

**I AM A REDDER: An Interview with Grant Guy**



*HAIKU* Photo Credit: Tom Elliot

Director: Grant Guy

Performers left to right: Phoebe Man, Carolyn Gray and Nadin Gilroy

**Adhere And Deny** was generated in 1981 by Grant Guy as a forum for a mixed program of theatre, performance, music, poetry and prose readings, and film and video screenings. It began life as *SHARED STAGE* that emerged from a union of Agassiz Theatre, the Manitoba Association of Playwrights and the Winnipeg Film Group. Events took place every second Sunday and were open to anyone who had something to offer.

In 1998 *Adhere And Deny* was born with the performance of Georg Buchner's *WOYZECK*. This production was notable for the introduction of what would become the signature *Adhere And Deny* cross between object/puppet and live acting, and for the recruitment of a group of actors who have made up the company ever since. Subsequent productions have included: *UBU ROI*, *BLOOD WEDDING*, *KLEIST: FRAGMENTS*, *SALOME*, *FOUND AND LOST*, *KATARSIS*, *PROMETHEUS BOUND*, *REQUIEM*, *ANTIGONE*, *THREE SISTERS: A STILL LIFE*, *YELIENA*, *CANTICLE*,

*MEDEA ET DUDE, THE TRAGEDY OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS, HAIKU, AND SEE IF MEMORY IS THERE, ELIGY FOR KHLEBNIKOV, VIA CRUCIS, SWAN SONG, ORESTEIA TRIO, THE PRAMPOLINI ACTION, SONG FOR SIMONE and PARADISE LOST.* Adhere And Deny is currently working on two performance works *THE TELEPHONE: A CHAMBER PLAY* for early November 2009 and *STILL WALKING* for March 2010.

Grant Guy is a formally trained designer and is creatively active not only as a director, but as an arts programmer, curator, designer, performance artist, playwright, videographer and writer. He received the Manitoba Arts Council Arts Award of Distinction in 2004.

My first interview with Grant was on a brutal, bone-chilling, sub-zero winter day in early December 2008. Only the bold were out in the lung-freezing air. We met outside the Adhere And Deny studio space in Winnipeg's historic downtown Exchange District. The presence of paint fumes within rendered the studio impossible as an interview space. Instead, the interview took place on the third floor landing over-looking the abandoned snow and frost-encrusted streets. Within moments the vast emptiness of a prairie winter day dissolved into the complex world from which Adhere And Deny had emerged and in which it was rooted.

Somewhat overwhelmed with the volume of the information I had taken away, I arranged another interview with Grant, a month or so later, in January 2009. This time we met inside the company's design and craft studio, an enclosed area within the company's intimate performance space. I was confronted with the flux of Grant's process-into-performance in a very concrete way as the studio/performance space also served as a kind of museum/archive site in which object/puppets from previous projects were nestled in shelves or on table-tops. At that point in time members of Adhere And Deny had begun to construct *PARADISE LOST* a performance I would see in March.

After some consideration, Grant emailed me with further thought on the content of the interview and much later I emailed specific questions to him concerning clarification of some of the content. This volleying of information occurred several times. During the course of these various points of contact, shifts occurred in the images or words chosen as descriptions. In the end the interview became a process in and of itself.

The world created by Grant Guy and Adhere And Deny is a captivating otherworld in which energy is reconfigured through the relationship of between actors and objects, actors and space and through the configuration of live bodies in time and space. As a result the spectator is always aware of the fact that she is not functioning in the quotidian world but in a world of other landscapes that are in continuous flux as space and time unfold upon themselves through the action or stillness created by performers, objects, light and sound. Shifts from focus on objects to actors create micro and macro worlds that exist in the same time and space but on different planes. There exists a great sophistication of thought and concept in the simplicity of juxtaposing the world of the object with the world of the living human being. This is grownup 'play' with the construction of reality that

involves investment, intensity and clarity of detail.

### **How long have you been doing this kind of work?**

This current work of Adhere And Deny – since 1998 but don't take my word for it. I am not very good with dates. Time for me is quite elastic.

### **Was there an evolutionary process involved?**

Yes and no. Usually I begin with a gut response. All intellectual justification comes later and with time, the justification has been known to change. I suppose everything depends on how I feel about something at a particular time. To be somewhat more specific, the current manifestation of Adhere And Deny, its evolution into an object/puppet-based theatre company, was predicated by practical concerns. In 1998 Adhere And Deny was awarded a tiny annual grant from the Manitoba Arts Council. However, there was not enough money to do what I had originally envisioned for Adhere And Deny's future. I have never worked with lots of money, so solutions to money issues were never a hindrance. One needs to turn the lack of money into an advantage. Besides silence and nothingness as material, I used poverty as material. I made it a material rather than a detriment. Mold it, shape it. Also I had experimented with 'my kind of' puppet [objects/puppets] in earlier works – sometimes seriously (or better – sincerely) and sometimes as dada dumbs.

Maybe I ought to explain "dada dumbs". Dada dumbs were short works created originally for SHARED STAGE. I, and others such as Alex Poruchnyk and Liz Jarvis, created dada dumbs. They were sometimes tongue-in-cheek. Sometime they were deadpan serious. Sometimes they were rehearsed. Sometimes they were improvised and spur of the moment. The Christmas Pageant Play by Alex Poruchnyk was conceived and rehearsed in less than five minutes when a performer walked out on the evening's event when he found out he was not the headliner. SHARED STAGE never had headliners. Sometimes the dada dumbs were just fillers. One such work was *Antonin Artaud is Missing*. *Artaud* involved two people tossing an eviscerated chicken back and forth like a football while a third person read out text and handed it to the audience.

The term dada dumb came from a review by Reg Skene – "Show balances things Dada, Dumb" (or some such thing).

These experiments became a ready-made solution. I knew the objects/puppets could become the materials and the tools to assist me in the making of a theatre that sculpted Time and Space – filled and emptied space. Silence, Time and Space have been prime deliverers of the narrative in my work, not the objects/puppets. I was using Time and Space as material in my work before the advent of the objects/puppets. Objects/Puppets have never been an end for me – only a means to an end. They became a means to create the kind of theatre I wanted to see.

### **What kinds of work was done prior to the object puppet focus?**

Prior to the most recent work of Adhere And Deny there was a lot of hit and miss projects – empty dreams. I was like a lost little puppy for a while. But a few things in the interim between SHARED STAGE and Adhere And Deny did generate a catalyst. There were projects such as *THE HARROWING* by Scott Douglas and *BEAR WITH ME* by William Harrar that set the foundation for the current trajectory of work. In 1986, SHARED STAGE spearheaded the International Intermedia Performance Festival of 1986. The festival was intended to highlight the immense amount of performance art that was happening in Winnipeg. The Festival was intended to have the Winnipeg work share an international stage. But after the '86 Festival, performance work seemed to cease or at least to drop off dramatically. Everyone seemed to go back to what they were doing before creating performance art – painting, making videos, etc. At the same time other artists were returning to Winnipeg or moving here and this would be the beginning of a new body of work.

During this transitional period, the Manitoba Arts Council was putting pressure on SHARED STAGE to change its programming practice. Basically they wanted us to replace our 'anarchy at a controlled intersection' programming with more conventional and accountable democratic structures in the same way most artist-run centres have evolved into their mature years. By the end of 1987/88 I think I suffered an emotional and spiritual collapse. I continued to do a little performance art but found myself gravitating back to theatre – not directly but incrementally. As I was converting back to theatre, I was deeply engaged in the world of video and video art. Video impacted my work for a while but I also inverted into a Luddite in the mid-nineties. Only now am I reemerging from my Luddite shell, but I remain skeptical of the superlatives and hyperbolic degrees of the digital engineers.

Some of the last performance art pieces were prototypes in the use of Time as material. Other performances were explorations of other vocabularies drawn from sources outside the theatre – particularly sculpture and film. I wrote and performed a number of monologues. *DOC HOLLIDAY* was the best, in my mind. In the exploration of the monologue, I played around with the notion of the clown – my kind of clown. Everything I do is 'my kind of'.

It was during this groping time, 1986 to about 1998, that I propelled my activity further into community projects. These projects involved many Winnipeg arts organizations and artists. *NIGHTCLUB*, a large-scale work, celebrated 'the nightclub' as my generation remembered nightclubs via the movies. In *LIGHT/LIGHT*, an outdoor work that was set at the junction of Omand's Creek and the Assiniboine River, several artists including Sharon Alward and Alethea Lahofer were asked to create works that used light as material or applied light as a metaphor. The *VAN TV* project involved five artists who were commissioned to create video installations for vans. The vans were driven to the five largest shopping malls in Winnipeg where they parked for one hour, near a mall entrance, before being driven off to another mall.

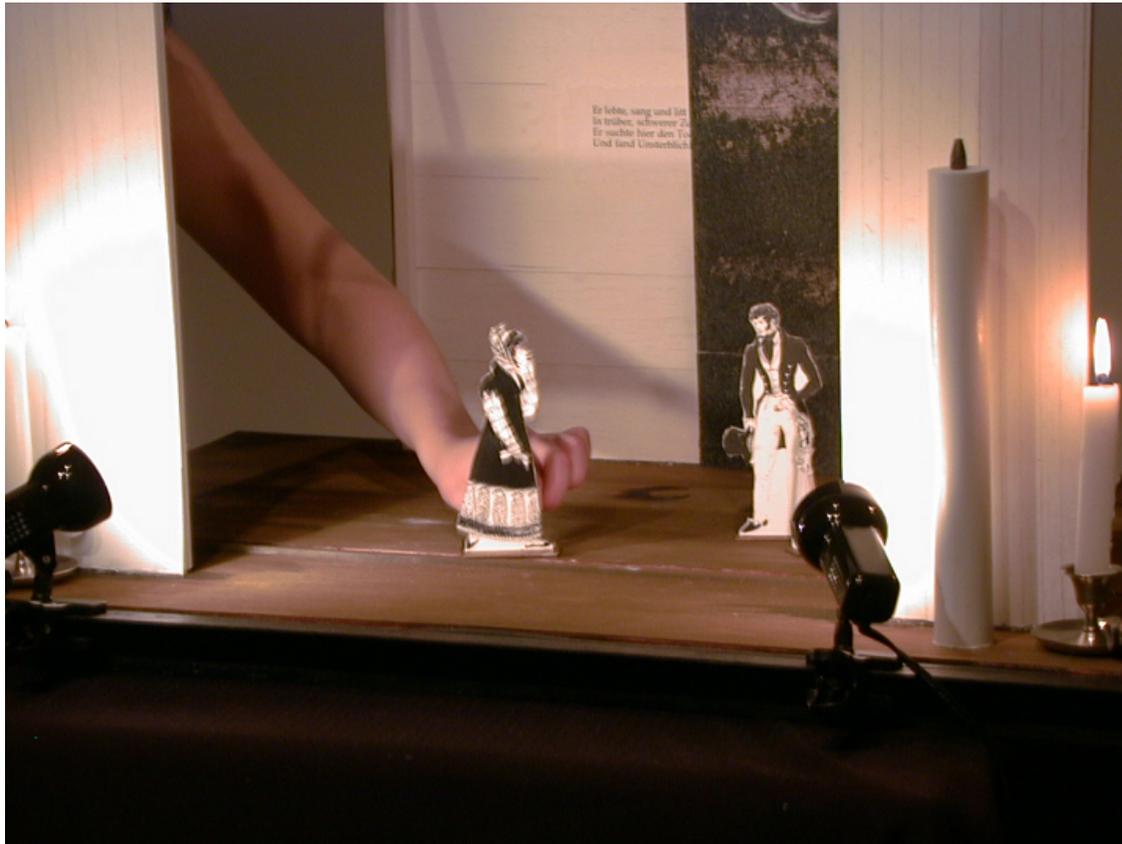
Even when I drifted in and out of theatre, my work in performance, and as a programmer and curator had a theatricality to it. I like theatricality. I am not big on theatre, but there is something about theatricality I like.

Drama can be theatre but theatre is not necessarily drama.

### **What is the core of the experimentation?**

I don't have a fixed core of experimentation. I merely pursue certain ideas or feelings that I have about something. That is the great advantage of not being successful – in terms of fame – there is so much more freedom in obscurity. I must admit, however, that there is a basic core that forms the foundation of what I do – at least since the mid 1990s with *LOST. LOST*, a work inspired by Samuel Beckett's *The Lost Ones*, was an epiphany of the power of white silence. My experience with the project was somewhat equivalent to a religious experience.

At times I thought that the core of the process was the way in which text was constructed or deconstructed. I am a narrative kind of guy. The *KLEIST: FRAGMENTS* project was one of the projects that employed deconstructed text. *KLEIST: FRAGMENTS* was a fragmentary theatre piece, as the title alludes. The text was a collage of texts by Heinrich von Kläist, Thomas Mann, Robert Selbing, Heinrich Heine, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and two or three more. All texts were broken away from their original context like shards of an ancient water jug and scattered throughout the work for the audience to reassemble and to create their own narrative. The production's narrative and the audience's narrative, in the end, have many, many similarities, but there are always interesting shades of differences. I know, however, that I would be lying if I said that the text was the core of the performance. The spoken narrative is important but not of 'the' greatest importance. Silence or nothingness is of far more importance. Mark Rothko stated that "Silence is so accurate". I think that what I am after is how a surface of a theatrical piece can be kept alive without activation. A concrete example would be a painting by Rothko compared to one by Jackson Pollock. It is a search for degrees of stasis. Am I there? No. But it is the search that is important. If I found the conclusion, I would be forced to defend that conclusion for the rest of my life. I can't imagine doing that.



*KLEIST: FRAGMENTS* Photo Credit: Jen Loewen

Director: Grant Guy

Performer: Carolyn Gray

This power of silence was very well demonstrated in *THREE SISTERS: A STILL LIFE*. *THREE SISTERS: A STILL LIFE* was a reconstruction of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. All the characters were eliminated except the three sisters. By allowing for Silence (and in conjunction with that, Time) a completely new narrative emerged.



*THREE SISTERS: A STILL LIFE* Photo Credit: Tom Elliot      Director: Grant Guy  
Performers left to right: Sharon Bajer, Carolyn Gray and Nadin Gilroy

Another project that illustrated the employment of Silence as material was *CANTICLE*. In *CANTICLE* no spoken word was uttered. The only text was the poem “The Spanish Canticle” by St. John of the Cross, broken up and spoken in Spanish over the sound system. No action, no gesture, was hurried. Each action was given its moment. The only sounds generated from the actions that were heard, although amplified, were resonant and crystal clear, such as a metal cross scraping the inside of a porcelain bowl, water dripping from the hands of Nadin Gilroy, the performer, into stilled water, and chalk scraping out the seven deadly virtues\* on a black-board.



*CANTICLE* Photo Credit: Tom Elliot  
Performer: Nadin Gilroy

Director: Grant Guy

I would eventually like to create a theatre made up of seventeen syllables. I wish actors would trust silence more.

\* Grant Guy's use of the term "the seven deadly virtues" is intentional. Its source is "The Dark Night of the Soul" by St. John of the Cross, in which the "deadly virtues" are described in detail.

### **How would you describe your creative process at present?**

I have been accused, by a very good friend, of being ideological and puritanical. I suppose to another person, I can appear to be an ideologue and a puritan, but I am not. However, I am quite annoyed by too much moving about, by too much talking, by too much visual pollution without reason. Nobody wants to give us too much time to think. Sesame Street aesthetics. That aside, my creative process begins with how I feel about things, before what I think about things. This governs almost all my processes. At the moment, I am interested in paratheatre and photography. Again, I must look outside theatre for constructs. I have seen works by Pierre Hebert and his "living cinema" and the film performances of Ken Jacobs's paracinema. I may be pushed back by one hand by the abundance of visual information in Hebert's performance *Between Science and Garbage*, but also drawn forward by another hand because the abundance is bewitchment. Beyond

the visual symphony of Herbert, is a garden of material to be culled, to provide answers to my search, to my work. This same openness applies to Jacobs's *Nervous Magic Lantern Performances*. In Jacob's work there already exists a relationship to shadow theatre, so the leap to turn the crux of his constructs into a theatre construct is not so daunting. On top of this – the issue of configuring the still image, the photograph, as the primary vehicle to deliver the narrative. Oh, there is so much outside of theatre that is better theatre. There is far more theatricality in the canvases of Robert Rauschenberg than found on most stages.

My process is curiosity.

### **How has your process changed over time?**

The process has changed only through practice – in the transition from feeling to execution to analysis – but at the heart still remains Silence and the application of Time in relation to Silence. How to sculpt Time. Theatre is a time-based art, so time is a natural material for theatre (other than beginning at eight and being over no later than ten thirty).

In Kenzaburo Oe's novel *The Quiet Life*, the character Ma-Chan comments about Andrei Tarkovsky and his film *The Stalker*. "These scenes are good for people like me who don't think very quickly." Time has always been employed in an Adhere And Deny production - even in the most conventional productions like *SALOME* and *THE TRAGEDY OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS*. The actors, whether they have been with Adhere And Deny for some time or are new, need to be acquainted with Time. There are several simple exercises to bring Time to the forefront. Most of the exercises involve doing nothing or taking twenty minutes to move ten feet. In these exercises, the actors become aware of their bodies in Time and Space, as volume and as architecture. I once asked an actor to sit in a chair and do nothing for two minutes. He was upset when I told him that he was not doing nothing. He was acting doing nothing. Sadly, when an actor works outside of Adhere And Deny, Time is quickly forgotten. Charming the audience becomes the primary objective. When asked if theatre is an art form, Alexander Solzhenitsyn answered "it's not an art at all. . . It just charms people. Charm is temptation." Time is not the enemy of theatre. Time is a gift we share with the audience.

Almost everything at Adhere And Deny is a process. I am too interested in too many things to have a dogmatic regime. The only thing that doesn't seem to change with Adhere And Deny, at least for the past decade and a half, is Time, Space, Silence, Nothingness. They merely become more refined and more obsessive pursuits. It is here that I am ideological and puritanical but this is directed at myself.

There was a time when my work was governed by chaos and anarchy. I left the chaos behind but retained the anarchy

I feel – I know – that I am on the cusp of new work. At the end of Fellini's *The Clowns* there is a funeral of the clowns. I would not be surprised if I were to have a funeral for my kind of puppet. My interest in Time, Space and Silence is drawing me back to an interest in time-based arts. Film has played a great role in shaping Adhere And Deny. Tarkovsky, Alexander Sokurov, Michelangelo Antonioni have had a deep impact on Adhere And Deny. I have no intent to abandon the theatre for film. I possess no patience for filmmaking nor am I interested in projecting video or cinematic video on the stage as scenography or razzle dazzle. Rather, I am keen to explore theatre more fully as a time-based art form. What other ways are open to us for delivering the narrative? I want to examine the notion of paratheatre. Don't ask me what this means yet. I am still sniffing around the fire hydrant of shadow and light and other constructs as a means to convey narrative. At the moment, I am very interested in using the projected still photograph as the prime deliverer of the narrative. I am considering the issue of how to take the constructs of documentary film and transpose them into a theatrical form. Why can't the notions of Robert Frank, Chris Marker, and Emile de Antonio or Peter Watkins be made into theatre. If Manitoba Theatre Centre can do *It's a Wonderful Life*, why can't I do Watkins's *La Commune*? However, as Al Rushton, a old friend of mine, use to say, after making a definitive and assertive pronouncement, "On the Other Hand."

### **Can you identify specific principles with which you work?**

The basic principles have been the same for the past thirteen or fifteen years. Time and Silence. Space and Nothingness. Through Time and Silence, Space and Nothingness, a new rapport is erected, bridging the stage and the audience. Through Time and Silence, Space and Nothingness, the interior landscape of the theatre piece is made visible and the interior reality of the character is manifested. Outward reality of the character is of no interest to me. Outward reality has no value for me and outward drama has even less value. My kind of theatre reaches the audience in the way that poetry or music can.

I am interested in finding unusual material to use in theatre. I am interested in how I can use boredom as material. The idea is not to bore the audience, God forbid, but to take them to a point where boredom is punctured, allowing new planes or portals of entry into a work – a deeper contact with the work.

### **How do you think of this work in association with mainstream theatre?**

My work's association with mainstream theatre is something I give little thought to. It does what it is paid to do and I do what I have to do. I seldom go to theatre. The only theatre I see is works where my friends are the primary producers. If they are performing at MTC [Manitoba Theatre Centre] or PTE [Prairie Theatre Exchange] I won't be there. I can't afford the time, interest or money. However if it is a work of their own creation, I will support them. The hungrier they are, the more they run to the abyss and jump, not knowing if they will reach across the abyss to the

other side, the better. If I am somewhere that Richard Foreman or Ping Chong or the Wooster Group or Lee Breuer are performing I will be there. It is not that I am a particular fan of this work (well, I am of Ping Chong). It is that the work will evoke something in me besides tedium. It may be elation, irritation or anger, but never boredom, in a bad way. There is good (0) and bad (\_\_\_\_\_) boredom, as Simone Weil distinctly indicated. I recall the first time I saw a Foreman production. I came out of the theatre irritated, bored and exhilarated all at the same time. That night I believed that theatre might have a chance. No, I don't give the traditional conventions and practices of mainstream theatre much thought.

I give more thought, or regret, to the alternative theatre or 'the other' theatre that is in fact mainstream.

**What are the funding hurdles that you have encountered?**

I don't really want to answer this question. We give the box office far too much importance in judging a theatre's value, as if popularity was the final yardstick to determine success. Theatre (and Art) is not a commodity for me. Rock and roll, Hollywood and television are commodities. Theatre (Art) is not an object to be sold in the market square. I have been accused of not wanting to develop an audience, of not caring about the audience. That is not true. I have always striven to give the audience a theatrical experience that they can get nowhere else. I endeavor to connect with their interior landscape. Yes, I'm an old Modernist.

As Lee Breuer says, you have to decide if you want to be a blacker or a redder. I guess I AM A REDDER.

**One more question: What do you see as the next challenge?**

Theatre is dead. That is its advantage. It no longer needs to succumb to the marketplace. However, too many of us think that theatre is alive so we hang onto an entertainment package that has been outdone by the Hollywood film and American television. Theatre is dead. Now we can create a theatre that can connect to the audience in a way that is truly social, that is communal, that is singular in its existence.

It pisses me off that, because of the box-office, theatre seems to be synonymous with capitalism. That is my challenge: to remove my theatre as far as possible from commodity-driven cultural capitalism. If postmodernism has a sin, and it does, it has grafted art onto the arse of the capitalist market.

I like what I do.

\*\*\*

The work that emerges from the umbrella of Adhere And Deny under the quiet intensity of Grant

Guy's visually and intellectually articulate guidance is like no other in the Winnipeg theatre community. *Adhere And Deny* offers its spectatorship what Grant describes as "interior landscapes". Theatrical worlds, carefully and densely sculpted of Time and Space, which invite the spectator into an event rather than the illumination and unfurling of a text. When the first sparks of flame lit the tiny grill/altar at the centre of the *PARADISE LOST* performance space, I laughed out loud. Not because the moment was humorous but because I realized that Grant hadn't been talking about "playing with fire" in a metaphoric way with relation to pushing the boundaries of form, but in concrete terms bound by Time and Space. I kept smiling because I was witnessing a rather extraordinary event that could not be repeated in any other time or space. Grant Guy forever reformulating, reconfiguring and redefining is an inimitable presence in the prairie landscape.



*PARADISE LOST* Photo Credit: Grant Guy

Director: Grant Guy

Performers left to right: Mia Van Leeuwen, Graham Ashmore, Rea Kavanagh and Gordon Tanner.

