



February 29, 2008

To whom it may concern,

If you are a teacher of history, political science, sociology, theatre, French, English or ESL (like myself), you may wish to consider incorporating the play and talkback "Sinking Neptune" in your curriculum. My experience using the play as an activity with ESL students at College Montmorency (Laval, Quebec) has been very positive; students get a fresh perspective on an important historical era (the 'age of discovery' and colonial 'New France'), a dramatic introduction to the politics of spectacle, and a stimulating piece of theatre that is both humorous and full of food for serious thought.

The play has many elements which can be used to pursue pedagogical objectives. In no particular order, I will run through some of them. For one thing, there is the topicality of the events the play deals with. 2008 marks the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's founding of the city of Quebec -- large-scale commemorative celebrations are already underway -- and "Sinking Neptune" can be used to highlight some of the issues surrounding that event. The play is centred around a deconstruction of Marc Lescarbot's "Theatre de Neptune en Nouvelle France," a masque which was significant for having been the first Eurocentric theatrical performance in the Americas. Lescarbot's play was written and performed by some of the first French settlers in North America shortly after the founding of Port Royal by Samuel de Champlain, and it is particularly interesting for the way it reveals French colonial attitudes towards and perceptions of the native inhabitants of the 'New World'. "Sinking Neptune" presents segments of Lescarbot's original play in an ironic mode designed to underscore some of the implicit subtext. For example, the play reveals how spectacle was used as a vehicle of colonial promotion, how stereotyping was deployed to disempower indigenous inhabitants, and how territorial annexation became a 'fait accompli' in the Eurocentrically scripted discourse.

All of this can stimulate rich discussion -- particularly when one explores how these strategies compare with contemporary ones used by modern forces of neo-imperialism -- but "Sinking Neptune" takes the debate further, exploring the boundaries between politics and art, and the ethics of reenactment when dealing with performance art. In 2006, efforts were undertaken to present a celebratory restaging Lescarbot's play for its 400th anniversary. Was this acceptable, considering the racist subtext of the play? Does the cloak of 'historical heritage' make objectionable positions 'presentable'?

Donovan King, the conceptualizer and group facilitator, is dynamic and engaging, and he is able to make the experience of learning theatre -- both in terms of theory and of practice -- one that is not only interesting, creative and fun, but also compelling and relevant. The feedback I have received from students who

participated in his workshops has been very enthusiastic. Donovan has a broad vision for theatre and its uses as a tool for education and for social change, and he articulates that vision with great confidence and charisma.

"Sinking Neptune" has a decidedly 'participatory theatre' flavour to it. It is produced and acted mainly by part-time theatre practitioners who are committed to theatre both as an art form and as a vehicle of political engagement. The working budget is minimal -- don't expect those detailed 'designer' sets often seen at high-end subscription theatre -- and the technical aspects (sound, lighting, effects) sometimes feel a bit 'touch and go'. Strangely enough, however, these limitations only seem to enhance the ambience. There is a feeling of unpredictability which is enhanced by the pastiche elements in the play itself: the proposed reenactment of Lescarbot's Neptune runs into some very tricky shoals and is soon listing heavily. The precariousness is palpable: one is never entirely sure whether everything is going according to script, although if it isn't, the actors seem to be miraculously adept at recovering. But gradually, we begin to realize that this is all meta-performance: the play is, after all, about the sinking of Neptune. Like the ship in Shakespeare's "The Tempest", Lescarbot's play has been sunk only to resurrect a more modern one, redeemed through critical reflection.

It is theatre at its destabilizing best which will get students thinking and questioning. It is also a nice length - an hour or so - allowing for a very valuable extended talk-back discussion afterwards (to get the most out of this play, make sure to include this time in your scheduling). All in all, "Sinking Neptune" has worked out very well for me and my students. Having incorporated "Sinking Neptune" into some of the classes I taught in 2006, I will be doing so once again this year. If you too are looking for a creative and thought-provoking activity to liven things up for your students, this is definitely something to consider.

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