfort when someone offers us up to tell a joke or recount a story that we were neither prepared for, nor really willing to tell. It is the feeling that something is wrong, that people aren’t following their scripts. These two psychological effects, the discomfort of being “seen” and the responsibility of having to participate, create a unifying element between the audience and the actors on the stage. No longer is there the clear division between the viewer and the viewed. Lines have become blurred and roles obscured. Even MacIvor has commented on this effect in his foreword to the actor for his one person show, *Here Lies Henry*: “One thing I like to say about the play...is that it is experiential. Experiential in that it is the whole experience of the piece (intellectual, emotional, visual, aural etc.) which creates the ‘narrative’ – and this narrative varies for each person who experiences its elements.... The whole story is now up to you and your relationship to the (figurative and literal) audience” (10). The resulting single effect is that the audience becomes part of the play.

*Never Swim Alone* is a contest of words between the two male characters, Frank and Bill. The referee is a girl in a bathing suit, who awards points and announces scores. She is an overt reference to a competition from their childhood, involving the three of them and a swimming race. However, the audience is pulled into the competition from the start. Both men “work” the audience before the play. They move through the house

greeting individual audience members, saying hello and shaking hands, attempting to create the relationships that will elicit support for “their side” once the competition begins. At the end of round one, after Frank takes the victory, he addresses the audience, “...To those of you I didn’t have a chance to greet as I entered I’d like to welcome you and thank you for coming. I’m sure you all have busy schedules and many other concerns in these troubled times and your presence here tonight is greatly appreciated. A hand for the audience!” (294). This reversal, applauding the audience rather than the audience applauding the actors, confuses who is who and what their roles really are. It asks the questions, is the actor the actor and the audience the audience or is the actor the audience and the audience the actor? According to Wasserman the audience gladly jumps in, backs their favourite character and “actively keeps its own score with laughter, cheers, boos. The only thing missing in Round Eleven is a tag team” (290). This supports the opinion that there is a blurring of the demarcation between audience and actor and a fusing of them into a whole. Everyone is part of a team, creating the same psychological effect that cognitive categorizing does, an element of us and them, only in this case there is only the “us”; we are one and we all belong together; which, of course, doesn’t stop us from backing our favourite opponent.

In *Here Lies Henry* there are numerous incidents of the actor interacting with the audience. Near the opening he regards the audience, checks his fly, mimes a bird with his hands and then after an uncomfortable pause begins to intimately divulge his problems with public speaking, “You don’t want to get me started talking, I might never shut up.” (14). But isn’t the point of the actor to do the speaking, to be the one that never does shut up? After all, it isn’t the audience’s role to do that; their role is to be quiet and

listen. Shortly after discussing the rules of public speaking he offers his apartment, “Hey, I’ve got a place if you’re looking. Two bedrooms, hardwood floors, fireplace, view of the park, five-fifty all inclusive. It’s a very good deal. Of course if you take it you’ll have to contend with the matter of the body in the next room.” (15). This is followed by commentary on what the play has now become, “Oooo, what’s this suddenly? A mystery? “Murder She Wrote” suddenly... No. I had the strangest dream.” (15 – 16). It is as though the play is nothing more than a somewhat one-sided conversation with Henry’s buddies or acquaintances with whom he is close enough to divulge his public speaking problems to and to offer his apartment to. Later in the play he moves into the audience to speak to individuals privately; divulges more personal information including permanent afflictions, sexual predilections, his parents and their parenting skills; asks the audience what they are thinking when he dances for them; bums cigarettes off of audience members, invites them to “get preposterous” with him, and when he is all finished he comments on how the lighting should fade out and then ends by regarding the audience. The entire play consists of Henry interacting with the audience. No pretence of a fourth wall is ever even entertained. Even in the introduction by the Director Daniel Brooks, the participation of the reader or audience is implied, “We could reveal some of the working premises, elaborate on the dominant themes, define our idea of metaphor, and explain our approach, but each and every answer would only lead to more questions. In keeping with the spirit of the play, we leave the questions and the answers to the reader.” (9)

The text of *House Humans* and the character of Victor embodied within it do not consider themselves in any way to be differentiated from the audience. Right from first

read-through it is obvious that the interpretation of Victor is entirely reliant on the reader and/or audience. Robert Wallace in the introduction to *House Humans* speculates that both MacIvor and Victor may experience resentment over this: “Victor exists only in his stories (MacIvor makes Victor a true child of Barthes: he is entirely the sum of his texts), his subjectivity is always a matter of interpretation—another form of treatment. Whether this takes place in a theatre or the reader’s mind, it leaves Victor vulnerable to the same fact: the social and material circumstances of the interpreter will determine the way he is treated.” (8). Rarely do characters in plays acknowledge their own textuality which has been constructed by the writer, interpreted and performed by the actors and interpreted by the audience; however, *House* does all of these things. As well, the aleatoric nature of the two works, the fact that the reader or director is allowed to choose any of the short works that make up the text of *Humans* and insert as they please into Victor’s narrative in *House*, creates a responsibility as well as continually reminding the reader and/or audience of their responsibility in the creation of the work. Not only is the fourth wall removed, but the actual creation of the composition is reliant on the work of the outsider. From the very beginning positions can not be held and lines are blurred. The question of who is in charge must be first and foremost in the reader’s mind. The recursive effect of Victor playing the part of a member of a therapy group, acted upon by therapist and other group members is reflected in the “acting upon” that is done by the reader or the audience. The effect of watching oneself act upon the actor who is acted upon by the character who is acted upon by the therapy group who are all acted upon by the audience is like viewing one of Escher’s drawings, or listening to a Bach fugue. There can be no

understanding unless one actively participates. Attempting to maintain any sense of distance or boundaries is simply impossible.

Similar to *Here Lies Henry*, *House* is a one person show. Also similar to *Here Lies Henry* any attempt to maintain segregation between audience and actor is disbanded right from the opening and continually reinforced by the behaviour of the actor. Victor speaks in a disarmingly open manner to the audience, as though he were speaking to a few members of his therapy group, behind the backs of the other members. After welcoming the audience he begins his narrative discussing how “fucked-up” his therapy group members are. He talks about Mrs. Davidson’s abnormal obsession with making a popsicle stick lampshade, “...you know how many popsicle sticks it takes to make a lampshade? THOUSANDS! Poor Mrs. Davidson she wanted one of those popsicle-stick lampshades so bad she had to get her stomach pumped. She ate all those popsicles all by herself in the bathtub...” (21) and Stew’s weird propensity to steal everything that isn’t nailed down and even some things that are, “he’ll steal the handles off your kitchen cupboards...steal the thing out of the back of your toilet that floats, he’ll steal the round things you got on the bottom of the chairs in the living room so they don’t dent the carpet, steal the receiver off your telephone!” (25). Victor even tells us that it isn’t a play, “...or hey I don’t know...talk to me after the show. But it’s not a show...It’s my life...It’s my [*stands and thrusts his arms up in victory*] HOUSE!” (33). Later he interacts by asking the audience about a piece of green plastic indoor/outdoor carpeting he pulls from his pant pocket, “Does that look like *grass* to you?” (34). This is followed a bit later by Victor approaching the edge of the stage and conspiratorially telling the audience, “I know it’s a theatre. I do. I know it’s a theatre. I know it’s a stage. I know

it's a chair. I know it's a light." (38). And then begins to speak about himself in the third person as he starts down off the stage, "Oh oh. Oh oh. Oh no. Here he comes! He's ruining everything! I thought this was a PLAY! Stop! Stop! Stop! Now you wish you stayed home to watch teevee eh, teevee doesn't get up and walk around behind you, don't have to turn your head to watch teevee, never get a sore neck from teevee. Nice theatre eh?" (39). At this point in the original production, when MacIvor played the role, he would begin to disparage the Factory Theatre Studio Café, the theatre in which the play was being performed, all the while wandering throughout the audience and interacting with the people in attendance, finishing by returning to the stage, much to the audience's relief, and commenting, "Oh thank God he's back up there!" (39). This overt engagement of the audience forces them become part of the play itself. The interaction of actor and audience create an aleatoric element to the performance in which the audience's unrehearsed reaction to Victor's behaviour forms part of the play. It isn't only the actor that is crossing the fourth wall, if one was even considered to be there in the first place; it is the audience who complicitly involves themselves as well. Additionally by adopting the third person, Victor becomes the audience at the same moment that the audience becomes the actor. This is far more than a simple device of post-modern play writing, this is the actual play itself.

*This is a Play*, the most extreme example of post-modern influences of all of these plays, does not even attempt any "normal" aspects of a play in which actors play characters and audiences watch. *This is a Play* in a manner is reminiscent of Victor in *House* and Henry in *Here Lies Henry* in that the play spends its time commenting on itself and its own textuality while involving the audience and behaving as though the

audience has tacitly agreed to be a part of the play. Or as Carol Bolt comments in the introduction to *Never Swim Alone* and *This is a Play* “MacIvor’s characters seem to believe that their audience will actually help...think that we can make a difference.” (8). MacIvor so completely abandons the idea of standard theatrical conventions in *This is a Play* that he neglects to even name his characters. They are simply identified by type: Female Actor, Older Female Actor, Male Actor and Composer – who is only a voice. The characters in this play narrate their action as they perform it, “I cross the stage like a caged animal. I take up a position ever so slightly away from yet ever so slightly toward. Pain, hope and fear dance across my face in a delirious symphony” (85); comment on their own performances, “I take up a position stage right. I am sick with embarrassment, not only did I trip on my big cross but now I am not in my light.” (83); comment on the performances of others, “You’re dragging the play down, you’re milking the moment, you’re killing the momentum, you selfish little twit you’re pissing me off!” (85); relate their innermost feelings about their performance as though they were watching themselves perform, much in the way an audience would, “You imagine what a good hearted, folksy and simple person I am...Finally I speak. A perilous journey over dry and dusty terrain explaining things you already know...” (87); discuss the philosophical aspect of what the play comments on, “But then again, what is original? If the art is an extension of the artist and if each person is an original being then doesn’t it just follow that even the most banal, indulgent and derivative work—“ (87). And when they tire of talking to themselves or the other actors on the stage, or commenting on each other’s acting, or philosophizing, they actively engage the audience in their world, “You worry again, wondering if this might be children’s theatre. It should be. You look at your

watch and shift in your seat and I'm out of here." (82). There is an implicit understanding that the audience is part of the play, that there is no differentiation between what is going on up on the stage and what is happening in the house. It is simply the most extreme example by MacIvor, as though he wished to see exactly how far a playwright could move into the world of metatheatre, aleatory and recursion. The effect of this extreme position is succinctly described by Wasserman: "The enigmatic final tableau leaves them and the audience suspended in the pure theatrical ether that is Daniel MacIvor's milieu." (291).

MacIvor, in his Introduction to *Here Lies Henry*, commented that he believes there are only seven stories that can ever be told, man against the world, girl coming of age, lonely soul loses something, the battle over property, nobleman accidentally raised by soft-hearted villains, hero and his journey and the five things that can happen to a person: birth, death, love, weather and arthritis. MacIvor knows that these are universal; these are the stories that we all live and consequently we have them in common. There is no difference between Frank, Bill, Victor, Henry, Female Actor, Older Female Actor, Male Actor, Composer and us. Their story is our story and our story is theirs and this is the story that MacIvor tells. His deft usage of words and his seamless movement in and out of the audience blurs lines that define who belongs to whom and who is supposed to do what, and in this way he fuses us into a whole. The fourth wall simply does not exist for MacIvor. He does not introduce this element as artifice or a device of storytelling; it simply "is". It is the foundation for his post-modern approach to theatre. According to The Film Reference Library "Daniel MacIvor is widely regarded as Canada's most influential post-modern playwright". There is good reason for this, after all it is my story

and your story that he is telling and he wants us to be involved. Just in case he should get confused, or need confirmation of the facts, he wants us there to direct him, correct him and support him in the telling our stories.

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