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“THE GOLDEN AGE: THE CASE FOR  
CO-DIRECTING IN THE THEATRE”  
A CONVERSATION WITH DWAYNE BRENNNA  
AND CAROL GREYEYES

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**"A Golden Age: The Case for Co-directing in the Theatre" A Conversation with  
Dwayne Brenna and Carol Greyeyes**

**Synopsis:**

Directing in the theatre can be a lonely business. Actors and designers are accustomed to working with a single director on a single script and, in the usual circumstance, directors can be collaborative or autocratic but the buck stops at the director's doorstep. Instances of successful collaborations between two directors in the theatre are rare. In this paper, Carol Greyeyes and Dwayne Brenna explore the advantages and challenges of co-directing in a university theatre. Together they co-directed a production of Louis Nowra's wonderful play *The Golden Age* at the University of Saskatchewan in autumn 2016. This paper is a conversation between the two, as they give their personal responses to the process and what they learned while co-directing in a university theatre.

**"A Golden Age: The Case for Co-directing in the Theatre"**

**A conversation with Dwayne Brenna and Carol Greyeyes**

## Introduction

The customary approach in 21<sup>st</sup> Century theatre is to hire one director per production to coach actors, to communicate with designers, to block the play, and to work out its specific rhythms—in short, to assume responsibility for the final product as it reaches an audience. This approach has led to the rise of directors who, like Peter Brook, stamp each production with their inimitable style. It has led to the rise of auteur directors like Robert Lepage, who assume the roles of playwright, lighting director, and sometimes actor. While the practice of hiring an assistant director to perform menial tasks on a production, or simply to sit back and learn, are common, instances of true and equal collaborations between two or more directors in the theatre are relatively rare. John Caird and Trevor Nunn produced excellent results in their co-direction of *Les Misérables* and other plays in London's West End. More recently, Joseph Haj has written glowingly about his co-direction with Dominique Serrand and others. In *American Theatre*, Haj wrote, "The opportunity to be deeply embedded in another director's process is a tremendous gift."<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we will each give our personal responses to the process, the challenges, advantages and disadvantages of co-directing in a university theatre. Together we co-directed a production of Louis Nowra's wonderful play *The Golden Age* at the University of Saskatchewan's Greystone Theatre in autumn 2016. Because neither of us had ever co-directed before, we found the process challenging and rewarding, exciting and arduous.

As artists working in the theatre, our backgrounds had many similarities but also some important dissimilarities. We had both studied in the same drama program in

which we are now teaching—the University of Saskatchewan—so we shared a common philosophical and methodological framework. Both of us were trained in the methods of Stanislavski. We had also acted together, back in 1988, in a summer theatre production of Ken Mitchell’s play *Grey Owl*. If we had come from vastly different backgrounds, say if one of us had been a disciple of Grotowski while the other had studied with Lecoq in Paris, our co-direction might have been doomed through lack of a common theatrical language or, possibly, we might have embarked on a learning process of gargantuan proportions. As it was, our paths had also diverged over the past thirty years. Carol went on to graduate with an MFA in acting from York University. She ran an indigenous theatre program in Toronto for several years before returning to Saskatchewan. She was an officer with the Saskatchewan Arts Board and, at the same time, a celebrated actress. Her work as Bernice Trimble in *The Gravitational Pull of Bernice Trimble* (Persephone Theatre, 2016) garnered her a SATA Award for Best Performance. Dwayne acted at the Stratford (Canada) Shakespearean Festival and then returned to teach at the University of Saskatchewan in 1986. He has studied with Yoshi Oida and Kristin Linklater and with Tina Packer at Shakespeare and Company in Vermont. He has a doctorate in theatre studies from the University of London (in England) and has written several books about Canadian theatre.

### The Back Story

CG: Originally, I was asked to be the Assistant Director and merely shadow Dwayne, as I was new to the Drama department and hadn’t any experience directing shows in university theatre. My previous experience was primarily in professional theatre where the Assistant Director is typically a silent presence; one that merely sits and watches.

Perhaps they fetch coffee for the Great One (the director), but the Assistant Director typically is seen and never heard during the rehearsal process. I was content with this position however, because I knew nothing about how the student-theatre worked. But at one of our early meetings, Dwayne proposed the idea that we co-direct. He had been reading an article about the concept and was intrigued by the idea. I had never co-directed before either but wasn't afraid to go where angels fear to tread, and I agreed to the experiment,

DB: I'd been assigned to Carol as a faculty mentor as she was in her second year on faculty in our department at the University of Saskatchewan. Carol was also a theatre practitioner of wide-ranging experience and international reputation. It seemed to me that it would be unreasonable, and perhaps a little disrespectful, to ask her to accept a menial position as Assistant Director on the production. The problem was, I had no idea how an equal co-directing scenario might work out. I combed the library and the Internet for discussions of the co-directing process and found very few articles. When I read Joseph Haj's brief article in *American Theatre*, however, I began to see that a co-directing process might work, might be beneficial for each of the co-directors.

#### The Process

CG: Dwayne was adamant from the start that it be an equal partnership, not an A-director/B-director scenario. Because we didn't have any real guidelines or methodology to follow, we had to think on our feet as it were. Like all good actors (thank goodness, we were both actors) we therefore improvised our way through to creating a co-directing process that worked with each of our personalities. One thing that we discovered very early on was that communication was key if each of us was to have a hand in every

aspect of the production. Similarly, because we are also both parents, we recognized that a united front was essential, so our cast and crew wouldn't be tempted to "divide and conquer", by playing us off one another, as children can often do.

DB: At the start we had no idea how to allocate the tasks while making the best use of our individual strengths and talents. So, despite our objective to participate in everything equally, there were a few exceptions. Because Carol had a particular affinity for working with actors in non-verbal scenes, she spent the first few days coaching the "feral" characters—in Nowra's play, the offspring of a lost generation of ex-convicts who are discovered in the Tasmanian outback—through a series of improvisations. Because my computer archives contain a catalogue of instrumental music from around the world, I was put in charge of finding musical accompaniment for the scenes and intervals in the play. But final decisions about blocking or music were always made after consultation with the other director. Outside of those exceptions, we both participated in all aspects of the production.

CG: Our collaboration began in early August 2016, with a series of meetings in which we went through the script, scene by scene, discussing character and setting and key moments in the storytelling and how they might be achieved onstage. These sessions were partly about facts and questions that we had gleaned from our individual readings of the play, but they also evolved into far-ranging philosophical discussions about the world of the play all the way to sharing fantastical ideas about lights, sound, and costume design.

DB: One of the challenges in this phase of our collaboration was to curb our enthusiasm and to keep the conversation focused on the things directors need to know

before going into rehearsal. We met twice a week, over a three-week period, in preparation for the start of rehearsals.

We decided to divide the rehearsal period into three phases: rudimentary blocking (or movement) for the play; exploring character and action; setting the rhythm and fine tuning. We proceeded in this fashion because of the brevity of our rehearsal period; we had exactly four weeks of rehearsal between first read-through and tech weekend, and we rehearsed only in the evenings between six and ten o'clock and on some Sunday afternoons between one and five o'clock.

CG: This schedule was a definite shock to me as I was used to having actors all day, six days a week. I honestly didn't know how we would be able to do it all. It was at this point--creating the rehearsal schedule--that I could see the definite advantages of having two directors. So, to make the most our limited rehearsal time, we decided to alternate leading the first two rehearsal periods; Dwayne led the blocking rehearsals, and I led the character and action phase. By the third week, when we felt that we were both solidly on the same page, we led the fine-tuning phase of the rehearsals in tandem. As far as possible, we developed a system where one director would lead the scene work and, when we returned to that scene a week later, the other director would take the lead. With very few exceptions, we were always both in the rehearsal room. We developed a system, where whoever was watching the other directing, would take notes on the scenes. Then we would share our notes with each other about each of the scenes that the other had been working on. In this way, we always presented a united front. Any of our disagreements—and there were very few-- could be quietly discussed away from the actors or student designers.



DB: Joseph Haj writes that a co-director “is continually interrogating the work all the way through,” and that is how we approached our collaboration.<sup>2</sup> The lead director had the option of conferring with the co-director when matters became sticky, when something irrevocable was happening, or when a choice made during the scene work might affect the trajectory of the remainder of the production. For example, there are two scenes in *The Golden Age* in which amateur actors are staging a classical Greek play. We experimented with those scenes, through the rehearsal period, with and without classical masks, constantly asking each other which way worked best. Would amateur actors even bother to use masks? Did it matter that the masks would have to be used poorly and anti-theatrically? Would the audience understand the subtle humour of the scenes? We interrogated the work through the rehearsal period until we reached a decision, relatively late, to proceed with the use of masks.

CG: There were a few times too when even two heads couldn't come up with a satisfactory solution. There was an incident when my initial blocking of a scene wasn't working, and I just could not figure it out. Then I saw Dwayne signaling me from the audience. From his perspective and understanding of the moment, he had some ideas about how to resolve it. So, with the obliging actors, we tried his way. Then we tried my way. Then we tried a blend of the two. But even though we eventually reached a compromise, the blocking problem, in my mind, remained unsolved. Try as we might neither of us could come up with a satisfactory solution. However, for the most part, we were very lucky that our aesthetics and directing styles were complimentary, otherwise the process and the final product could have been a confusing mishmash.

## Challenges of Co-Directing

DB: We've already referred to the amount of time and energy spent meeting as co-directors before the rehearsals started. In a single director scenario, the director researches the script, pins down the setting and characters through a process of ascertaining facts and asking questions. In a co-directing scenario, each director does all of that and then participates in a three-week discussion, so that you both are on the same page. This only works, we think, when the directors use the script as their bible, as the arbiter of all things and the settler of all differences. It would have been difficult to co-direct the play had we decided to move the production from its original World War Two backdrop to, say, a backdrop involving modern Afghanistan (in order to make the play more relevant to a modern audience). Had we done something like that, the script would no longer be in the position of arbiter; much of the direction would have had to proceed from our own imaginations.

At any rate, both of us were aware that we were investing much more time in the production than either of us would have done in a single-director scenario, but we were also happily aware of how much we were learning from one another.

CG: My practice is to take the script apart by way of the Method, dividing scenes into beats and determining characters' intentions and obstacles. Dwayne's approach was more akin to Katie Mitchell's; he lists facts and questions, scene by scene, and finds moments where decisions are made and life changes for all the characters in a scene. It was a real pleasure for each of us to see how deftly our co-director worked with their own methodology. The actors benefited similarly from having diverse ways to analyze and

work through the play. Miraculously, when we surveyed the cast and crew after the play closed, a clear majority found it helpful to have more than one perspective.

DB: Designers are accustomed to dealing with a single director, and we had to be extremely clear up-front that ours' would be an equal collaboration. That two equal directors were in the room to discuss set and costume design posed some challenges. Despite being united on the big-picture ideas, we both found ourselves hashing through costume and set details as the designers presented them to us. We deliberated aloud over the bloody smock that Betsheb wore, over all the costumes really. We arrived at decisions, while our technical colleagues looked on, about what Betsheb should be wearing in the final scene of the play, when she has found her way home to the Tasmanian outback. We could feel the pressure in the room as our technical team looked on. Wouldn't it be less time-consuming to have one director make these decisions?

CG: There was a particularly tricky situation with the student set designer in Week Two. Although we were both initially enchanted by the design, after spending a week on it, trying to block the actors on it, we both realized that it was not working. Not wanting to gang up on the poor student, who felt that his beautiful design was being categorically rejected, we each tried to gently negotiate a compromise. Perhaps it was our collaborative, cooperative approach, but we met with resistance. Or maybe the production staff didn't believe that we both felt the same way—and we could be played off one another-- but heels were dug in. I was in despair because I wrote in my journal: "Now we have to live with a non-actor-friendly set!". However, the feeling was mitigated somewhat because I knew I had the support of my co-director; we would solve the

problem together. Or at the very least, share the blame in any critical drubbing we got as result.

DB: Technical issues have a way of coming to a head late in the rehearsal period, usually (in our experience) on tech weekend, which happens three days before opening in our schedule. This is the weekend in which light and sound levels are set, and decisions must be made in a hurry. Many sudden decisions need to be made. I remember asking for a change in a lighting effect in the final mask scene, only to have the designer mention that Carol had asked for that effect one day earlier. I apologized to Carol and to the designer for providing contradictory direction. Carol magnanimously accepted my apology and advocated for the lighting effect that I wanted.

Like designers, actors (even student actors) have become accustomed to working with a single director. During rehearsals, the actors would sometimes give each other furtive looks when one director set off to explore a scene in a different direction than the other director had previously gone. For the most part, though, we prided ourselves on our ability to speak with one voice. When students evaluated the co-direction after the production was put to bed, there was little mention of contradictory direction given by either director. One student posited that a co-directing scenario would not work in every case but that it had been successful in this production because Carol and Dwayne were clearly good friends.<sup>3</sup>

CG: As one might expect, the biggest challenge of co-directing was to set one's ego aside. Both of us have evolved through a system that caters to a single director, and it would be wrong to assume that there were no bruised egos along the way or that scenes might have been directed differently, in hindsight, had either one of us been the sole

director. Both of us can remember instances when we, as co-directors sitting in the back of the theatre, shouted out advice to the lead director in a moment of epiphany. We eventually had a discussion, after this had occurred a couple of times, where we agreed that there could be more than one approach to a character or to a scene but where we also agreed that the non-lead director should only give direction privately to the lead director. There were also instances where student actors would ask the non-lead director for advice over the shoulder of the lead director. This behavior became less common when we articulated our working relationship to the students.

Differing perspectives are, we think, largely unavoidable, especially in the first instance of two co-directors working together. Individual directors tend to develop an intense relationship with the script on which they are working. They tend to fall in love with their own visualizations of the production. It is difficult to step back from the notion that you alone have a special understanding of the play and can let somebody else's vision have sway.

DB: Given these challenges, why would anybody want to co-direct? The obvious answer is that the process might create a better production, capitalizing on the strengths of two collaborators. We believe this to be true. Carol's dance background shone through, for example, in the movement patterns of the feral people. Many of the feral people scenes were non-verbal, and the actors had to communicate their intentions through their physicality. So, using a combination of Neutral Mask and Authentic Movement, Carol worked with the feral people to find a style of physical expression that was characteristic of them as a social group but that was also open to individual skills and preferences. For example, Jordie Richardson's pugilistic stance as Majorne was a

reference both to an activity that was prized by his ancestors and to an individual strength of the character. Similarly, my experience with large group scenes in Shakespearean theatre led to some interesting group work in the party scene at the end of the first act of *The Golden Age*. Ten characters congregated on the stage in that one scene, often having side conversations while action was going on elsewhere. It was probably the most difficult scene in the play to block, and I worked hard to create points of focus on various parts of the stage at different moments in the scene. Through all of this, we both took advantage of the option of going back to our directors' chairs and conferring quietly with each other.

CG: Another strength in our co-directing process had to do with gender. We weren't struck so much by the differences in how a male director and a female director might perceive the same scene as we were struck by the way the student actors perceived us, based on gender, in specific situations. *The Golden Age* features several scenes in which sexuality comes to the fore, and several in which a female (the character Betsheb) behaves voyeuristically and instigates the sex act. We found that females in the cast preferred to be directed by me in those instances and that males were more comfortable talking to Dwayne. In one particular scene, in which Betsheb has an orgasm that soon becomes an epileptic seizure, Dwayne was working with the actors moment by moment on how to stage the scene. He wasn't getting the results he wanted until I came down from the auditorium and demonstrated, for the somewhat shy actress, exactly how she might behave in such a situation—the laughter after my little demonstration was just what was needed to lighten up things up and unblock the actors' impulses.

DB: The most powerful justification, especially for practitioners working in a university setting, is that the process of co-directing provides an impetus for directors to learn and grow in their craft. Joseph Haj writes that the three directorial collaborations he's participated in "are on the short list of my most meaningful directing experiences because of the enormous growth in each of those journeys."<sup>4</sup> We also think that co-directing offered us a rare opportunity to see with another director's eyes and to hear with another director's ears. I marveled at Carol's technique, for example, as she worked Nowra's text into the bodies of the actors. Often starting with one line of dialogue, or even with a single word, she encouraged the actors to find a pose or a way of moving that embodied the text. This technique became the basis for character development and movement in those scenes in which the feral characters were involved.

Haj notes that co-directing *Henry V* with Mike Donahue didn't require "needing to, or pretending to, always agree 100 per cent of the time—it meant that we had to be committed to the same big-picture ideas...."<sup>5</sup> We found this to be true in our co-direction of *The Golden Age*. We weren't always on the same page about the playing of various beats in the text, but we knew from the outset what we wanted the production to be—a stark look at how we treat "the other," whether we define the other as people with exceptionalities and convict ancestors or as people of a race or social grouping that is different from our own. We wanted to kick the audience in the gut with that reality, and we wanted them to leave the theatre asking tough questions.

CG: I felt that the process of co-directing was in many ways a parallel exercise to what the play itself calls for: to stop seeing "The Other"; be open to diversity and tolerant of differences, such as when *The Golden Age* characters in cry, "nowt more outcasting". It

required us, in the words of Aga Khan in his address on pluralism, to use the following: a vital sense of balance, an abundant capacity for compromise, a more than a little sense of balance, an appropriate degree of humility--a good measure of forgiveness--and, of course, a genuine welcoming of human difference.<sup>6</sup> In the *Golden Age* we see that separation and emphasizing differences leads to destruction-- a timely message for us all. Shall history repeat itself over and over? Or are we willing to make a shift towards accepting and integrating diversity? Do we insist on being right at the expense of being happy? In many ways, our co-directing process mirrored this major theme in *The Golden Age*. Fortunately, we had the exhortation "nowt more outcasting", to guide us. This line which is spoken numerous times and by numerous characters could be interpreted to mean that we welcome differences and diverse ideas. Success is measured in the joy of collaboration and unity; inclusion not exclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> *American Theatre*, 13 August 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *American Theatre*, 13 August 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *University of Saskatchewan Drama Department Evaluations*, November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *American Theatre*, 13 August 2014.

<sup>5</sup> *American Theatre*, 13 August 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 28 September 2017.



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