

# UNIVERSITY of GUELPH

COLLEGE OF ARTS

*School of English and Theatre Studies*

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Dear Donovan and the Optative community,

I am writing to express my appreciation for the performance/ workshop of *Sinking Neptune* at the University of Guelph in February. Having read the script and followed the development of the project, I was grateful for the opportunity to have the students in my Political Intervention Theatre course engage with such a powerful example of theatrical activism.

In my course I explore different historical models of activist theatre, and the different approaches to agitprop and documentary. One of the pressing questions that emerges is the cultural ownership of critical and aesthetic value, and its relationship to discourses of mastery and professionalism that support the disciplinarity of canonical theatre work. *Sinking Neptune* was an effective and inspiring example of what I call insurgent aesthetics-- that is, the refusal of canonical theatre practices in favour of a theatricality that emerges out of the immediacy of the political issue. In Canada, this history of refusal of "the theatre" can be seen in Nellie McClung's Parliament of Women, in the street agitrops of the 1930s, and in the work of the Mummers Troupe in the 1970s. *Sinking Neptune* reminded me of the Mummers in its powerful address, its urgency, its home-made theatricality and militant courage.

But *Sinking Neptune* is also very much a product of its historical moment. My students were, I think, somewhat surprised. I don't think they have ever encountered real anger in the theatre before. The *Sinking Neptune* project is in itself important, in its attack on the historical cycles of colonialism, racial displacement and genocidal masquerade that have been part of our theatre culture. It is also important as an intervention in Canadian theatre practice and theatre history.

Beyond that, *Sinking Neptune* and the larger project of Optative Theatre signals the new directions of political theatre, which are more productive and theorized than was the case of the Mummers Troupe. In the 1930s, agitprop worked by claiming public space; in the 1970s it worked by claiming media attention. Today the work of agitprop is to form networks and communities, often across cyberspace, using theatrical processes as coalition activation. Optative is one of the most effective examples of a project that multiplies its effect across its networks. Your workshop process was a valuable method of showing concretely how networks expand, and how easily participants can engage in

them. This demystification of theatre work may be the one of the most important things that my students took away from the show.

I look forward to future iterations of the project, and wish you great success in Quebec this summers.

In solidarity and gratitude

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Filewod', written in a cursive style.

Alan Filewod  
Professor