

From the fringe to the mainstream

Case-study on the success of an Electric Company production

Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla

In 1996, the Vancouver Fringe Festival showcased a new work by a young theatre troupe called the Electric Company. Ten years later, after touring extensively and participating in various festivals, *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* was programmed into the National Arts Centre's 2006 studio season. For an independent company working in a country as vast and diverse as Canada, becoming recognized by such a prestigious national institution is considered a significant achievement. In this paper, I will investigate the Electric Company's journey from the fringe to the mainstream: the mechanics of this journey and the development that was involved; why this experimental production appealed to mainstream institutions; and how the company maintained a perception of newness for over a decade of presentation. Years after the Electric Company show was first produced, *Brilliant!* was still advertised by presenting institutions as new and innovative, and established critics still referred to the company's techniques as groundbreaking. This production managed to maintain its reputation for experimentation through various instalments, and the discreet interventions of cultural institutions only assisted in the development of the piece, rather than limited the company's capacity for creativity. With the encouragement of these arts institutions, the company cultivated their production by adapting to the subtle requirements of each presenting venue and festival, and by making changes such as editing the script, increasing the use of technical elements, and altering the number of people featured in the production. Assisted by various source materials, I plan to pinpoint the significance of the Electric Company's lengthy production process, as well as illustrate the importance of national festivals that showcase touring theatre and cater to alternative methods of production development, thereby allowing for more experimental theatre to achieve prestige and popularity across the country.

Furthermore, to clarify what I mean by the term 'experimental,' I will examine some definitions of the avant-garde and a Canadian definition of disruptive theatre and consider how they can be applied to the performing arts in this country.

Due to the nature of exploratory theatre, it is difficult for an independent production to reach mainstream status because, often, true experimentation does not appeal to a mainstream audience. In terms of overall popularity and box office revenue, the most successful productions in any Canadian theatre season are still classic plays from the European canon. Critic Ric Knowles claims that "despite the apparently all-consuming appetite of a dominant consumer capitalism for anything new and innovative, however, there is always a level in the public and unstable forum that is theatre at which the genuinely innovative, particularly in form, resists containment and has the potential to negotiate genuine cultural intervention" (Knowles 70). Festivals that program new Canadian theatre promote themselves as institutions that showcase experimental work, and yet they are equally keen on presenting theatre that would appeal to a wide range of audiences. As Knowles suggests, these festivals are perhaps not programming the newest, most pioneering productions, but they do make efforts to seek out new forms of theatre that English speaking audiences in Canada would not yet have experienced. Furthermore, these theatre organizations are ensuring that the productions they program have a lengthy existence beyond their appearance at the festival by promoting the importance of innovation in Canadian performance and encouraging the notion of newness as a marketable product.

To establish a clear background on this production, I will now summarize the Electric Company's journey from the Fringe to the mainstream, focussing on the mechanics of their move from one venue to the next and how the production changed overtime. By examining the history and development of this production, it should become apparent why this independent company from Vancouver was recognized by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

Founded in 1996 by a group of Studio 58 Graduates, the Electric Company premiered their breakthrough production *Brilliant!* at the local Fringe Festival. All four members – Kim Collier, David Hudgins, Kevin Kerr, and Jonathon Young – have worked as the predominant creators, writers, designers, and actors in this show over the years. The story itself chronicles the rise and fall of the prolific inventor Nikola Tesla, a rival of Thomas Edison, who believed in a world united by his creation of free wirelessly transmitted energy and a world-wide communication network (*Brilliant!*). The subject matter of the piece was certainly appropriate for a young troupe because, like Tesla, the Electric Company was on a quest to discover something new – something revolutionary – by experimenting with stage technologies. The Fringe show was so well-received that the team decided to expand the forty-five minute script into a two hour and twenty minute epic production and rented Vancouver’s Roundhouse Performance Space in 1998 for the purpose of presenting their new developments. Afterwards, they decided to tour the production: it has been presented in cities across British Columbia, including Vancouver, Kamloops, and Victoria; it travelled to Edinburgh, Scotland for the Fringe Festival and to San Jose, California; and it also was picked up by two Canadian national theatre festivals – Calgary’s High Performance Rodeo and the Magnetic North Theatre Festival, that year in Edmonton (Appendix 1).

Although the Fringe show was originally directed by only the company itself, the remount production at the Roundhouse included collaborator Conrad Alexandrowicz, who brought in more elements of dance and physical imagery. The company received positive feedback from reviewers regarding the character of Nikola Tesla as interpreted by Jonathon Young, who was meant to play the role in the original Fringe show, but instead had to take part in a film at the time. However, there was some negative criticism concerning the new script’s structural problems and unnecessary expansions to the text. Having seen the Electric Company’s original Fringe production, Peter Birne from the Vancouver Sun noted that “success hasn’t spoiled *Brilliant!*, but this innovative production certainly suffers for its

expansion from a one-act hit at the 1996 Fringe Festival” (Birne). Still, the company was applauded for their continued creativity in stage design and aesthetics: with this new show, they were able to include more technical elements, such as giant metal ladders leading up to the theatre’s cat walk, beyond what could be permitted at the Fringe. Echoing these sentiments, the Georgia Straight’s theatre critic Colin Thomas said that, “Too many underdeveloped themes and ideas vie for attention, but overabundance is better than paucity and the show is so winningly staged that I think special Jessies should be invented for most theatrical production and best use of space” (Thomas). However, there was no need to create these new categories because the remount production swept up a total of five Jessie Richardson Awards that same year, for Best Production, Best Original Script, and Outstanding Lighting Design, Set Design, and Sound Design.

Even though the new script was recognized for its creative and experimental nature, still the critics’ comments indicated that many additional scenes and subplots were gratuitous and cumbersome, and the production was in need of some editing. Young says that while the company was conscious of criticism from the media, the comments did not have a direct effect on changing the production: “We do look to feedback to understand what’s coming across, and we took critics into account – but it’s not always direct cause and effect. We’re generally our own harshest critics” (Young). It is difficult, however, to completely ignore the correlation between the published criticisms and what the company decided to alter in the new version. For example, one of the biggest complaints about the production was in regards to a techno-geek character named Phil: the Georgia Straight reviewer called her “the worst-written character of the bunch; she delivers far more information and flat-footed editorializing than I was interested in. Besides, the techno-guerrilla, once such a hip theatrical image, has become a cliché” (Thomas). Appropriately, stripping this character of any individual personality was one of the most noticeable changes in all subsequent productions; the actor playing the role of Thomas Edison would

also play the role of the now nameless narrator, thereby keeping the focus on the title character. During our phone interview, Young said he realized that “the character surfing the net was no longer an interesting device. It caused problems having her at a computer with a whole bunch of monitors, just sitting there. It screwed up the design by tipping story toward narrator character and away from Tesla. It burdened the story” (Young). By making this important change in casting and overall character development, the company – intentionally or unintentionally – also dealt with another criticism from the media, in particular the play’s lack of focus due to a large number of subplots.

Following that same idea, Young said that the company would not alter a production for a presenting venue or festival, but would consider inquiries about production development: “We would never enter into agreement when a theatre had a say in the product. But they might ask, what’s your plan over the next couple of years? What about this point in the script?” (Young). However, it seems that even these subtle questions and suggestions can indeed influence the development of a production. An example of this occurred when One Yellow Rabbit member Michael Green invited the young company to perform in his company’s annual theatre festival, the High Performance Rodeo. Familiar with the Roundhouse production – and consequently the positive and negative criticism that followed – Green was very interested in showcasing this new work, but provided the company trim half-an-hour from the script (Young). The group not only agreed to Green’s request, but continued cutting bits from the production even after taking part in the High Performance Rodeo. Following their successful run at the Calgary festival, the troupe prepared for the Edinburgh Fringe and reduced the time some more to create the 90 minute version that is still being presented today.

Across the ocean, the company performed at C Venues, home of the biggest theatre at the Edinburgh Fringe. According to their website, the venue “seeks out the brightest and best work to showcase at Edinburgh... with an emphasis on new and dynamic work” (C Venues). This is rather

different than the Canadian Fringe circuit, in which all the shows are chosen by lottery, without any discrepancy concerning the quality of the show or the reputation of the company. In Edinburgh, the company must plug their show to a specific venue, so there must be some interest in the show itself, and the company must have already achieved a certain degree of prestige (Young). That means that only six years after the creation of the Electric Company, the group had already garnered a reputation on the international Fringe circuit. The show collected more positive feedback from a reputed publication called *The Scotsman* that commented on the show's "skilful acting and inventive directing" and notes that the production was "visually stunning, quite literally dazzling its audience with brilliant thunderbolts that come zigzagging out of the darkness like inspiration itself" (Dubois). After having achieved critical acclaim overseas, the company members were in a good position to return to Canada and continue touring and developing their production. It was at the Western Canada Theatre in Kamloops, British Columbia that Mary Vingoe, founding Artistic Director of the Magnetic North Theatre Festival, had the chance to see this production that was quickly increasing in popularity. Vingoe says, "I went to Kamloops to see it and was intrigued by the fascinating subject matter and how the form and content really worked together. Jonathan is a very engaging performer and Kim's direction is always surprising and innovative. The ensemble is very strong. It seemed absolutely right for the Magnetic North" (Vingoe).

By the time Vingoe had programmed *Brilliant!* for the 2004 Magnetic North Festival, the National Arts Centre staff had also taken notice of this Electric Company production. Marti Maraden, Artistic Director of the NAC at the time, was invited to the festival in Edmonton and saw the Electric Company's tech run. In a recent email, Maraden explained that "I was inspired to invite *Brilliant!* for the final season I programmed at the NAC. I remember how much I loved its joyous physical evocation of the theme of creation/science/invention" (Maraden). The only other new Canadian play that was programmed for that same season was *Earshot*, written and performed by Morris Panych, and it had

also been showcased previously at the Magnetic North. Of course, Maraden would have already been familiar with Panych's work, but she also had formed relationships with members of the Electric Company after having worked with them at Studio 58. Young remembers that, "the [High Performance Rodeo] theatre space was really perfect for the show. For whatever chemical reason, the show had a really great run. Marti had wanted to program us for awhile, and Kim and I had acted at the NAC when she worked there. We were certainly on her radar and we were promoting our work" (Young). While previous acting experience and early networking were important factors in getting recognized by the National Arts Centre, it seems that it was taking part in these national festivals – especially at the Magnetic North – that secured the Electric Company's prospects for a national reputation.

While the Calgary's High Performance Rodeo has been showcasing contemporary work since 1986, the Magnetic North Festival, based in Ottawa, and the PuSh Festival, based in Vancouver, have only been in existence since 2003. Each organization upholds an independent vision for Canadian theatre, and yet all three festivals have the common goal of exposing innovative new productions to a wide variety of spectators. Although the High Performance Rodeo does not explicitly state a definite mandate on its website, we can make assumptions about their programming objectives based on previous festivals and on the company that runs the festival. It seems that the organizers of the Rodeo, the same artists belonging to the performance theatre troupe One Yellow Rabbit, have programmed diverse productions that fit the same criteria as their own company: "experimental yet professional, and challenging but always captivating" (Rabbit). One Yellow Rabbit forces a link between the words experimental and professional, almost as though the terms were contradictory. It seems as though the term experimental automatically implies unprofessionalism, or at least something that is not ready for a live audience, that is still working through stages of experimentation. However, One Yellow Rabbit challenges this assumption by suggesting that experimenting with new ideas and new forms is a very

professional activity because that is how artists make discoveries; and that is precisely why the company has dedicated a festival to supporting that very notion. Likewise, the PuSh Festival strives to popularize the notion of experimentation by showcasing “contemporary work that is visionary, genre-bending, startling and original” (PuSh). Finally, the Magnetic North aims to “celebrate and provide a forum for artistic innovation in Canadian theatre” and its mandate is “to produce a Canadian theatre festival with a national scope that has a strong artistic vision, that meets high artistic standards, that promotes dissemination of Canadian work through presenters to audiences and that increases the awareness of Canadian theatre amongst artists, audiences, producers and presenters, nationally and internationally” (Magnetic North). Like its companion festivals, the Magnetic North attracts presenters in search of new works to program in their prestigious venues, and productions that have participated in these festivals have been remounted in presenting venues across Canada and internationally.

In addition to nurturing relationships with theatre companies and presenters, these national festivals have proven themselves to be valuable institutions because they are conscious of the contemporary methods of theatre creation in Canada. They are unique in the opportunities they offer on a national basis, not only to writers and their scripts, but to emerging professional companies and their productions. There are, of course, institutions across Canada dedicated to the nourishment of young artists, such as the National Theatre School in Montreal, and there are others, such as Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, that focus on new play development. Even the Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada has made some efforts to include new play development into their programming. However, according to their online application information, Stratford only accepts “previously unproduced plays for production” and in the form of a manuscript (Stratford). While this program is supportive of already established Canadian writers – as evidenced by their recent inclusion of well-known playwrights such as George F. Walker and Jason Sherman – it is restrictive for artists working in alternative methods of

theatre creation. Indeed, some of the most interesting works created in Canada today have company members working collectively to develop all aspects of the theatre piece simultaneously, which means that the script is being written as the rest of the production is being created. In the introduction to their published script, the creators of *Brilliant!* comment on giving equal focus to all areas of the production: “Electric Company has always treated each element of production – staging, design, and performance – as a key component in the creation and telling of a story. Therefore, the script includes references to theatrical conventions, video projections, and non-verbal performance that are as vital to the narrative as any of the words spoken by the characters” (*Brilliant!*). The creation of this type of production is an organic process that gives all elements equal weight, with less central focus on the script and more focus on the production as a whole. While working on the early versions of the Electric Company production, Young acknowledged that “the ideas are physical and visual. They’re in the script because they worked onstage” (Young). Generally speaking, the staging determines the writing, not the other way around. Since these national festivals are showcasing productions that have experimented with challenging development processes, innovative theatre created by independent companies is being shared on a national basis. This provides opportunities for companies working with a production-based model, as opposed to the arguably more European text-based model. Furthermore, these festivals are always communicating with presenters and Artistic Directors, so that means that more experimental theatre is being programmed in prestigious venues.

In researching what exactly is considered experimental in today’s Canadian theatre scene, and therefore what sort of productions these festivals aim to program, I looked at several definitions of the avant-garde. In his 1996 book entitled *Avant-garde Theatre*, Christopher Innes defines it as “any type of art that is anti-traditional in form... what is new at any given time: the leading edge of artistic experiment, which is continually outdated by the next step forward” (Innes 1). Innes depicts the avant-garde as something ephemeral that only exists for a certain amount of time before it becomes obsolete.

His notion of avant-garde is something that is constantly changing and depends primarily on the reception of the audience: only the receiver can define what is innovative based on that which he has been exposed in the past. The anti-traditional might be responding to an art form that was traditional a century ago or five years ago, and therefore this notion of newness is mostly subjective. Matei Calinescu, in his book *The Five Faces of Modernity*, concentrates on the specifics of avant-garde practice, which he describes as “the widespread use of subversive or openly disruptive artistic techniques” (Calinescu 96). Ottawa theatre critic and scholar Alvina Ruprecht continues this idea in her strictly Canadian definition of *disruptive theatre*, through which she suggests that artists and companies “break away from the realistic images of documentary theatre, use stage devices in a new way, avoid linear narratives that have tended to define much of our playwrighting, evoke sources other than those of a British heritage and even redefine our Canadian identity” (Ruprecht 128-129). Ruprecht links these criteria with successful Canadian theatre artists such as Ronnie Burkett, Judith Thompson, Daniel McIvor, and Tomson Highway. If Ruprecht’s definition were to be directly applied to the production at hand, it would appear that *Brilliant!* is merely following in the footsteps of realism and basing itself in conventional historical storytelling. In fact, it could be said that the Electric Company’s production is a comfortable choice for mainstream audiences because it follows some of the European trends that Ruprecht mentions in her article: *Brilliant!* is a historical piece about a Serbian inventor named Nikola Tesla – not even a Canadian one; the script follows a generally linear storyline; and it is composed of relatively realistic scenes. Could this then be considered a disruptive production? Whether or not it qualifies for all the criteria, the Electric Company production does contain aspects of avant-garde theatre: the company, in Ruprecht’s words, uses stage devices in a new way, and any traces of realism are surrounded by technical elements that are integrated into the production.

While the Magnetic North is on the lookout for “artistic innovation” in Canadian theatre productions, still they consider the importance of appealing “to a wide range of audiences” (Magnetic North). On the one hand, the festival is attempting to cater to independent theatre companies by showcasing their experimental productions, and, on the other, they are choosing works that could be considered accessible for a mainstream audience. When programming each season, the festival takes into account what the presenters are looking for: the fact that the production of *Brilliant!* is grounded in conventional theatre forms is comforting for some presenters, and yet the show’s appeal mainly comes from the company’s use of exploratory staging devices. In describing how the group combined realism with experimentation, Young explains that the “show is filled with the spirit of invention that surrounds these more naturalistic scenes” (Young). And that inventiveness is precisely what theatre reviewers seem to remember about the show. Vancouver critic Thomas commented some unique staging in the company’s 1998 production:

[Characters] Katherine and Robert enter walking but wearing a rowboat to create the illusion that they’re paddling, and later on, the three friends head off on a bike ride, each trotting along happily behind a set of handle-bars and one wheel. And... the company uses a giant white ball in several ways – as a projection screen for images of everything from pigeons to viscera... and simply as a wonderful plaything. (Thomas, Appendix 3-4)

Some of these stage inventions might be reminiscent of the work of another innovative Canadian artist. Indeed, the Electric Company has been compared to Robert Lepage, as seen in Denis Armstrong’s 2006 review in the *Ottawa Sun* where he calls the production “one of the more imaginative visual experiences Canadian theatre has offered since Robert Lepage’s *Seven Streams of the River Ota*” (Armstrong). Moreover, Ruprecht makes the same comparison in her review of the production for *CBC Ottawa Morning*:

The Electric Company is a theatre based on new stage technologies and, in fact, this is similar to the Laboratory called Ex Machina that is run by Robert Lepage in Quebec City, and I have this feeling that this group from Vancouver is very much influenced by the work of Robert Lepage on stage. They both explore theatre and multimedia creation using state-of-the-art computer equipment, and in *Brilliant!* especially, you see how film, dance, mime, comedy and drama are filtered through graphic computer technology and it creates the most exciting visual effects just to explain the inventions of Tesla. (CBC)

Not surprisingly, the Electric Company acknowledges Lepage as one of their greatest influences for their creation process and Young says the production has “some of the spirit of his work” (Young). As former Artistic Director of the NAC French Theatre, Lepage gave French theatre patrons in Ottawa the opportunity to see his experimental work; but it seems that his influence transcended language divisions and geographical distance because this young English-speaking company from Vancouver adopted the sense of newness that is consistently found in Lepage’s work.

Over a decade after the Electric Company production was first presented at the Vancouver Fringe Festival, both promoters and reviewers alike still refer to the production as new. In fact, the Belfry Theatre advertized the 2008 version as a “new production” simply because the company added a chorus and incorporated new design elements. Current Managing Director for the company Nathan Medd comments “We were able to make four big improvements that in the past had simply been beyond our budget: a five-member chorus, an up-to-date video design, dozens of new costumes, and new choreography” (Medd, Appendix 2). Beyond the production developments, part of what maintains this sense of newness is the enthusiasm from the presenting venues, and the promoters that insist on referring to the Electric Company’s youthful nature: “What excites me about the Electric Company is their unbridled energy, intelligence, and visual style, all reasons to make BRILLIANT! a triumph for this

bold, young Vancouver company” (Vingoe). This encourages potential audience members to think of the troupe as uncultivated and still discovering themselves, but not in a negative sense. Young maintains that “audiences actually enjoy seeing unfinished work” because it allows them to take part in the company’s growth (Young). There is excitement in the idea of newness, and the National Arts Centre staff took advantage of this when creating promotional material for the 2006 presentation of *Brilliant!* In the press release, the Electric Company is called “innovative” and the production labelled “explosive, extra-dimensional, and alarmingly theatrical.” However, comfortable descriptors are also used, such as “playfully eclectic staging” and, my personal favourite, calling the inflated sphere – an integral part of the staging – the production’s “biggest crowd pleaser” (NAC, Appendix 4). Oftentimes a certain degree of sensationalism works when catering to the public sphere, especially when a production is reputed for its visual elements.

The Electric Company’s production of *Brilliant!* appealed to the artistic staff at the National Arts Centre for several reasons: it had already garnered a reputation on the national theatre scene and the international Fringe circuit; it was considered an experimental production that could nonetheless appeal to a mainstream audience due to its foundation in conventional drama; and it had a marketable nature that could satisfy the demands of a theatre-going public seeking a sense of newness. The show’s ideas – textual and theatrical – were unique enough that even ten years after the original performance, audiences and critics were still impressed by the novelty of the production. In fact, Young suggests that “ideas that have any merit should remain interesting and should continue to have impact for maybe twenty or thirty years. A decade is really not that much time at all” (Young). Instead of outdating the production, the years of development, arguably, have only improved this piece of theatre and made it attractive to numerous institutions across Canada. Owing to national festivals, such as the Magnetic North and High Performance Rodeo, that make efforts to showcase innovative new works that would

appeal to the mainstream, more independent companies are being given the opportunity to become acquainted with presenting institutions across Canada and around the world. These festivals encourage production development – that does not consist solely of script-based processes – and, of course, touring, which results in productions sharing new work with various communities for years after conception. Even after the Electric Company’s debut production at the National Arts Centre, the group has continued to tour the piece, and several others that they have created together over the years. Satisfied with the production’s ongoing development and its current standing on the theatre scene, Medd says “It’s awesome that *Brilliant!* has had the longevity it enjoys, because after twelve years it is growing closer to our original vision for the piece” (Medd).

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Young, Jonathon. Personal Interview. 22 November 2008.

Appendix 1

Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla

Production History 1996 – 2008

1996, Vancouver Fringe Festival. Vancouver, British Columbia

1998, Roundhouse Performance Space. Vancouver, British Columbia.

1999, High Performance Rodeo. One Yellow Rabbit. Calgary, Alberta.

2003, Firehall Arts Centre. Vancouver, British Columbia.

2003, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, C Venues. Edinburgh, Scotland.

2003, Western Canada Theatre. Kamloops, British Columbia.

2004, Magnetic North Theatre Festival. Edmonton, Alberta.

2005, San Jose Stage Company. San Jose, California.

2006, National Arts Centre Studio Theatre. Ottawa, Ontario.

2008, Belfry Theatre. Victoria, British Columbia.

Appendix 2

Photos of *Brilliant!* at the Belfry Theatre on Vancouver Island

Photo Credit: David Cooper



Appendix 3

Photos of *Brilliant!* at the Belfry Theatre on Vancouver Island

Photo Credit: David Cooper



Appendix 4

Photos of *Brilliant!* at the Belfry Theatre on Vancouver Island

Photo Credit: David Cooper

