



## DARREN O'DONNELL

[THEATER DIRECTOR/WRITER]

“YOU NEVER ARE WHO YOU ARE, BUT YOU ARE  
WHO YOU ARE *WITH WHO YOU'RE WITH.*”

Inhabitants of the ideal city:

*Georgina from Patty Queen*

*Naomi at South Indian Dosa Mahal*

*Somebody's kid whose parent is getting a pedicure*

**D**arren O'Donnell didn't start off working with children, but in the last few years his performances with children have become some of his best-known work, both in his elected home of Toronto and abroad.

*Haircuts by Children* began it all: a performance piece that involves training children to be stylists, then having them take over a salon and give haircuts to people. The show traveled to London, New York, Dublin, L.A., Vancouver, Sydney, Terni, and other cities, always using local children.

In 2008 and 2009, his theater company, *Mammalian Diving Reflex*, was the artist-in-residence at the Parkdale Public School (Parkdale is a lower-income neighborhood in Toronto), and his work continued to move further away from writing, producing, and acting in plays, which is how he began his career, in the early 1990s, with *Who Shot Jacques Lacan?*

Before children, his work dealt with sex: at an all-night performance festival in Toronto, he debuted *Slow Dance with Teacher*, in which giddy participants slow danced with nice, neatly dressed teachers. He hosted make-out parties; he published a novel, *Your Secrets Sleep with Me*; and, in the past year, he began working with the elderly. He has always been preoccupied with race, politics, and what it means to live in a city.

O'Donnell is a single, forty-five-year-old straight man without children. His theater company has four part-time employees, spends much of its year touring, and can be counted on to produce some of the most exciting and revelatory theater in Canada—shows that live somewhere between the art of theater and life itself. He is a combination of producer, actor, writer, director, city planner, host, relational-aesthetics artist, louche uncle, neighborhood granny, and kid. He talks very quickly, in a

*staccato voice, and seems to care little about social decorum or potential embarrassment to himself.*

*In 2006, Coach House Books published his manifesto, Social Acupuncture, an emotional inquiry into theater's oblivious, vain uselessness, and his own longtime complicity in it, and an idealistic search for something more relevant and revolutionary. The text was punctuated by his characteristic insecurity and self-flagellation, and has developed a cult following among theater and relational artists. His work has recently come to reliably resemble the "social acupuncture" of his dreams: art that, by pricking people, may "contribute to a healthy functioning social sphere."*

—Sheila Heti

## I. EAT THE STREET.

THE BELIEVER: In *Haircuts by Children*, you get kids to take over a salon, and, after a bit of training, adults come and the kids cut their hair for free. It feels strange, like something one must have experienced before, but we haven't. Do people who see the show recognize your political ideas around it—that children should have more rights, and that the project is about the question *Can we trust children?*

DARREN O'DONNELL: I think it's clear. There are written materials. But a lot of people prefer to view it as confidence-building for the kids, or skills-building, like, "Oh! You're making a bunch of future hairstylists." We're not so interested in confidence-building. I mean, it's great if confidence builds, but there's lots of ways to build confidence, and maybe that's one of them, but that's certainly not the main goal.

BLVR: What is?

DO: It's to make this crazy encounter between the adults and these kids, and make the kids feel they're in control, and to sort of provide another ontological possibility. Things can be very different if we allow for the participation of kids in a different way. The feeling of kids running around and having a good time at a family gathering—that vibe can be much more prevalent in the culture if we want it to be.

BLVR: What do you think the main blockage is with people who do conventional theater—what do they not see, people who just put on, say, *Romeo and Juliet* with emo kids? What are they not understanding about the world or entertainment or art or life?

DO: Theater is powered by actors. Actors are the ones who are running theater. Intelligent writers and directors have abandoned theater for other places where they can actually make money, like film and TV, so the only people to benefit from theater materially are the actors who get to jump up onstage and hear people applaud. They're running the whole show now, and I think most actors who are running companies and who have turned themselves into directors—they have a different set of things that are important for them.

BLVR: In *Social Acupuncture*, you said the reason theater's a hundred years behind the other arts is because it can't travel: theater practitioners can't easily talk to each other, can't easily learn from each other, so there's a sort of retardation of the art.

DO: A theater practitioner in Edmonton can't see work that's going on in London or New York, but if you're a painter, you can get at least a sense of what's going on in gallery scenes elsewhere. You can see photos. Theater doesn't document very well. A document of a theater production embarrasses everybody for some reason.

BLVR: You've written that "drama" is becoming more and more an inaccurate reflection of your life—that, for you, conflicts are mainly internal; they're in your head. You said that drama sort of devalues our own experience, because we're looking for the drama and there is no drama, so we're drawn to entertainment that's bombastic as a substitute for the lack of drama in our lives.

DO: Yeah. So now I just create situations where people come and are themselves and have to deal with the situation that we set up and have to be themselves. *Eat the Street* is a great example. A person comes and there's all these kids around, and however you navigate it, you navigate it.

BLVR: Can you explain that project a bit?

DO: We organized a jury of kids to go to twelve restaurants over the course of a month. The kids eat at the restaurants, and then we offer—to an audience—that they can come in and eat dinner with the kids, and all it costs them is the price of the meal. So we create these community dinners with the kids as a jury of critics. Then the kids give out a bunch of awards to the restaurants.

BLVR: Is it theater?

DO: In that kind of situation, there's a lot of drama happening. There's lots of conflict, there's lots of tension. Just the act of trying to get a kid to like you, and trying to engage a kid in conversation—that's really challenging for a lot of people. To me it's dramatic when that's happening, and there's success with that. When a kid eats their first oyster and everyone watches and applauds them—that kind of stuff is fun, and there are moments of real drama and real tension there. There are people who criticized it—people who couldn't engage with the kids. They said I should have come up with more-formal ways of talking, where everybody has to do a little task or something like that.

BLVR: They wanted to make it easier on themselves?

DO: Yeah. There was a playwright who came—he and his wife wanted to check it out—and he actually started to lecture the kids on manners. I was like, “I don't know who that guy is—you don't have to listen to him.”

BLVR: That's interesting. That's something for other people to see.

DO: It was fun to refute him publicly. In Australia, this school we worked with made the assumption that the project was all about teaching the kids manners, and we were like, “No—it's about the restaurant accommodating the fact that the kids *have* no manners.” It's about real people encountering real people and having to sort out these unusual circumstances.

BLVR: What does it mean to do “social acupuncture”?

You've written a book called *Social Acupuncture*. Why the metaphor of acupuncture?

DO: What we are doing is pricking people a bit—poking at situations to see if we can create a situation that is a bit uncomfortable. It seemed like an apt metaphor for it—social energy, changing social flows, changing social dynamics. It made sense.

BLVR: Did you study shiatsu to better understand how to do this kind of theater?

DO: I was doing shiatsu and acupuncture and Chinese medicine at the time, because I was hurting myself a lot in performance. I wanted to start working with other people and have them do the kind of physical stuff that I was doing, but I didn't want to hurt people.

BLVR: How were you hurting yourself?

DO: Just jumping around in plays.

BLVR: In the production of your fifth play, *pppeeeaaa-ccceee*, you wrote a script, but you divided the lines randomly among the three actors. Even though I didn't know, at the time, that you had done this, watching the show gave me a very profound sense of equality among people. I wonder how you perceive personality. Is personality not important?

DO: I'm working on a novel right now, and one of the things I'm experimenting with is giving very few clues as to who's talking, because I don't think it matters. One of the things I noticed while hanging out with my friends Kika Thorne and Adrian Blackwell was that when I was with them, I had a particular kind of personality, and made a particular kind of joke that I only made with them. I had a particular quality of time that I only had with them, and I was a particular kind of person that I only was with them. I really like that person, but that person was nowhere else. So I started to realize that maybe personalities are developed—or codeveloped—with people. You never are who you are, but you are who you are *with who you're with*.

BLVR: I saw a workshop of *Monster Makers*, and the parents aren't allowed to see the play. They sit behind a screen and the kids and the show are on the other side of the screen. You play a sort of mad scientist in it, and you interact with the kids. Then there's the Monster, a big hairy guy. How did the production go?

DO: We took it to Australia, and we had to change the whole thing. It didn't work with the kids. It became a very boring show—talk talk talk talk talk talk talk. The key conceptual points had to go. So now I'm simply this guy who woke up one morning to find a monster underneath the bed. And the monster evolves very quickly. When the monster's thirty minutes old, it begins to walk. Then we teach it to work with its emotions. Once we teach him to walk, talk, and dance, then he has to poop, and we take him outside to do more pooping. Then we take him outside to play, and the kids will shut him down. Then once the kids shut him down, he gets tired of being told *no!* all the time and he hails a cab. We put him in the cab. He leaves. Then we go back to the space and debrief as to what went wrong. "Why did you shut him down all the time? Why didn't you let him play?" So we talk about that. Then we do a slide show of all of the photos that we've taken during the first part of the show of the kids training him, and we're looking at it like a baby photo album, like, "Oh, remember that time when..." Then toward the end of that he calls in, and he's got a backdrop of Paris behind him, and he's having a good time in Paris.

BLVR: Why do the kids always shut him down? That's the weirdest part.

DO: I don't know.

BLVR: Because that's what parents always do to kids?

DO: If the monster wants to go into the store, the kids don't want him to go into the store. They're scared of what he's going to do. When he messes with the public, they don't want him to hurt anybody. They're respectful of people. But then the more he pushes against that, the more they'll hit him, the more they'll totally control him. It's easy to turn them into little totalitarian fascists.

Not fascists, but totalitarian, authoritarian...

BLVR: I like one interpretation of your work that says it's for adults, really, not for kids. You use the kids to communicate to the adults about adults and about children; like the subject is adults and the subject is children, but it does seem like the audience is the adults.

DO: Yeah, the audience is adults and the kids are collaborators. People have an issue with me calling them collaborators—like, *are* they collaborators? Or are they little puppets?

BLVR: All collaborators are puppets to some degree.

DO: But they can cut the hair any way they want to cut the hair. They can navigate it with their clients, and I don't care what they do.

BLVR: Some of your critics say you shouldn't work with kids. They say the kids aren't free to do what they want; that it's about your desires and not the kids' desires, for example.

DO: Well, sure, sometimes. But the thing is, I'm creating experiences that the kids want to participate in. Nobody's forcing anybody to do anything. Nobody's getting any marks for it, so they're certainly welcome to not come. And kids, when they're bored, they're fucking *bored* and they walk away.

## II. PARANOID KNOWING AND REPARATIVE KNOWING

DO: The art critic Leah Sandals wrote that if I really cared about the children, I would do something substantial like help find their parents work. And I'm like, "What does that have to do with *me*?" I care about the children and I'm interested in having fun with the children, but I'm not interested in being a social worker. This is not social work. It's performance art. When you start to do socially engaged stuff, there's a weird lefty headspace where any shortcoming—anything putting us anywhere short of utopia—is pointed at really viciously. I'm doing a project

right now with Upper Canada College, and Adrian called the project cretinous because we're trying to get the kids to network with bigwigs.

BLVR: Can you describe the project?

DO: UCC is an all-boys school—maybe the most elite prep school in Canada—and they have a program where they offer, free, to selected kids from high-risk neighborhoods, that they can come up for a month during the summer to get tutoring and have fun, educational stuff going on. So we organized a project where the kids got to choose a material aspect of the city they wanted to change, and we made a list of well-connected people who we thought might be able to help them with this. Then they chose a short list of ten people they wanted the school to approach. The idea was that we'd approach these people and ask them to host parties in their homes where the kids would be introduced to their circle of friends. [Pause] It isn't going very well.

BLVR: Why not?

DO: I think it's a big ask. People are afraid. The people at UCC feel like we're asking too much. My friend said we're teaching the kids how to kiss the ass of power. And I'm like, "Yeah, we *are*. I want to know how to kiss the ass of power."

BLVR: Sure.

DO: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote a book called *Touching Feeling* and contrasted two ways of knowing: one is paranoid knowing and one is reparative knowing, and paranoid knowing comes out of post-structuralism and Marxism, and it's all about artists revealing the hidden machinations of power to a benumbed audience who doesn't care, and we're going to get them to care. That way of making art sort of presupposes that people haven't figured out that the world is this hierarchical place with control and power and all that kind of shit. It also presupposes that people actually give a fuck either way. Contrast that with reparative knowing, which is about creating work that creates new small repairs between people. The

reparative people are seen by more paranoid types as naive and complicit, even. So Adrian's analysis is really paranoid. He said, "Maybe résumé writing is more important than learning how to schmooze," and, no, I don't think it is.

BLVR: I was at the mixer you organized with the kids and some artists and political types. The way the kids schmoozed—it was so weird. They were completely rude sometimes, and they ended conversations in the midst of you speaking. They would walk away as you were talking—

DO: And their assumption about how you suck up and compliment people! They were awkward at it. But who isn't awkward at it? But at some point in your life you will be dealing with someone who has more power than you, and you'll be trying to get something out of them.

BLVR: It's interesting to think of myself as having been an audience member in that situation, even though you invited us to help the kids. But, as an audience member, I could observe how coded schmoozing is. Like, people really pick it up gradually over the years—what you're supposed to do and how you're supposed to conduct yourself. You don't even realize you know this shit until you're around a bunch of thirteen-year-olds who are trying to imitate it.

I want to talk about Q&A, because it's one of my favorite things you do. There are two parts to it. One is trying to bring someone onto the stage, and the next is what happens when that person is on the stage. You get everyone in the audience to stand up, and you ask a bunch of questions. So you say, "If you've ever been hit by lightning, sit down."

DO: And maybe you end up with "If you've ever had sex, sit down." So I go from the least likely things to have happened to the most likely things to have happened.

BLVR: At the end one person is left standing, and you say...?

DO: "That's the most boring person in the audience. Now it's our responsibility to find something about them

that's not boring, because I believe that everybody's not boring." So I put them onstage and the audience is free to ask them any question they want, and the person is free to not answer if they don't want to answer, and away we go.

BLVR: It's completely compelling and fascinating. It gets at character in a much more real and affecting way than many fictions, and there's always some story in there.

DO: We spend a set amount of time talking to one person, then we get them to pick the next person. A long evening would maybe be six people for ten minutes each—so that's an hour. At the show we did at the Edith Wharton House in the Berkshires, one guy, his wife was in the audience, and she asked him what is the speed of light.

BLVR: He was probably the most boring person you'd ever had onstage.

DO: Yeah. Until that question, I was like, "We failed—this one failed." Then he answered it *perfectly*. He gave it down to the last decimal point!

BLVR: Everyone was astonished and you ended the show right there.

DO: Yeah, I was like: "Perfect—he's interesting! Show's over!" You've got to end it on a high note. Then I was talking to him afterward and I asked him why he knows the speed of light. And he said he was a rocket scientist who worked for the American military!

BLVR: Are you ever going to write more plays?

DO: No.

### III. TORONTO IS A TEENAGER.

BLVR: Can you talk a bit about Toronto being a teenager? It's an idea that comes up in your novel, and you wrote an essay about it as well.

DO: Well, Toronto happens to have a lot of qualities teenagers have. It's really shy, apologetic, not very confident,

and teenagers are really critical of each other. They're not very involved in generosity, and they're constantly looking elsewhere for affirmation—looking to adults or peers for affirmation. That makes it a tough environment, because there's lots going on, but it never feels like there's much warmth. The competition is not very generous, and people don't have staying power, because there are no resources. Famously, when you leave the country and get success somewhere else, your cred goes way up here. Just all those pretty standard things about Canada in general. Canada, I would say, is a teenage country.

BLVR: Is this teenageness useful for you as an artist?

DO: No, I think it's really frustrating, because nobody ever wants to be here, because there's always someplace better to go, so everybody's got their eye... Nobody is like, "Yes, this is where I am and I'm going to build this here." Nobody's interested in building the mythology of the city or the artistic mythology of the city. Why isn't anyone talking about the history of the Cameron House and Andy Paterson and stuff like that? But it's not cool, because Andy Warhol is way more interesting than Andy Paterson. I'm constantly thinking, Well, I should live someplace else. But I don't know. I like it here. I've got friends here who I really like. What do you think of that?

BLVR: I more and more accept that I'm here. Obviously I'm here. I'm here 'cause I'm here. And for the same reasons that you're here: there are people I love and I love being here. But, yeah, there's always part of your brain that thinks you should go somewhere else. It's completely maddening and ludicrous; everything I've done so far I've done from here, and I'm fine with everything I've done so far.

DO: When you go to New York, do you ever want to live there?

BLVR: I more and more feel like artists should live in different places, you know? The idea that every single artist should be in New York is just insane. Of *course* there have to be perspectives from different parts of the world. They can't all be from Brooklyn.

DO: I want a particular vibe around me when I walk down the street—like I want Sesame Street all the time. I'm curious about how to create your own personal network out of the people you interact with daily at the places you do business. Can I develop friendships out of that which exceed the boundaries of commerce?

BLVR: That seems like something that would happen naturally if you lived in a community long enough; you would naturally develop a friendship or some kind of relationship with your baker. Why do you have to self-consciously make that happen through art?

DO: Because it doesn't happen. It's really difficult because we don't live in homogenous communities. The Portuguese butcher down there with his family, and the South Indian woman selling dosas—they know me, but not each other.

BLVR: So what's your ideal city?

DO: I'd like to go out with Georgina at Patty Queen, hang out with her, and walk down the street, and for the two of us go to see Naomi at South Indian Dosa Mahal, and have food there, and later everybody comes to my house for tea, and that's all. That kind of being together. And somebody's got a kid who the two of us take responsibility for so they can be free to get a pedicure or whatever. I think the postmodern city is really a difficult one for developing connections between people other than the ones you have through your vocation.

BLVR: Well, you're talking about a village.

DO: I think a village involves fairly likely social configurations, like extended family and so on, whereas in the city you have the potential for unlikely and unusual configurations across various divides.

BLVR: What's left from theater in the work you do?

DO: A theater company that sees the city as a stage, and all of the people in it as actors—we can work with that and that's theater.

BLVR: You've had dinner parties at your house for a long time, which isn't connected to your theater company but is so much part of your interests—getting people together and having certain kinds of conversations. The people at your dinner parties make presentations, right?

DO: Yeah.

BLVR: Why did you start doing those dinner parties?

DO: It was an assignment from a shamanic healer that I went to.

BLVR: A shamanic healer?

DO: My back was really bad, and he assigned it to me. That is one of the tasks I was given.

BLVR: To have dinner parties at your house? And has it healed you?

DO: Yeah, yeah.

BLVR: In what way?

DO: I'm not entirely sure. I was supposed to meditate every day, which I was spotty on, engage with the task at hand, and have dinner parties.

BLVR: I loved your most recent show, *The Best Sex I've Ever Had*. You had six elderly people on a panel talking about the best sex they'd ever had; some were gay, some straight, some more prudish than others. Their answers were so surprising—how most of them said they were having it now! I guess there were both planned theatrical elements and improvised elements, so it was never messy or boring, but it was always alive. The people you chose had such character, and were such warm and open people—

DO: It was self-selecting. We put up these ads, and—

BLVR: You put ads on the street?

DO: Yeah. “Are you over sixty-five and still thinking about getting it? Will you take part in this research project?” We did the Toronto show and now we’re going to Germany. We tried to get three of them—Dorothy, Taylor, and Phil—to go over....

BLVR: Which one was Dorothy?

DO: The eighty-year-old woman. Taylor had a breakdown in the show that traumatized him and made him really tense for the next little while. His lover was tortured in Guatemala, and he sort of mentioned that, and he had to hold back tears for what seemed like a minute to a minute and a half. That’s a long time on-stage. After that he was really tense and his chest was quite tense, and he’d had open-heart surgery ten years ago. He didn’t want to go to Germany and have a heart attack and be stuck in Oldenburg for two weeks, so he skipped that leg of the project, and Dorothy got pneumonia. So what I’m learning is when you’re working with old people, there’s all these other considerations. We’re only taking Phil, which kind of sucks.

BLVR: If you’re ever doing a show, I see it, because I know it’s going to be incredibly pleasurable and entertaining. Is *entertainment* a word for you?

DO: Well, the tagline for Mammalian is “Ideal entertainment for the end of the world,” so I’m trying to reconceive what entertainment is. With *Diplomatic Immunities*, one of the things I thought about was how could I create an experience that was as close to just hanging around and being with people, but still get away with charging admission? I would always just like to be hanging around. I don’t want to do anything, really. *Eat the Street* is a great project because I get to hang around with a bunch of twelve-year-olds and goof around and that’s really fun. So, yeah, I’m trying to generate an experience for myself, and I hope other people have that experience.

BLVR: So what does *entertainment* mean, in your definition of it?

DO: I would like it just to a lot more resemble hanging out.

BLVR: Hanging out is the most entertaining thing?

DO: Yeah, and the show that the world puts on for you. Why do you want anything more than that? That’s perfect. ★

#### MICROINTERVIEW WITH EYAL WEIZMAN, PART IV.

THE BELIEVER: It seems that certain militaries plan their destruction very delicately, almost.

EYAL WEIZMAN: Well, I think the first revolution was that of precision weapons—developed throughout the late ’80s and coming into operation in the early ’90s in Kuwait, Iraq, and later in Kosovo. But they led to another capacity, that of the precise estimation of the amount of damage. This provides the means to calculate the economies of violence, the ability to design the precise effect of a bomb.

BLVR: It didn’t exist before the smart weapons were developed?

EW: Well, proportionality as a principle did exist in many legal systems. The illusion of our time is that violence and its chaos can be brought under the discipline of an economy of calculations. There was a software employed until the early ’00s called Bugsplat, which tried to calculate the casualties from each bomb if you throw it from this angle, from that angle, if it’s quarter-ton or full-ton, if it is with a delay fuse or some other kind of fuse, etc. Soldiers and planners can start playing with the angles and with this and that until they get the number that they need. The ethical economy of violence found its means in this kind of engineering. ★