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Celebrity Musings: Brushes with Fame and Other Thoughts on Celebrity

by Mark A. McCutcheon, Gilles Leduc, Diana
Mady Kelly, Sue Ann Martin and Blake Brooker

Would you lend Bob Dylan your guitar pick?

Mark A. McCutcheon, Assistant Professor, Athabasca University

Editor's Note: In Spring 2009, I posted an invitation on Candrama, the listserv for the Canadian Association for Theatre Research, inviting scholars and artists to share stories of their experiences, encounters, or reflections on celebrity culture in Canada. Here are some of the responses I received.

Shy FX may only be a celebrity in the niche market for drum & bass music, but there he's canonical: he is the producer and DJ who popularized the "jungle" sound with 1994's "Original Nuttah." On March 10, 2001, he headlined a dance party at The Docks (now Sound Academy) in Toronto. I had finished my own DJ performance there, when one of the organizers asked if Shy FX could borrow my headphones. As I handed them over, I said: *Would you lend Bob Dylan your guitar pick if he needed one? It's not even a question.* When Shy FX stepped up, I waded as close to the stage as possible with my camera, for a shot that only later revealed dim silhouettes in a purple haze. As for the headphones, they weren't industry standard—but everyone could hear they did the trick, in the tight mix of booming tracks.

I was among several amateur DJs performing at this party for free in the licensed side room. At that time, a licensed party was exempt from requiring expensive paid-duty officers that the Toronto Police required at all-ages dance parties. I might have attended anyway, but I only had headphones that night as part of a larger strategy to keep police outside the party. As a result, my unpaid performance work helped to minimize promoters' expenses and partygoers' arrests, and to reinforce an international DJ's subcultural capital.

Later, I got my headphones back, but never met their borrower. I defend my analogy; any junglist will tell you it fits, if they care who Bob Dylan is.

Celebrity Gets in the Way of Talent

Gilles Leduc, Artistic Director, Thin Ice Theatre, Nanaimo, BC

A decade ago, while working for the Nanaimo Fringe, I contacted a community theatre in Qualicum Beach to encourage them to submit a piece. The Director saw me and asked, "Have you ever done any acting? There's this part of a psychiatrist in a W.O. Mitchell play called *Back to Beulah ...*" I got the part, we went to a competitive festival, the lead actress won and I was hooked. Within three years I became president of the group and won at the same festival for directing *Escape From Happiness*.

Next, I create my own troupe, "Thin Ice Theatre." I've hardly made any money, I've always had a day job but I've directed *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*, *Albertine in Five Times*, wrote, acted and directed my own play *Never Endings*. The celebrity is local, but becomes a bit more widespread as the years go by. Last summer, a friend wanted to direct *Proof* and I agreed to produce it. When I read the script, I realized that I'd be a great Robert, so my friend cast me. Within weeks more than one source told me that I was "better than Anthony Hopkins." I'm pumped! I'm brilliant! I'm ... kidding myself. The more recognition I got, the more insecure I felt. I had the time of my life, despite becoming poorer and poorer. I played the superintendant in *The*

Stillborn Lover! More accolades—brilliant. At another festival I'm told, "you have a good chance of winning", "you're better every time out", "you should act more." Do they know? How can they? I'm more and more insecure. I can't live up to these expectations. I'm at the festival again. Lights are wrong in my first big scene. I can't even see the actress three feet away. I'm angry and yes ... I'm out of character and forget what scene I'm in, let alone my line. She's a rookie and GETS ME OUT OF IT! Wake up call ...

CELEBRITY GETS IN THE WAY OF TALENT! And

now celebrity is the focal point for so many people. They get the PHS (Paris Hilton Syndrome) kicked into them.

A Day with Donald

Diana Mady Kelly, Professor Emeritus, School of Dramatic Art, University of Windsor

Sue Ann Martin, Professor of Theatre, Central Michigan University

We arrived on the set of *The Rosary Murders* in Detroit on a summer day in 1986 to interview Donald Sutherland for a

book we were writing. The extended interview took place in his trailer, at Vince's Restaurant, and the Holy Redeemer Church convent where he was staying.

After a white-knuckle drive to the restaurant with Donald at the wheel, his two double espressos, his autograph seekers, our questions, and pasta, we went to the convent. The Sisters had placed a hand-cut gold star on his bedroom door and baked him a new batch of his favourite prune cookies. We had cookies and milk as Sutherland discussed the people in his head from Klute to Father Koesler.

We learned much about the development of the artist. But, it was his intimate response to our final question that gave us insight into the man. We asked him if he compared himself to any other actor?

He replied, "No ... no I don't ... Keifer maybe. I didn't know he was an actor. Like how do you know? He was downstairs in the house in L.A. and he asked me to read something with him. He was going for a reading. I said OK. I didn't know what I was going to do. It would have been easier to deal with a daughter asking to make love to you. It was so hard. I sat on the bed. His reading was so beautiful, and so varied, and new, and separate. It was just real lovely."

Donald Sutherland speaks to a group of university theatre students about his experiences as an actor (c. 1985).

Photo by Lionel Walsh; courtesy Diana Mady Kelly and Sue Ann Martin

The cast of One Yellow Rabbit's production of *Sylvia Plath Must Not Die* (left to right): Andy Curtis, Denise Clark, Onalea Gilbertson, Michael Green.

Photo by Trudie Lee

As we once loved or hated our gods and kings, as we feared or desired our chieftains, empresses, and priests, as we talked around the hearth about those who separated themselves from the herd, we concentrated on the elevated other.

Celebrity Reflection

Blake Brooker, Artistic Director, One Yellow Rabbit, Calgary, AB

I don't even know who Kim Kardashian is ...

There are celebrities for every category: celebrity chefs, celebrity gardeners, celebrity bowlers, celebrity mechanics, celebrity politicians, and celebrity dog trainers, to name a few. There are neighbourhood celebrities, local TV celebrities, regional celebrities, national celebrities and international celebrities. The reasons for being interested in celebrities are luminously obvious: they are figures who are distinguished from others. Looks, talent, power, luck, wealth, appetite, intelligence, drive, or opportunity blend in various combinations to create this separation. As we once loved or hated our gods and kings, as we feared or desired our chieftains, empresses, and priests, as we talked around the hearth about those who separated themselves from the herd, we concentrated on the elevated other.

At One Yellow Rabbit we consciously located ourselves in Calgary twenty-seven years ago. The choice was an obvious one for us: we wanted to live and work in Calgary, and none of us had the price of a Greyhound ticket elsewhere. As a consequence, the question of celebrity has had a negligible role in our deliberations concerning the creation and presentation of performance projects. Major celebrities do not inhabit regional centres. Outside of the odd hockey star or local radio or TV personality, the phenomenon has not taken root enough to factor into our daily activities. Celebrity exists in theatrical culture in one or two larger international centres perhaps, but in English Canada it is rare, closing in on undetectable. Our ambitions and appetites reflect that: our ensemble aspires to create a body of undeniable work. This body of work is gained not all at once, but by accretion. It is the result of years of methodical and difficult practice of creativity aimed at the moving target of productivity. Celebrity in our context has never been a factor.

I don't even know who Kim Kardashian is, but I hear she has a spectacular ass.