# Theatre as Social Remediation

## A panel discussion with Erik Ehn and Thomas Riccio

### Great Plains Theater Conference, June 2010

**Erik Ehn:** I've been writing about genocide and trauma since the early 90s and this lead to an interesting Rwanda I was blocked on how to write about Rwanda having written about El Salvador and Bosnia in the past but the scale of Rwanda just was intimidating to me, I couldn't gain access to it until I heard about through the New York Times about two nuns who are on trial for genocide, two nuns who killed 7,000 people in their convent and they were being put on trial under a new law universal crimes law in Belgium, they were picked up in Belgium there were still nuns. So that somehow provided a kind of keyhole for me and I felt that on the basis of my Catholicism and due to the fact that they were just two of them that I could somehow witness in a personal way to the Rwandan genocide through their story. So I went to Belgium and in for a penny in for a pound, I went to Rwanda shortly after that and fell in love with the country of Rwanda and what's going on there.

So in Rwanda it became clear to me that if I was called in anyway to the country I was called to create a community around Rwanda and its neighbor Uganda. I'm not anything more than a sheepdog really its, I'm not a rancher, I'm a sheepdog, and I just like bringing people together, it's the only knack I have really so since about, well, for the past six years, I've been taking student groups – groups of students and professional theater artist to Rwanda and Uganda to look at the genocide and to speak with survivors and politicians and theater artists. To look at the way in child soldiers and refugee centers look at the way art is being used to address trauma. Where we go, just briefly, that's all any of us can afford we go for

about three weeks at a time, but the steadiness has made for a kind of dialogic relationship.

We also have a conference in the States in the winter so we can bring some people back over. I've been able to bring a couple of students into the different schools that I've worked at so it's meant to be a two-way kind of conversational exchange. If many people press for outcomes, what do you do? Well how can you demonstrate change, show me that you've healed trauma with theater? I'm clear now that our objectives are really personal transformation through conversation. That we go to learn and to share and one's point of view shifts, and then one's art shifts as a consequence. So Lynn Nottage came with us one summer and shortly thereafter she wrote *Ruined*. I don't want to say that she wrote it because of her trip but she was writing while she was on the trip. Katori Hall is another writer who went on the trip and is writing on it. I've written on it through the trip and Rwandans and Ugandans have generated art motivated by the trip. So a low key persistent set of human interactions with artistic consequences. That's the Rwanda and Uganda project.

**Kevin Lawler:** What's the nature as you've been able to perceive it with the communities you've been working and how they use art in dealing with situations like this or generally historically, sociologically and what we perceive what's that?

**Thomas Riccio:** Africa is, we need remind ourselves, a big continent and every country is very different. And within every country there are many, many cultures, meaning and you have to read and you have to become an on site depth reader of wherever you are. It's a broad question you're asking, but essentially the work is essentially form fitted to the necessity of the moment. Some examples. When I first worked with Zulus in '92, the last apartheid laws had just gone off the books. I was working at a national

theater, the Natal Performing Arts Council in Durban and what they brought me into was a historical sea change. Soon blacks would be become the government, which is what happened with Mandela coming to power in two years time. Anticipating this, they started training black actors, young black actors had to be trained because the white dominated art and cultural institutions realized there were no trained black actors. Up to that time it was against the law for them to be trained because they feared, the white government, that black actors and black theatre could be used in a seditious way. They could use theater against the government. It's a big change—its political and its cultural—just to do theater in many countries. Something we don't have a sense of in the developed world. My doing workshops was a political act.

Just to give you an example of the historical moment we are talking about. While walking, my walking on a downtown street, if there was an Zulu coming from the opposite direction they would step off the sidewalk and onto the street to make way for the white on the sidewalk. They would step onto the street because there are, their bodies and their minds, had been so conditioned and trained to respond to the white man as a power figure. It was then, for the first time in my life, I realized what being white and being a male meant as a symbol of power. Colonization is a mind, body, and spirit event. It is not just about country and resource extraction. There is a psychic, physical, and embodied reality enacted by colonization and racism. That event, repeated in so many and different ways, was frightening. It shook me and I realized every so sharply, what deep psychological damage had occurred and how their bodies and psyches had been marked severely. And so in working with the Zulu the cultural moment, all that lives within the participants and all that is swirling in the world around us, must be part of the workshop. It is a full engagement. When I conduct a workshop I am acutely aware that I'm a westerner. The workshops are providing training and but more importantly it is a forum

for a skills exchange. It is so important that people, the Zulu, the Yup'ik of Alaska, whoever, recognize what lives within them. Their bodies are vessels, containers of culture, holding a portion of the earth's legacy, a code expressing their history, unique place and way of being in the world. That is how the oral, the embodied way of knowledge works, and that is valuable to the larger discussion of globalization. It is this vibrancy of being that my work is devoted to.

Such project must consider everything, most significantly, organization and structure. With this in mind the workshop with twenty-six Zulus of the newly formed Kwasa Group, included six members, whites and two "colored" as they called them, from the young professional company of the Natal Performing Arts Council. It was soon obvious that the Zulus felt very intimidated by the knowledge the professionally trained actors brought to the workshop. The professionally trained actors seemed putting out, as if they were slumming. In their bodies, minds, and actions lived a different reality, implicit were power structures and ways of being and proceeding in the world that represented control, cultural and racial superiority lives and is braided into western theatrical modes of expression. Maybe that is where and how racism lives. It is our nature to position ourselves in relationship and relative to others, use social signs, behaviors and other indicators, clothing, cars, language, body shapes, all the time. Admit it. We have all, at one time or other, thought ourselves better than another.

You must remember performance is an enacted cultural code, a reiteration and reaffirmation of a sort of cultural neural pathways. Performance carries and bundles these social codes cum culture. So, when doing a workshop you only have the vaguest idea of what you are getting into and what you will find, what you must do, you must be prepared for anything and open to anything. Always alert to the setting, constantly reading the layers, the spaces before you without expectations or preconceived notions

of outcomes. And so I asked everyone in the workshop, “The next time me meet bring in three things that you feel are traditional, something from your culture, something cultural.” The trained actors went first, two did Shakespeare monologs, and a woman did ballet, another modern dance. The Zulus were puzzled and thought they misunderstood the assignment. I go to them, “Now just do whatever you brought in.” One Zulu said he didn’t know Shakespeare. The Zulus just said thinking they did something wrong. Finally, one woman got up and started doing a Zulu dance. Within moments the Zulu drums in the corner started sounding. Next thing you know, it an hour and a half of Zulu dancing later, the place was vibrating. The trained actors, the white and colored actors, those raised in privilege, had known Zulus from a distance. Then they realized, and the Zulus realized, the potency that lived within the Zulu body. The culture that lived within. It was then the workshop became focused, respect was paid, the raw material expressed and the objectives defined: the workshop would be about transforming a rich Zulu cultural inheritance into a theatrical expression. “Your strength lives within you, you know everything you need to know.”

One day during the workshop, it is hot and a Zulu participant takes off his shirt, underneath his shirt his back is full of whip marks, scars zigzagging his back. His name was Kenneth.  I asked happened. You get to know in a workshop, we see people, work long days and who they are becomes familiar to you. When I saw the marks I was shocked and hurt. I said to him, “You must tell me what happened.”  Kenneth goes no and puts his shirt back on. He’s pissed off at me for asking. “You must tell me.” And he walks away.  A week later we’re doing an improvisation, we were working off of a Zulu myth called Emandulo, it’s about a cow which is metaphoric for Zululand and how this cow is basically killed and torn apart. A metaphor for Zululand and what happened to the Zulus. A week later we’re conducting the improvisation and he says, “I will tell you now.” I knew exactly what he was referring to. As per usual we circled a group. Within

this circle anyone can say anything about anything. They can comment on how I'm working if they don't like something someone else or I say or did, anything can be voiced. It is a free zone. In the circle I'm suddenly doing drama therapy. At NYU I took a drama therapy course, I never thought I'd use it, but has become an important component of my work. I asked, "What happened? How did this happen?" And he proceeded to tell how when he was 14 years old, coming home from school in his township, he found himself in between the police and a demonstration. The police saw him, he was tall for his age, and arrested him and they caned him. Kenneth was 25 years old then; a big guy and they wanted to make sure he stayed in line. He was under arrest for two weeks. Nobody knew where he was or what happened to him. When he came back home. I asked him what happened and he said my mother is there, so was my father. His mother was crying. I asked, "Did you cry?" He was reliving the moment. "No." "What did you say, did you tell them?" I ask. Again, he says "No." "Why didn't you tell them what happened?" He responds, "I am a Zulu. I'm a warrior there are others who have died."

Then I asked the group, "How many here have been arrested by the police?" Every Zulu raised their hand. Then, "How many have been beaten by the police? All except two women raised their hands. Then the started showing their wounds little scars here and there on their bodies. You assume they are the marks of falling or childhood, the marks of a life normally lived, but no, you realize that they are marked by a repressive society. They have been beaten into submission, and because of the Zulu warrior sensibility and because in many ways they were in a state of ongoing war for the last sixty or so years under apartheid, they never talked about it. "Others died, I am still alive." You realize there was no mechanism for remediation of collective trauma. We cried for sometime. Suddenly theater transformed into a platform, a venue for socio-therapy for the community. This hidden issue, hidden even from themselves, is now

part of the workshop. I am no longer a director there are other issues and responsibilities. What was revealed had to be dealt with and shaped into something positive and productive and in this way theatrical expression becomes charged with another responsibility. It was not and is not group therapy, but what was revealed had to somehow be dealt with and marshaled into something that can be presented to the larger community. The performers became vessels and expressive of community grief. You never know what you will find. In this instance and other instances, in other cultural settings, we hit something strong, dark, and difficult. When you do the only way to proceed is to be honest and forthright, engendering committed and understanding that it is part of the process. Everything must be transparent, everything I do, what we go through, is revealed, it is the how, why, and what decisions are made. I am the facilitator. If it's strong within the group then it's going to be strong for the community and then indeed it was. It was then we found a diagram for our work and maybe what theater, at its very basic level, does.

Theatre is a technology and service to the community. Its job is to expose and shape the invisible things that live within the community for the benefit and survival and progress of the community at large. It is basic, it goes back to ritual—it is why I do theater. Regardless of form, venue, culture, it is in the service of the community. I'll leave it there and let Erik… I get emotional, Africa makes me emotional.

**Erik Ehn:** Maybe four quick things and it goes to this issue of the assumptions that you bring in about the glory of theater and what you're saying when you talk about theater. We were doing a writing workshop in a refugee camp for former child soldiers in Northern Uganda up near Gulu and going in it was all set up we're going to do a writing workshop. When we got there, we announced we're doing a writing workshop, time for the writing workshop. I get to the classroom I say, okay, lets do a writing

workshop everybody get out your pens and your paper but they didn't have any pens, they didn't have any paper, they didn't have any desks, they didn't have any windows, didn't have any doors. So we had to do the writing workshop in the dirt with sticks and they were that was one change of assumption. There are highly literate they were desperate to change their lives, they worked very hard at school but they didn't have the basic necessities. A couple with that is the fact the system of teaching there didn't really encourage student initiative, it was ineffective for me to say what's on your mind to walk in and say what's on your mind because there were accustomed having a teacher yell at them and they repeat back what the teacher has just told them so a couple of shifts in terms of assumptions.

Second is meeting with drawing students or reluctant students similarly your story, maybe it's an American therapeutic habit, but I figure its all about me that I'm not glamorous enough to draw these students out. But then under a battery powered light bulb at night you get their stories and this one girl had I won't detail this one girl have been living in the bush with the Lord's Resistance Army for four years, she was 16 years old and the things she had done in her life are frankly unforgivable. We'll have a long conversation about that. On one level I believe anything can be forgiven but I know she'll never forgive herself, god will forgive her but she has been, there is something inside her that's permanently broken. So this issue of come on everybody lets have fun with theater was just wasn't right it will take more time and more care and more therapy to open up the artistic dialogue. So another assumption.

Third, in the camp, and then I'll move to another example, is we get there so there are a group of about fifteen of us and we get there and the van pulls of this road we're down this bumping road and the camp is organized like a village, it's a very shrewd place its self sustaining farm, its they've

got everybody there has reconstituted family and so the theatrical structure of the family is very important. They are all orphans and widows but they've reconstructed themselves as mothers and sons and brothers and they live in the village architecture. So driving down the road to this school village and they come running up to the van and they are singing and dancing and its late afternoon and then they kill one of their couple of goats they kill half of their food stock for us and feed us the sumptuous meal late at night. And the fire is going crackling late at night they're dancing around the fire and we're all dancing around the fire and singing and singing until all the wood is burned down and its like 2 in the morning and we wake the next day its 9 in the morning and they say and now we know your theater artist we will do our theater for you, and they do this theater for development theater where they have this anti AIDS play and these people who are radiating creativity at night they had so much archival knowledge in their bodies, they had so much to tell us in their singing and their dancing at night. When it came time to do their theater their heads were down, they could barely open their eyes and they were doing things like I have the AIDS, I should've worn a condom and then the personal thing the nurse would say, "Wear your condom", and it was made you for you to feel so ashamed for what we're saying theater is and how at odds we are at conversation. And one of the ways that western theater was introduced to Uganda in fact was through the coffee plantations where plays or skits were put on by the plantation owners to teach people how to pick coffee and how not to misbehave. So western theater it's much, very much connected with the cane so this is a set of assumptions that was revealed to me in time.

And lastly I'll say it that again in terms of where the actions is this relates very strongly to America I believe that there is the national theater in Uganda which is a colonial vestige it's a theater with about four lighting instruments in it but its got those bolted seats in a proscenium stage and a

very more of an kind of programming somehow but it has long ways to go. Outside the theater there was a bar and at the bar there was an at the bar there was an improv troop that started doing shows on Thursday nights would end up that expanded from an audience of like 3 to an audience of 100 and now they get an audience of 1500 right outside their national theater right next-door to the national theater. And the laughter from the improv troop drowns out the plays that are going on stage so there is a ton of activity, a ton of energy and ton of life but it's maybe more improvisational and its extramural it's outside the control of the classical form. So yeah those are my experience. To be careful when we say Africa that the example that I always use is two, three years ago, American Idol did, Idol gives back for every phone call that we give like $0.10 or something like that they've raised millions of dollars which is great but there was this spectacle of Ryan Seacrest leaning into the microphone and saying and "Then Simon and I went to Africa" and then sad music came up and we saw babies with flies on their eyes they didn't say where in Africa it was just Africa and it was Simon crying and Ryan Seacrest crying and that was the entire continent. But if you go from person-to-person and block-to-block Africa is quite diverse. So Africa is diverse, theater is diverse, performance is diverse and it takes time and listening to peel few of the layers.

**Kevin Lawler:** What are some of the powerful aspects of what you learned that you've been able to bring back here and inject here any work that we do here?

**Thomas Riccio:** Boy…Personally deepened. The experiences are something that I will always carry with me. They are now a part of my life. These experiences have changed me in a special way, in unknowable and mysterious ways. It is important to stress that this is a different kind of theatre. It's not our notion of theatre shaped by regional or commercial

theater we have here in the states, it kind of bores me. That theatre, is, in terms of vitality and unfulfilled potential, is not invested in the same way. It is a reflection of who and what we are and what we need. We have to remind ourselves we live in shiny city in the hill and as a consequence theater has a different role and place. The rest of the world, the developing world especially, does not live like we do. There is an incredibly broad discrepancy. We have the advantage of health care and nutrition, education and political and social stability. We are wealthy. My experiences have urged me, taught me to give back and share. Erik and I are two white guys we're not Africans, but we have something to offer. We have knowledge and knowledge of theater is powerful. It is like knowing magic. We can, like a magician, facilitate change. Theater is an untapped and underutilized power in our country. We scratch the surface. The theater that we are trained to do here has within it a depth and potential that is a rich and is old as humanity. Occasionally we touch that nerve, and what I hear in Erik's voice is he has seen it and he has touched it, he knows it, we can't explain it. Like a religion or spiritual belief, theater accumulates and articulates the human spirit. It focuses human power. Connecting people, making real the invisible that surrounds us, connected past and present and future.

Africa has a power and allure and working in Africa it rich and heartfelt. I've never been so moved and so felt such generosity as I have in Africa and yet never felt so much despair as I have there. It's a place of extremes and because of that vitality, vulnerability, and power. The people I worked with there may have nothing and yet they'll give you what they have. I've worked with actors, who when taking a break, will lay on their stomachs to forestall the pangs of hunger. When I asked what they are doing they won't tell me they don't have money for lunch. When I find out money is the issue we make it part of the program to give them money to provide for lunch. It cost 25 cents for lunch, but they didn't have that. The world and the stakes

are different. In Ethiopia, last fall, we couldn't do some of our performances because our work was too political. The police feared riots would be provoked by the ideas and feelings that lived in our performance. I had to pay off the police so they would not arrest us. But that did not stop the performers from wanting to do the show. If anything it egged them on. You realize that they are willing severely expose themselves, regardless of the consequences. Because the stakes are higher and they have a sense of responsibility not only to our performance but also to their community. They must do it because they live in a country with a repressive government; they live in a place where they can't speak freely. We enjoy basic and fundamental freedoms issues they cannot comprehend. It humbles me. And somehow I am obliged to convey to you, through conversations like these, alerting you to the fact that there is more out there and maybe there is more in your own work. More in your everyday work, more in this moment here and now, that you are not realizing. You don't have to seek problems out, just recognize the deeper things that live in this moment and within yourself. Move beyond the calluses of convention and form that bind us to the surface and reach into the potential that lives within.

A lot of my work with indigenous groups is ritual based—the currents of ritual and traditional expressions are still very much alive. And it is incumbent upon all of us to recognize and appreciate and learn from the multiplicity of worldviews. In general our worldview is essentially human-centric. When I say community you think of people, and maybe a collection of buildings or architecture. Community for indigenous people is nature, its their land, its the animals, it's the spirit, its the ancestors, and when they perform they perform with them and for them. The name of my indigenous performance project is a Losi word, the Losi are the people living in Southern Zambia. The word, Litooma refers to an island that floats above us in the sky. On this island the ancestors live. And when humans perform

that island comes to the earth with all the spirits and ancestors to join with the animals, humans, and environmental forces to perform. When the performance is over the island returns to the sky where they watch over things until next time. Performance is a fulcrum, a gathering point.

Within this worldview when you see a tree, the tree sees you. When you think of something or someone, they are thinking of you, regardless if they are dead or alive, animate or inanimate. When a bird flies by and you are thinking of something, the bird squawks, confirming that thought. When I think of you grandmother, whether your grandmother is alive or dead, she is thinking of you. It is a porous and interactive reality and everything, word, object, an animal, thought, action, and event, is alive and speaking. You are always speaking and the world is always listening and responding.

This is a very different way of looking at the world and of course performance in this context serves a very different function. In many ways it is a way of opening the boundaries, dissolving the boundaries, for a brief moment as to touch the raw current of life. It is a way to interact with the ancestors past, present and yet to be born. Interact with the animals or elements directly, to dance with them. That is the context of a traditional mask performance. An animal mask, the embodiment of the spirits, giving them a place and honoring them. We don't have an equivalent to that in our human centric performance rather we confine our embodiment to other humans through character and plays that are essentially about social remediation and not about reaffirming and rebalancing the world. And if we think about it, if we had an equivalent or incorporated some aspects of indigenous performance functionality, it might just make us a bit more aware. We just might develop a deeper sense our own place, our interaction and responsibility to the larger community and our own ecological relationship to the world. It just might give us a deeper sense, an immediate and tactile sense that only performance can communicate, of

how we are part of a greater whole, a continuity and have a responsibility to a continuity that is not human centric. Such performance tells us implicitly that there is more to the world than the momentary manifestations around us and that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. That's an awareness offered by such a perspective and performance.

**Erik Ehn:** Similarly, I'd say two things one formal and one theological. Formally, likewise nobody really knows what was on Hamlet's mind there is big big blank spot in the middle of Hamlet and Antigone another perfect play has more deadlock in it than advocacy. The Creon and Antigone are foils for one another its not agit prop there is a mystery at the heart of Antigone like something void at the middle of it. And a dramaturgy that supports mystery or questioning is in line with a society or social action that creates a circle rather than a mob. And it has deepen my commitment to mystery and drama and to creating circles so the action of the sheepdog is really in the void it creates by circling and circling. Circling is important to me.

I would say having looked at the kind of language and the cultural apparatus that was used and artists were big part of genocides and art is a big part of the process of the Lord's Resistance Army, it's a very poetic process, art is a tool of genocide and it can do great evil. I would say that typical of genocidal dramaturgy is a drama that starts from answers and proceeds in a linear fashion through cause and effect so linear and reductive dramaturgy that promotes clarity in thought is in line with genocide I would say rather than a drama of charity that starts from mystery so that's been confirm for me in some of the process.

Theologically I would say that mystery, that we can image socially through drama is invested in the human soul, and that at the center of the human

equation is likewise a question and that identity is a void, as the Spanish mystics would confirm this is the question we have about where is god more than it is a statement about god or righteousness about god. I will be hygienic about this, it's the middle of the day and you didn't ask for this, but just to illuminate what I'm talking about there was a survivor we spoke to who was captured and had been brutalized by men for 3 days by hundreds of men until she was paralyzed from the waist down. And they left her there they said, "Don't bother to kill her she is dead don't bother to kill her." They left her and she crawled out and ways away from the house her children had been hiding in the trees when the militia came. She crawled over to the trees and collapsed into a kind of hole at the base of one of the trees looked up into the trees for her children and her children were gone. She was pregnant at the time and miscarried under the trees and the wild dogs took her child.

A snake approached here and she prayed that the snake would kill her but she said I was fouled that the snake wouldn't even kill me not even the snake would kill me. She was utterly devastated, I cannot imagine every time you think you can imagine the limit of human suffering you hear another story. She was at the bottom of the human well at that point but later that day after she gave her testimony, after we created a circle around her in which her story could be heard and after we pledged to repeat and remember her story, she was laughing with her two children. I'll leave it at that. But she found space in her soul; her soul was so spacious, that the answers in her soul got lost in the mystery of joy. There was enough room around her biographical information to accommodate joy and I want to advocate for that kind of dilation, that kind of letting go, that kind of common property no one human soul has big enough for it becomes the common soul. So theologically, mystery and dilation, and the same is true for drama. If drama should operate like the human soul and should be as mysterious as drama and joy.

**Thomas Riccio:** Well, maybe it's a manifestation of the collective soul.

**Erik Ehn:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Thomas Riccio:** Theater is a lot more powerful than we were trained to think and understand it to be. I'm not sure why that is. It's a narrow perception, maybe self-censoring; we're in a rut. More needs to be explored, we mustn't stop exploring, but here we are, we're trained in one way of thinking about theater how we, as artists, engage ourselves as actors and writers and directors. Theatre has lot more potential; it's an old art form, its something that's really quite powerful and world changing.

**Erik Ehn:** Yeah, the two big lies are that there is such a thing as private property and that you may own things and both of those are patently false, we can own nothing, show me who can take it with them. We own nothing and private were dead, and theater has been channeled into the same set of lies that theater can be owned privately in your own fame, and that its property that it can be legitimately sold. Both of those features make theater sick and confused in its nature, it's free and it's collective.

**Thomas Riccio:** Amen. There are three principles that I've boiled my work down to: responsibility, compassion, and generosity. Those are the things that drive the work. You're serving the community and you must always keep this in mind. When I worked with the Bushmen I remember once, when we were working on a section of the performance. Something was wrong with our communication and I couldn't figure it out. Then I realized that they had no sense of metaphor. Metaphor is such a profound notion and a bedrock way of our conceptualizing the world. We think in metaphors. Our language is essentially metaphoric. We live metaphorically. Everything is what it is and something else at the same

time, layers of meaning and spaces we all inhabit. We name one thing to identify and clarify another thing; a word is but a metaphor for an object, idea, or person. This plastic water bottle is not a “plastic water bottle” that is what I call it, not what it is. In a different language or culture it is something else. For the !Xuu Bushmen of the lower Kalahari, a culture that is five, six thousand, older, years old, their linguistic system and view of reality, does not conceive of the world in metaphors. What does that mean? When they are performing an animal and when they perform an ancestor they ARE the animal or the ancestor. And it’s now and it is for forever, past, present, future are time concepts, linear and metaphoric concepts imposed on a continuing and cyclical reality of reoccurrence and ritual. The idea of “playing” or “acting” something like a character they found puzzling if not abhorrent. “How can you be something you are not?” They asked me. To dance the wind is to be the wind. The world around us is porous and transformative. Metaphoric cultures, like ours, put boundaries and definitions on things, to make the world organized and controllable. For these Bushmen, the world lives entirely within them and without. There is no need for metaphor because everything is the same. The same but different. They are comfortable with ambiguity and being in the forever moment they are in. We are not. Metaphor removes us from connection and being.

A little anecdote. When I first started working with the Bushmen there was one man a healer, George was the name the military gave him because they couldn’t pronounce his given name. Well, George was always going around looking at his watch. I was wondering, “What the hell is he doing with a watch and why was he constantly looking at it? Did he have some place to go?” When I asked to see his watch and it is broken. He said he saw all the white men looking at their watch and he is trying to impress me. He had no idea what a watch did only that important white men looked at their watch and so he mimicked all the gestures of his head tilting, all the gestures of

looking down then looking forward. He had no concept of time or a clock or the necessity of it. It wasn't relevant when you are in the world and the world is in you. You will do what you need to do when you need to do it. It is interesting to me that one of the few boundary-less places; one of the few zones remaining where boundaries can dissolve is the theatre. It is a place were time is suspended, identities are fluid and transformable, and boundaries between ideas, people, the present and the universal are permeable.

**Erik Ehn:** That's very interesting so the world is one place; it's a knit place and an ecological place. The next century is the century of ecology, I think Joel may remember this, which the previous century was a century of genocide we need to reknit ecological thinking and vocabulary is really going to fly off the handle. Here we promote the idea of position this is where you are, who you are and where you belong and the reason why that is promoted is so that you could be cast out of position you're not quite normal, this is your position and you're not quite there. And the reason why they put you out of position is that you have to buy your way back to position so they're very specific and fixed identities in social roles assigned to you by the market. You are forbidden to actually occupy those positions and they sell you yourself the self that you've been advertised. So if you don't believe in any of that, if you believe in ecological thing there is no being out of position there is being with and there is plenty of room and withness.

**Kevin Lawler:** So hearing these stories, the first step could be to start imagining your selves stepping outside of existing structures. We must set up the possibility to exist and to create theater outside of this traditional structure that we've been talking about into. Okay, so lets open it up.

**Question:** I worked a lot in theater education and recently I've been working with the Sioux tribe here in Omaha. The Sioux people who are living here in Omaha and then also in the spring I spend sometime on a Sioux reservation. And one of the biggest challenges I have is gaining trust in a new community. I wonder how you guys go about that. You go to various places and people are sharing very personal and traumatic stories a lot of time. I never get three and a half months; usually it is only a week! And to develop trust that quickly is difficult, I just wondered how you guys go about that?

**Thomas Riccio:** It's always tough, especially if you're not from the group. They way I look at it, we all look at it we're all earth links and except for their skin color I'm sharing the same anatomy, same organs and I have a mother and a father and I have joys and I have feelings like they do. And basically just I go from the heart that's it. A native elder in Alaska told me, "If you don't know what to say just listen to yourself." I just listen to that deep part of myself. And people respond because often times like what the Zulu comments like who the hell is this guy man and its but then people know people, it doesn't matter in fact skin dissolves.

**Erik Ehn:** That's true.

**Thomas Riccio:** after a while they don't see it's like they feel your heart and that's what I feel in people and that's how you relate to the world doesn't matter of how they look if they're there and you feel it its something very ultimately its totally interpersonal and very immediate in a moment that's ultimately what it is. So just being who you are in a very deep way and people respond.

**Erik Ehn:** Two, I think like I also worked with a homeless group in Rhode Island and so its great to hear that you work locally this I have a friend

who is dying of bladder cancer and he is a person who needs theatrical outreach in a way and needs conversation. So you needn't make heroic leaps to do work engaged in this level it can be in your own home and your own heart frankly.

**Response:** What actually happened with the Sioux here in Omaha, it started as just an educational program through the Catholic Church to help them acclimate became educated, but because I'm a theater artist and through the working with the children, they became interested in theater. And so we've had to turn it into that. What has always been my biggest struggle, and I think its more of my worry, is that there is no trust. I wonder why would I trust if positions were reversed.

**Erik Ehn:** I was saying in those cases that its not about you I think you're right not necessarily its really a fair situation you've come into to acknowledge an inequity and material resources not to pretend that you're like not to suddenly start talking like Rocky Balboa or something like to acknowledge that you come in with resources. But then to say that in immaterial resources on the level of narrative on the level of story that you're at least equal if not at a disadvantage in terms of narrative wealth. So I try not to enter these communities saying like with the bag of rice sing bwana has come to save you its I'm here to learn and I think for example and that I'm Catholic and I'm practicing Catholic the Catholic Church needs saving. So whenever it goes into save it needs to be saved as well and I feel the same when I go to Rwanda.

**Female Speaker:** Thank you.

**Thomas Riccio:** No bwanas.

**Erik Ehn:** No bwanas.

**Thomas Riccio:** When I worked in Zambia the performers called me bwana, boss man. I asked them not to, but they persisted until I got to the point where I refused to talk to them. After a while they stopped. I'm not a boss man I told them and to be called one made me feel uncomfortable. One thing I learned, the first time I worked in Africa, has stayed with me. I had worked in Africa intensely for a few months and I went back to my cabin in the Alaskan woods, it was a month or so later, I was working around the house. One day I just started crying. Uncontrollably. Sobbing, for more than an hour and I knew it was because of my experiences in Africa. Why? Because in Africa I didn't allow myself to cry when I experienced horrendous stuff, I held it in. Luckily my nearest neighbor was a psychologist. I go to her and ask, "What's going on?" Margaret Oak was her name, and she advised me to share, and that I cannot control a situation by trying to control myself. She told me if I was not feeling well and if something upsets me, I have to tell whom I'm working with, all right.

I'm from a power culture, I wear a power skin, I'm a male and all of that carries a lot of baggage. And for whatever reason I felt I had to take it all in and be macho and strong. To be the therapist or psychiatrist, the neutral person, and that I am somehow separated from the pain that is being released. That is the wrong and unhealthy way of dealing. If I'm not feeling something I shouldn't be there. If I'm not telling you I'm feeling something and I am, that is deceptive and non-participatory. When I reveal what I am feeling, if something upsets me, I become more fully a part of the dialog, the emotional dialog. I tell whomever I am with and this deepens and enlarges the conversation. It also does something very interesting, it empowers and includes the group in the dialog and takes the work to a deep emotional level, which enlarges the conversation. I do not have the right to control and power, and if I am there to give fully of myself then I must be able to give of myself fully. This is trust; this is a generosity and openness of spirit.

It is not about emotional power, control or differences. It is about sharing, and that is essentially what the project and performances are about. It isn't that we are doing group therapy, but if things come up, they must be dealt with and dealt with honestly. You don't go looking for it but if its there you address it.

**Erik Ehn:** I would also add persistence. I think that Sean Astin and that movie about Notre Dame, you just keep showing up you'll get on the team.

**Question:** I'm curious on just practical level how you get these programs set up? Who funds you? How do you organize these teams and how do you make your case to a funder?

**Erik Ehn:** I'd say first, first do it and then figure out how to do it. So the first couple of years I just said hey, everybody lets go to Africa and we sort of made it work and a lot of was individual funding I paid my own way, I still pay my own way. But then when you demonstrate that it can be done then you begin to, I believe in the money suction system of attraction.

**Thomas Riccio:** Attraction right.

**Erik Ehn:** Yeah, you attract you don't look first for approval from the money first you become attractive to the money by demonstrating practicality. So I get a little bit of money here and there but this year, to be concrete about it, I raised $56,000 this year, which is unbelievable to me that $20 used to seem like such a big deal to me and now its all this. And it's not hard by now it's the sixth year people know what the program is I can pitch it very clearly and I've discovered the avenues.

**Thomas Riccio:** I look at it I'm in dialog with the world and if I start telling the world what I need, it responds. I generally work by a kind of chance.

Chance is how the spirits speak. So chance occurrences occur and things just happen. Things like projects in the most unusual places. People will ask, “Can you do this?” and then someone else will say, “I can fund this.” So I really don’t plan it, I am not systematic about it but then always seems to work out. So I think if you have a positive and open attitude, maybe a mental image of what you want, it will happen. It seems kind of airy-fairy, but that’s how I’ve been working and that’s how the projects materialize. They happen by happenstance.

**Erik Ehn:** It’s avoid the bright idea and respond to invitation. Meaning, “Chocolate scented Kleenex!” That’s what the world would like, so you’ve got this idea and then its “Let me get packers for this thing.” And you give ten years of your life to Chocolate scented Kleenex; actually that’s probably a good idea. But you know what I’m saying, its like don’t lead with the idea but make yourself available to the world. And then, when the world says are you there? You’re ready to say, “Here I am.” But don’t say, “Here I am” before anybody is asking.

**Question:** As a follow up to that, what is the greater objective and outcomes? What do you tell your funders who are you serving and how by this work?

**Erik Ehn:** It’s very hard. This is an outcome issue and its really plaguing education too, where especially in arts education we’re like why? And especially in developing countries, why bother with arts education? Like what’s the payoff? I think we have to be really aggressive and nuanced in how we pitch outcomes. Where we have to insist that there is a value in deepening the soul or in personal transformation or in perceptual dilation even though this language is unattractive in terms of “Are you 56% more spiritually dilated than you were before?”

**Thomas Riccio:** Do a survey.

**Erik Ehn:** Even though it doesn't fall into that you have to insist on those alternative rubrics otherwise its all going to be no child left behind and it's not going to work you're going to tie up the students.

**Thomas Riccio:** The conversation has to be on the terms that you feel are appropriate rather than external terms and that's a matter of persistence as well.

**Erik Ehn:** And just show them, show the fixed authorities that it works and they'll come to you they'll flow money, burning man its now like the Disneyland, its lawyers on crack, but the money was attracted to it because of its innate identity. So first be true and then the world will come to seek out the truth and then withstand the world.

**Question:** Thank you so much, well this is so articulate you've made my day and my week. I still you might think of when you were talking about the two instances one of the woman and one of the man were been paying and the exchange of story and the transformational experience because of the group and then we talk about what you bring back here on this culture I've often been in I'm old enough to have a glimpse through that was emotional transformation was like taught in a classroom which rather things are and there it seems to me like there is a lot of theatrical charlatans where people get it to a room and they feel that in order to be a good actor or a director or whatever they need to share what it is it. It doesn't seem and that it has to power exchanges but I'm not as articulate as you compare the two and tell being you are articulate mind and what about what's not there in your experience that we have to watch out for in an experience that is sort of manufactured, you know what I'm saying?

Erik Ehn: There has been a shift in Augusto Boal methodology that he initiated it towards the end, where he moved more into poetics but if you know theater of the oppressed, where you go into community and you'd say you are the oppressed, who are your oppressors? Let's have a dialogue. But he found that sometimes you go into communities and there were those who didn't feel particularly oppressed. If you are oppressed there is the power, hate the power. Its not, I'm doing okay. So even in compassion even in you can't be predicative about the problem like if you're this used to be a problem with a heroic surgery that a surgeon has a great gift but not everything needs to be cut. So therapeutically oriented theater artists, not everything needs that kind of therapy per se so you have to listen to the situation and respond appropriately.

**Thomas Riccio:** Boal and I had a pretty strong conversation in Australia years ago at a conference. My objection to his methodology was that he starts from a negative, which frames the entire argument, whereas I start from a positive. For me if we had time and we had the interest with the number of people here we could make a performance here and the idea is everything you need to know is already here. Everything. The text is within you; it's just a matter of bringing the text out and the text I don't know what it will be. And so it's like you have to observe and ride and understand and listen to what it is and in that lets say presentation of listening, listening to one another about listening to yourself and then, there is no one way. I think what you're referencing is maybe a power thing whereas one person wants to have a dominance over others which there are times people come to my reversals and they don't know who the director is which is very nice for me this is what I like. If I'm the only white guy they know who I am but if there is a mixed group like once in Sweden they had no idea, they were looking for a director, they had no idea because they couldn't see the physical dynamics of who was in charge and I liked that. So it's a re-conceptualization of how we think of playwriting.

Most of my plays were with indigenous cultures are written after the play is doc it's a documentation. We remember orally and we activate an older part of our brain remember somatically in our body and our rhythms that we present so it's a whole different way of like looking at the world and relate it to one another so it kind of changes our whole approach the whole idea of a director and a playwright and a play and a text is, and authority. It is an approach that uniquely defines the roles. I prefer everyone being who they are, artist. I just happen to bring different things to the circle that's it and that's how I proceed. So it's about the structuring of it that's what its about and I think that's maybe a scene between Erik and I we're talking about the structure and we feel – I feel very alienated from the structure of the American way of producing and the objective and functionality of performance in theater. And my own work is becoming more and more trying to define my own and I work by myself because I get tired of trying to convince everyone so I just use small projects and I work with that and then hopefully I haven't done a survey or a documentation and hopefully it spreads in it and what I can see it does spread it changes.

**Erik Ehn:** Can you imagine process of manufacture where the consumer is constricted to bolted seats where they're subjected to the unmediated expertise of an alien producer in a lightless room at fixed hours; this is the model of American theater. It's like Malcolm McDowell and *Clockwork Orange* where I think that would be the dream of many American producers like not only they bolt the seats down but to actually try drill bolts through the arms of the audience so that they're forced to sit there and take it and to receive these messages in ways that can't ungob them from the pristine surface of their minds. It's a violent macho and anachronistic system of delivery that we have. Who would go into a building like that? A lightless building that you're not allowed in all day long then when it's dark out and the streets are scary you can sneak up on this theater and slip money into a crack and walk in and have this

experience imposed upon you. I don't want that, it's like a Roach Motel. Why would I go into the dark?

**Thomas Riccio:** Africa teaches. I've only done one show in Africa that is in a building, they're are always outdoors and they're in marketplaces, they're in bus stops, they are outside of health clinics, touring shows there are everybody but they are outdoor and the public interacts. If someone wants to come up in dance they're dancing with the performers and that's fine. If there is a goat walking across that's just part of the show, its part of the community, we're running through marketplaces to gather audience its that kind of immersion. There are less defined boundaries and it has vibrancy.

**Erik Ehn:** I guess a piece of advice. First, I would just like to acknowledge that I'm sure there are people in this room who put me to shame and nurses and nuns and philosophers and teachers who are working at a level of risk that's well beyond what I'm doing right now but if you feel a calling to put your work out there in a new situation there is nothing that inhibits you. If you want to go to African go to Africa it's not that hard it's down the street it's not that hard. So get up, go and be with where you feel in cases where you feel called it's not hard and you have no excuse.

**Thomas Riccio:** Make sure you get your shots.