Chapter III

The Farm Show: A Sociological Perspective in Collective Creation

The dominant form of Canadian documentary had its birth in an unused barn near Clinton, Ontario, in August 1972, when the Theatre Passe Muraille premiered The Farm Show, the best and the most typical example of collective creation in the sociological genre, to an audience of local residents and farmers. Originally created for a farming community near Clinton, by a cast of remarkably inventive and intelligent actors, the success of the show was such that the company took it to Toronto, and from there on tour, performing in Ottawa and for various Saskatchewan communities. It was also performed on radio and its creation documented on film by Michael Ondaatje. The enormous appeal of this play to audiences everywhere was truly astounding. To the urban audience, it appealed by its simplicity, spontaneity and its authentic characters and situations.

The Farm Show is a mosaic of scenes, literally recorded within the community. The list of characters is followed by a note to the effect that “All characters in this play are non-fictional. Any resemblance to living people is purely intentional” (Thompson 12). The success of the undertaking seems to invalidate the usual critical views that to be effective, no dramatic idiom can be taken raw from life that instead it must be carefully shaped to create the illusion of realism. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that although the company used the words given to them by the people of Clinton themselves, a process of selection took place which no doubt heightened the effectiveness of those words; the selection and arrangement of the scenes was also carefully planned as can be seen in the various scenes.
The Farm Show is innovative as well as pace-setting both as a play and as a cultural phenomenon. It stands as one of the finest works of the Canadian theatre, and it became the model for a form of community documentary theatre based on the actors’ personal responses to the source material. The play inspired numerous imitations across Canada, most of which applied techniques of collective creation developed by Passe Muraille’s artistic director, Paul Thompson. Few of his successors equaled the original in dramatic intelligence, as indeed did few of Passe Muraille’s later experiments in the form. The reasons for the play’s brilliance are several, but in the end they must be ascribed to the pioneering inventiveness of Paul Thompson who formulated the theme and directed the play. This play is generally considered the best and the most typical example of Passe Muraille style in the sociological genre.

Thompson’s emphasis on the actors’ creative encounter with reality as well as his delight in pure theatricality was shaped in larger parts by the two years he spent as a stagiaire – an apprentice director – with Roger Planchon in France in the later 1960s. Perhaps even more significant to the development of Passe Muraille’s documentaries was Thompson’s belief that theatre can locate and define the motifs and images, which identify a culture. For Thompson, these motifs and images point to the formative myths of a society. The concept of myth recurs throughout Thompson’s work; it lies at the heart of The Farm Show. It also explains why in subsequent shows Thompson moved beyond documentary actuality to a new form of actor-created dramatic literature.

The style of the documentary collective creation developed by the Theatre Passe Muraille is centered in each of the sociological collective creations around one or more real objects from the community represented in the show and also the objects
that somehow authenticated the representation serving the Theatre Passe Muraille as a kind of temporarily transcendental signifier. Sociological shows were usually first presented to the community where they originated, although members of the community could instantly identify themselves with the characters and situations on the stage a testimony to the artists’ serious desire to understand the workings of the community and to give a sympathetic picture of it. While the artists are on their own to research and develop the parts they will play in this type of show, the director sets himself as a necessary outside viewer which helps to shape the final product, and also arbitrated in case of disagreement among the artists.

Theatre Passe Muraille’s subsequent sociological collectives on Ontario, beginning with *The Farm Show* in 1972, eschewed the geographical remoteness of *Doukhobors* from its subject community and, in the first performances at least (*The Farm Show* in Ray Bird’s barn near Clinton, *Under the Greywacke* in Cobalt [1973], and *Oil* in Petrolia [1974]), used as authenticating objects the place of performance and the subject community as audience. Like so many subsequent sociological collectives by the Mulgrave Road Co-op, twenty fifth Street House, these performances had little need for documentary authentication beyond the validating approval of the audiences who were their sources and subjects. However, it is significant, that with little other claim to authenticity, and unlike *The Farm Show, Under the Greywacke* and *Oil* did not tour.

Although the collective creation movement forms a part of the general antinaturalistic trend of the modern era, the type of sociological show developed by Passe Muraille really represents the ultimate in naturalism an imitation of life in the most literal sense. Thompson maintains that his productions go beyond imitation to capture the real spirit, and the essence of the community portrayed. His technique amounts to
the kind of photographic reproduction of reality for which modernists condemned the naturalists. The success of his show provides testimony to the enduring appeal of the realistic/naturalistic mode, which has here undergone a change of style and emphasis from an authored play to a collective creation, from a psychological theme to a sociological concern. Thompson’s naturalism does not belong to the school of Ibsen; it’s a post Brechtian version of that mode, with a strong local and contemporary flavor.

Creative Treatment of Reality

The origin of the play The Farm Show was so startling because, except the idea of doing a play about the kind of Ontario farming community, there was neither any source material nor any preconception about the play’s direction. The actors only had to find the material from the Clinton community and develop the play script as the ideas emerged. So, The Farm Show has been evolved from an artistic rather than a literal truth, mixing real characters and stories with imagined ones. Thompson shared his ideas with Ted Johns, then a fellow instructor who gave a concrete proposal, and they both together made arrangements to take a company of actors to Clinton, where Ted Johns had a relative, who in turn had an empty farmhouse, which Thompson might be able to use. This personal connection and a cast of remarkably inventive and intelligent actors are the two underlying factors that constitute the play’s success.

The play was published in 1976 in a version prepared by Ted Johns, a member of the company and an occasional dramatist in his own right. The text prefaced by two notes, one by Paul Thompson the other by Ted Johns. Both the prefaces provide an excellent explanation of Passe Muraille’s philosophy and methods. The idea was
to take a group of actors out to a farming community and build a play of what we could see and learn.

The introduction establishes the play’s relation to fact, that it is about real people in a real community and uses their words. In performance the play itself repeatedly asserts its own veracity. The unique power of *The Farm Show* is that it is not only about a farming community, but also about strangers being brought together in a life-long-way, the farmers, the actors and the farmers with the actors. It is a play about the experiences the actors passed through in the process of researching the material. The performance documents the actors’ growing consciousness as they make sense of the lives of the farmers. In that sense, the actors are a community, looking at a community:

With songs, poems, skits, interpretive exercises, and monologues, the three actors and three actresses from Toronto bewitched their audience… As a matter of fact, those in the audience who were from the area recognized most of their neighbours in the scenes. Howls of laughter and roans of embarrassment burst continually from the straw bleachers. And somehow the actors managed, while laying open the characters of the community for all to see, not to offend anybody (they hope) and not to bear false witness to the personalities of any of their new found friends. (Wallace 121)

The structure of *The Farm Show* is episodic or anecdotal. Paul Thompson describes the form of the play as “more like a Canadian Sunday school or Christmas concert where one person does a recitation, another sings a song, a third acts out a skit, etc. Sometimes he describes it, as in the opening monologue that, “the show kind of bounces along one way or another and then it stops” (The Farm Show 19). In fact he
could be talking about the structures of many or most collective creations, which are often described by reviews as free-form or revue-style entertainments. The play has two acts each with ten scenes.

Since the play is the living portrait of a farming community, all the scenes in it present a cross section of life on the far, from the description of ordinary daily life to serious social problems. In between poeticized views of rural life as well as scenes designed to exhaust the romantic and native myths, which city dwellers hold about life in the country are also there. In the first scence, the audience is told the basic facts about the six week visit to Clinton area.

The first scene of the play moreover indicates precisely what will be the specific quality of that relation to actuality. Attention of the audience is drawn to the stage, which is laid out as a map of the district, complete with indications of where many of the people imitated or mentioned in the play live. This stage has multiple identities: as a non-representational playing space it is capable of being transformed into barns, fields, homes, the town square of Goderich, and so on. Yet through all these transformations it maintains its relation to fact, as a map. When the play opens, “one of the more easy going members of the cast”, (19) serves as the object of the documentary and outlines for the audience the nature of the collaboration that produced the show:

Last summer we visited a farming community near Clinton, Ontario. Clinton is about a hundred and twenty miles due west of Toronto. You go down to kitchers and then take the number eight highway to Stratford, Mitchell, Seaforth, Clinton which would be right about here (just off the front of stage left) if it were on this map…Now beside the number eight highway is the
community we live in. This map (marked on naked stage) shows the roads and the names of the different farmers in the area. (19)

The actor immediately after his description of the nature of the collaboration continues with the following list of authentic pieces of farm equipment, authenticating properties that stand in for the reality. Many objects are used as props in the play and as such they undergo many a transformation for example, in the ‘Winter Scene’ the crates covered with a white cloth become a winter landscape, the shopping cart becomes a car, a mail box becomes a snow mobile. But through all these transformations, they remain what they really are, things from Clinton. They provide witty authenticity and links to actuality. They allow the scenes to mean and invest actuality with a socially transformative potential at the level of deep structure. The stage and props indicate the play’s paradoxical relation to actuality: its conventions are far removed from representational realism, while the audience is continually reminded of the actuality behind the mask of performance. Thus each actor performs a number of people of the community past and present, and as trees, animals, machines and landscapes as well, yet all the while is present to the audience as a specific person who has gone to Clinton and helped to create the play.

Following the presentational introduction and the ensemble ‘Auction Song’, comes as the second scene of the first act, ‘Miles meets Mr. Merrill’, which is a tongue-in-cheek dig at city folk. It is short comic encounter between Miles Potter, a member of the company, and Jack Merrill, a farmer. As Merrill, played by David Fox, moves bales of hay, Miles Potter introduces himself as a member of the company, and offers to help with chores.

Miles Potter’s big city enthusiasm leaves the farmer gaping; he cannot see why Miles would want to make a coffee table out of the old boards of his barn, nor
why he expects “organic vegetables from your garden and all, far out!” (24). This scene has some distinctive features with it, firstly, it entrenches the assertive light-hearted mood of the play; secondly, the dialogue between these two men proves that everything in the play has been imbibed through first hand experience, and it demonstrates the process of that experience. Thirdly, this is the first mimetic scene and first of many such impersonations of the show. It serves as the touchstone of the play’s humorous tone and sympathetic nature. The contrast between the two actors reminds us of the distance the actors have travelled in the course of making the play.

The company has respected the built-in-limitations of their material in developing the play. People have told them and showed them what they were willing to tell them and show them. The play reveals its subjects in the same way, as the local people were willing to present themselves to strangers. This convention is established in the play, in the scene titled ‘Round the Bend’, scene three of Act one, a series of images of the people at work in their work-spots, who lived around the bend of the road. The seventeen characters performed in this scene are presented as if they are introducing themselves to the actors. The most explicit of these short monologues being Betty Fagan’s: “Oh hi! Come on in! No, we’re not busy. We saw the light on over there. We know you were there but we didn’t go over. You know we didn’t know what to expect. You must be Janet. Look who’s here, Ross!” (26).

The guarded friendliness of this speech is a marked characteristic of all the monologues in the play. They recreate the setting through mime and sound. There is also room for improvisation and audience participation. For example, the actor portraying a young boy named as Stephen Lobb throws the ball he is playing with into the audience; depending on the situation or mood of the evening, interaction between performers and the audience may or may not occur. The multiple voices in this scene
suggest the company’s first tentative glimpses of the farm people’s own perspectives: the way they live, what they think of farming, and their cautious show of friendliness to the visitors.

The play’s modesty and reticence is a source of its variety, and of its strength. However, it does not exceed the limits imposed by the brevity of the encounter presented. One can notice this particularly in the absence of irony. That is, the knowledge the performer has of the character and shares with the audience is commensurate with the self-awareness of the character. The actor who is ‘demonstrating’ a character has already been perceived as ‘demonstrating’ himself or herself to an audience. The genuine impression that the show conveys is largely due to this congruence between the process of gathering the material from reticent people over a brief period of time and the resultant end product emerging.

In this scene, the original audience sees themselves reflected through the actors, and the later audiences see the original audience as the actors are meeting them. When this scene was enacted, the actors were accompanied by the other actors performing the activities and objects in their scenes. Having directed at what they can do, the performers begin the next episode, ‘Winter Scene’ scene four Act one, which is the most lyrical and poetic scene of the play. Being structured into three parts, with poetry and a mime section at the beginning and at the end framing the central position, this scene recounts the experience of a day of snowstorm in the country, throughout the whole day. Three actors appear in this scene, which opens with two lines of the ‘Winter Poem’ presented by one actor, “The middle of winter. Inside, everything is cosy, and warm, and small” (33).
The winter setting is arranged by covering two all-purpose crates with a large white sheet. The remaining two actors perform various male and female roles that represent family life on the farm. Taking on a dozen parts of men, women, children at work and play, they perform all the multiple activities of a blustery day: inside the house at breakfast, at the chores in the barn, in town in various errands. During a square dance at night, which is accompanied by the voice of the winter, that is, window, frost, icicles, and snow are depicted by miming. The voices of the actors and movements of the objects intersect and flow in parallel directions because of the impressionistic and rhythmically times scenes. The crates function variously as a house and as a barn. A Clinton shopping cart serves as the housewife’s car in taking her son to the hockey arena, which is indicated by a bean dryer. An old mailbox represents the farmer’s snow mobile. The combination of all these objects with the usual chatter of everyday, give witty authenticity to the make-believe of the presentation. Finally, the scene ends with the rousing finale of a square dance party before returning to the lyrical tone of the beginning, with the two characters miming moon and snow. In terms of skill, versatility, and the timing of the voice, it is proved that this scene has demanded much from the actors.

Like scene two, scene five of act one ‘The Bale Scene’ also deals with the same theme the strangeness to the work of the farm. This scene is in the form of a long monologue by Miles Potter. In this monologue, Miles, while recreating his experience in helping Mervyn Lobb store hay in his barn, mimes the work of lifting, loading, carrying etc and mimics the sound of the bale elevator. The description of the past experience is presented in the theatrical present. From the description, it appears that haying is somewhat less invigorating activity than city folk tend to believe. The strain of lifting the heavy bales, the stifling heart of the barn, and the sore muscles and
the skin torn by the rough material are all described in the monologue. Miles’
grueling efforts to help farmhands stack hay in the barn quickly rob him of any
illusions of pastoral joys. At the end he collapses in exhaustion and the scene
ends with a passionate outburst to the audience: “Now I ask you…why!? Why
would any human being choose, for the better part of his life, twice a year, to put
himself through that total and utter hell? I didn’t understand it then… and I don’t
understand it now” (43).

Thompson carefully presents the text with interspersing themes and styles.
Gradually these slip more fully and with increasing theatrical bravura into the farm
people’s perspectives. Even the confident presentational style of ‘Winter Scene’ is
carefully juxtaposed with Miles’ comic self-deprecation in ‘Bale Scene’. Only at this
midpoint of the act, the play risks its first prolonged monologue by a Clinton
character with the ‘Les Jervis’.

In scene six act one, Les, performed by David Fox, whose peripheral stories
being as lively as his central narrative takes centre stage, while the other two actors
represent the features of the setting and the creature that live in the speaker’s bird-
and-animal sanctuary. The sound made by the animals, birds and trees are mimicked
by the actors and sometimes they became a duck or peacock at the beginning of the

scene. In his sustained monologue, Les Jervis, with the footage of Jervis himself
commented that ‘Fox mimed me pretty good’.

In the next scene ‘Orange Day Parade’ the ensemble gives a contemporary
perspective on the fading institution of Orangeism. It begins with actors on stage
representing people gathered for the parade. The parade itself is a solemn walk around the stage representing the Goderich town. The actors recreate the event as a joyful celebration, out of their experience of the Orange Day Parade, they witnessed in Goderich. The scene is a collage of public addresses and monologues, framed by the actors’ mime of a marching band. Both as paraders and spectators, the actors share a common awareness with the audience that the ritual celebration by the Protestants of King William’s famous crossing of the Boyne is mostly a thing of the past.

The structure of The Farm Show is generated by two encounters of radically different elements: the encounter of farmers and actors, which is the content of the plays, and the encounter of documentary and theatrical conventions, which is its form. If one tries to examine how this structure communicates itself, the ‘Charlie Wilson’ scene, will serve the purpose, because in this scene the shared work and shared creativity achieves its most powerful expression. The scene begins by recalling the real process by which it came into being as well as by reasserting its factual basis:

Last summer we asked one of the farmers if he knew anyone in the area who was considered eccentric. Someone who was a bit strange and outside of the community. He said the only man he could think of was a man named Charlie Wilson…. Well, we went around and asked people what they remembered about Charlie. (57)

The props used in this scene are objects that belonged to the hermit some of his tools, his letters and his hat. These links associated with a normal sense coexist with the scenes’ theatrical sense. The small cast transforms itself into a living collage of the farming people whose recollections they gathered; one performer, David Fox,
transforms himself on stage into Charlie Wilson with no more costume change than putting on the old man’s hat.

The scene is framed by two emphatic declarations to the same effect, “Well, I can tell you one thing about Charlie Wilson – he’s dead” (57). The second emphatic declaration is, “He was odd and kept apart, but he’s in heaven!” (61). Yet the effect of the scene movingly contradicts these testimonials to the absence of Charlie Wilson, the dead man is made present. If one reflects on the reanimation of Charlie Wilson that one witnesses in this scene, one becomes aware of the fact that the people of the Clinton area and the company of actors are its co-creators. The intensely moving presence of Charlie Wilson is partly the work of the people who keep him alive in their memories, whose power to evoke the past covers an enormous range, from the banality of “Oh, Charlie was a Corker, he’d get off some good ones” (59) to the spare poetry of this recollection:

I can tell you exactly what Charlie looked like. He had along lean face that looked like it was hewn out of the white elm. He was very pale and he had a square jaw and his chin stuck out just a little. He was always clean-shaven, but occasionally you could see his beard, and it would be white. (59)

The work of the farm people meets that of the actors. The recollections are performed by people whose talents for mimicry were put to a severe test, because of the presence of their models in the original audience. David Fox’s performance as Charlie Wilson is a greater creative act and took a corresponding greater risk, in that the man who took shape in his imagination had been a familiar figure to many people in the audience over a whole lifetime.
Finally and most significantly the scene testifies to the creative work of the company in that it is responsible for the selection and arrangement of the material. That selection and arrangement produces a total effect that is much greater than the sum of its parts. A number of people recall a hermit; he is presented in performance; these several strands are interwoven to create, paradoxically, out of CharlieWilson’s loneliness, a powerful image of community, at the levels of both social structure and community. His loneliness can be seen as a social role. He is by no means a non-member of the community; his outsiderhood defines his relationship to it. By the time we have heard a number of people define that relationship, in terms of regular visits to people’s houses, of his role as handy-man, of his status as a self-educated man, we have as an after-image, a powerful impression of the community itself. Significantly, the scene ends with an image of a social relationship, “Wishing you the compliments of the season and again thanking you for your kindness, I remain, your friend, Charlie Wilson” (61).

The last two scenes of Act one, ‘Man on a Tractor’ and ‘Washing Woman’ portray the farm people at work. In the ‘Man on a Tractor’, three actors standing in a row form a tractor with appropriate sounds and the other actor, a farmer, mounted on the middle actor’s shoulders steers it, and demonstrates his point with appropriate gestures. When the farmer said that, “you goota be awake, you gotta be alert, you gotta be watching” and “there’s always a bit of danger involved. I don’t know anybody on this line hasn’t turned his tractor…” (62), the audience, who had an idea about farming as a cheerful work, became aware of the complexities and dangers in driving the tractor. The tractor sound mimicked by the actors and their movements match with the words that come in full force from the farmer resulting in an illustrative performance.
The ‘Washing Woman’ scene also gives an account of the hurdles of a farm life. The scene outlines a typical day in the hectic life of Marion, a harassed farm wife, until the constant interruptions by her family build to such intensity that she turns into a chicken. The woman’s speech is in the form of a monologue, which is interspersed by a song and dance routine that lightens the naturalism of the scene. As the talk speeds up, so does her gyrating motion, the washer woman has become the washing machine, until she disintegrates dramatically into a squawking chicken. Like Miles, the woman has lost herself in the exhaustion of her labours. The washing machine is mimed by one of the actors, like other stage props. Finally, the scene turns into a square dance to a ballad about a farmer’s wife who sells her husband at an auction. The final portion of the speech and the last verse of the song maintain a fine balance in mood. Within the framework of the ballad are two brief monologues and a vignette comment on sex and marriage. The woman says, “My husband is out working in the fields for ten, twelve may be sixteen hours a day. And of course it keeps him in good condition. But he’s tired when he gets home. Now it’s not as if I don’t have a lot to do around the house, with the kids and the house and all, but well I miss him” (70).

The scene comes to an end with a song, which gives a humorous tone to it, and particularly the last verse of the song counterpoints the understand pathos of the woman’s speech, “Well, she had her cake and she had her man, and she had ten kids and a frying pan. And now old Maisy she is 84. But she ain’t looking’ for a man no more” (71).

During the course of creating the play, Thompson gives certain exercises to the actors, which provide them the basic tools to transform their perceptions and experiences into theatrical gestures, and at the same time they are the building blocks
of the play itself. The five principal exercises are namely, ‘portraits’ of local characters, ‘landscapes’, ‘mythologising’, ‘show and tell’, and ‘transformations’ that is turning objects into something else. In each of these exercises, the actors are asked to present their discoveries in terms of concrete imagery and gesture and only those experiences that seemed to be transformed into effective theatre make their way into the play. From the ‘portraits’ exercises, come the character studies that are the heart of *The Farm Show*.

The farming people are not only presented in a style that is exuberantly inventive, but also presented as equally creative in their own right. If one considers the fact that the basic gesture in the play is self-presentation, in that much of it consisting of monologues delivered to visiting strangers. These monologues have already been subjected to processes of choice and selection and arrangement before the company set to work on them. They are the words of people who have a strong histrionic sense, who enjoy presenting themselves, and who take pleasure in shaping what they have to say. Performance is a creative activity, which both groups share; the farming people are simply the subject matter of the play, they are the co-creators as well along with the actors.

Dramatic performance as such is referred to frequently in the material. Characters talk about skits, parades, wedding receptions, and a base ball game in which one team wears braids and grass skirts. Worth particular notice is in the ‘Jean Lobb’ scene with which the second act opens. The scene begins with Jean Lobb’s description of the various weddings in her family, “six girls, in two years, in one little community well” (72). Her speech in the form of monologue captures the flow of images as memories and associations follow each other in her mind. Her detailed
description includes wedding of different colors, flowers and novelties of the wedding services and all the fun that people had at these wedding parties.

The skit was evidently carried out with the high spirits that have become the signature of the Theatre Passe Muraille itself. Indeed it works with conventions like those of the Theatre Passe Muraille, presentational performance, transformation and theatrical metaphors. Some stanzas introduce particular speakers from that family and others remind the audience of the generational continuity of farm community. The scene concludes on a happy tone, with the first verse of the Lobb song.

Many other examples such as Les Jervis’ beautifully landscaped game sanctuary with its birds and animals and symbolic water wheel, Clark Johnson’s “laughing song” (54), and the symbols and decorations in the Orange Day Parade. Thus the play makes us aware of the continuum between art and what the farming people do in their daily lives, landscaping, organizing parades, weddings, skits, folk art displays, putting together family albums, writing poems, performing etc. In holding a mirror up to the community, the actors address people whom they present not only as working people but as artists also.

The presentational performance style is the appropriate vehicle for capturing the actuality of the luminal encounter between the company and the farming community. By its very nature, it permits an actualization through performance of two manifestations of communities in the context of the affinity between the documentary thrust of the play and its theatricality. They are the sharing of work and the sharing of art.

The physical dangers of farming—the ever present farm accident is the basic idea of the succeeding scenes that come after the ‘Jean Lobb’ scene. Marriage and
birth are followed by injury and death. In all the three scenes, tractor is the central image. In the second scene of the second act, the character Daisie’s monologue presents a whole string of farm accidents, from a child falling into a well to a man killed while cutting trees and of course the common mishaps, “…because there’s been a good many people around here that’s been killed on them. Especially going around these hills, they’ll just flip over… they’re not safe, they’re not!” (75).

Her recounting of these stories put forward a feminine perspective on the ‘Man on a Tractor’ scene nine Act one and also functions as a prelude to a somber narrative, ‘Accident’ scene eight Act two enacted by men as well as by actors as machine. Unlike scene two, scene three concentrates more particularly on one accident in which a man first describes a devastating baler accident. His description of the baler machine “with its rows of rotating steel rakes and heavy cutting knives and a huge plunger arm” (76) itself creates a fearsome feeling. When he describes the accident met with by a man named Uncle Carman in 1959, two actors serve as a baler with suitable sounds and the third actor plays the role of Uncle Carman loading bales. The description and the movement go side by side. The man says that “… when he noticed some straw caught in the sprocket of the plunger arm he started to reach for it, just when the tractor started to stall. He shouted at me to speed up the tractor. I brought up the throttle! And the plunger arm came down heavily on the right side of his face, caught his eye, nose, cheek…” (76).

The enactment of the accident is followed by a brief epilogue from the victim’s wife. She laments over her husband’s head injury, the fate of her children and the work on the farm. In spite of the pathos and tragedy present in this scene, it ends on a tone of hope and gratitude, as the woman tearfully remembers the way her neighbours rallied round to assist her in her pathetic situation. Paradoxically not only
people but also their tractors came to her rescue. “The day after the accident, you could see about twelve actors out in that field, and they had the whole thing done in a day” (77). From this scene we can sense the care and concern that the community shows for its members, which the Theatre Passe Muraille wants to glorify.

The next episode ‘Tractor Tug’ in scene four act two is based on an event rooted in the old country-fair tradition of oxen or plough-horse competition. Here in spite of the oxen or plough-horse, two different model tractors of super power and efficiency take place and they are represented by two actors. When the scene opens, one actor as ‘Announcer’ using the reversed hammer for microphone welcomes the audience to the 1973 International Plowing Match with the special event, the gargantuan war of the tractors. After that he speaks with the two contestants and from their dialogue, the audience could understand the various qualities and advantages of the two tractors, and now, the announcer asks the farm implement buying public to decide who’s going home with the coveted Acre-Eater Award by giving their applause. When he asked about the long-time champ, the Agriking, there was applause and again when he called the good-hearted challenger from south-western Ontario, the Farmall, again there was applause. Finally, the announcer presents the name of the person who takes the award home.

The ‘Jesus Bus’ in scene five act two begins with the Lobb song as its introduction. When it opens, the character Diane Lobb shows the double-decker bus to the audience, on the top of it is written that, ‘JESUS EQUALS PEACE’[Sic]. Throughout the whole scene, Diane Lobb describes the journey she and her husband along with another couple Bob and Carol Stevenson took to Halifax to bring back the bus to Clinton, and also says how they felt the presence of God throughout their
journey. On their return to Clinton, the bus broke down en route four times and each time, when they felt helpless, God’s hand helped them miraculously in an unexpected way. As she describes the four breakdowns one by one, one actor graphically performs the troubled bus and two other actors help him.

‘Jesus Bus’ scene functions as a reference to the religious aspect of the play. The journey of the bus and the breakdowns encountered on the way to Clinton can be compared to a sinner and the trials and tribulations he faces in his pilgrimage towards salvation. The scene comes to an end as a prayer meeting with a final hymn and prayer, having the audience as congregation. Immediately the third verse of the Lobb song takes place. While this scene pictures the religious faith of one day, the next scene ‘Alison Lobb’ portrays a character known as Alison Lobb, sister-in-law to Diane Lobb, who vividly recounts the various community events that she has taken part. Her more conventional involvement was in Sunday school, even though she says that, “I’m not religious. You might even say that I border on the agonistic” (89). While describing her local activities, she mimes some of the kitchen work. The scene comes to an end with the fourth verse of the Lobb song.

If one turns from a consideration of how the play was presented to what was presented, one can find that it is the encounter of two communities that takes shape in the imagination, for in selecting and arranging the material, Paul Thompson seems to have emphasized two kinds of activities which the company shared at a profound level with their subjects. The two activities are the art of work and the work of art. *The Farm Show* has a great deal of material about the work of farming. The characters are presented at work; and they talk a good deal about what they do. The play is also equally about the work of acting, which is not so obvious. We are aware of the cast not only as a group but as a group at work. We are made aware of the
work that preceded the production; the presentational performance style ensures that we are conscious of the actors at work, particularly since some of the scenes are physically very taxing; and to the extent possible the non-performance aspects of putting on the show, for audience. The presentational style also ensures that the actors as skilled workers are doing a job well. Certain scenes are quite obviously bravura passages which demand admiration for technical virtuosity.

Alison Lobb’s monologue leads rather arbitrarily into the ‘Township Council’ scene seven of act two, in which two actors play the role of five councilors by shifting roles as they shift from seat to seat. No character is consistently played by one actor. In the course of the scene each of the actors plays each of the five men once or several times. Robin’s reading, for example, may be continued by one actor moving out and the other moving into his place.

The scene makes us conscious, by a direct appeal to the histrionic sensibility, that the objective underlying the desperate activities of performing and farming is the same to provide something of use and value and to take pride in doing so. The play also points to a unity transcending the separate social identities of the actor and the farmer. The other objective, which the two groups share, is to create art and take pleasure in doing so. The creative work of the actors is immediately experienced in a number of ways. They have made the show they are performing. Their performance style calls attention to their inventiveness; there is the matter of transformation from character to character, from animal to machine and to landscape; there are the passages of pure invention, like the battle of the tractors, there are the songs composed by the cast, there are the brilliant stage metaphors. For example, in the ‘Picture Frame’ scene eight of act two, the disappearance of the family farm is movingly presented as the disappearance of one child after another out of a family
portrait until, with only the parents left, it is auctioned off. There is the exuberant playfulness of the performance. Five actors stand in a row while a large wooden frame is lowered in front of them. As two of the actors, representing a husband and wife, describe the history of their farm, their children in turn step out of the frame and tell the audience why they chose to leave it. This scene contrasts the Lobb stability and ends when an auctioneer ‘sells off’ the picture. The scene is a theatrical metaphor of changing attitudes towards farming. It sentimentally suggests that all that have gone before represent a vanishing way of life. The scene comes to an end with the last verse of the Lobb song.

The next scene ‘Bruce Pallett’ scene nine of act two comes as an explanatory note for the children’s leaving out the farm. In this scene, the character Brue Pallett, gives a more explicit detail of the issues of the ‘Picture Frame’ scene and he points out the reasons for the children’s behavior. He confronts the audience with the realities of modern farming. That is, he speaks with high energy, how the farmers get a low price for the food they cultivate which results in a great loss of profit, and how the land that provided food for almost the whole nation, is sold at a low cost.

In a thought provoking speech, Bruec Pallett points out with much passion the various other economic plights faced by the farmers. It seems to raise the awareness of the urban audience the “bellyachers” who think that farming “should be a public utility, and that everybody should supply food for free” (100). The scene comes to an end with an angry outburst, which shows his commitment to farming and also stands for the company’s reaction to farmers in adversity. “In 1971 we sold $73,000 worth of stuff off this farm. But it took $73,0006.40 to do it. And that’s allowing $6000 for management – that’s to keep three families for one year … each of my kids got three thousand bucks a piece. I didn’t get a red cent. Y’know, I just want my kids to
make a living at it, I got grand children. I want to make a living at it. So what else can I do? Y’know, how else do you build a nation?’” (102).

The play comes to an end with ‘John Deere’, scene ten of act two, a rousing song that celebrates the heroic deed of a kind and gentleman, John Deere, who save two stranded boys and a little girl’s pet kitten from a flash flood. The narrator with the help of other actors recites and performs the Ballad of John Deere who had farm land in the Maitland, Clinton, and who used to work in the field from morning till late night and who had farmed the land employing all his resources. The hardships of farm life made him think how to farm the land without wasting time and energy. And finally he invents the tractor. When the other farm people saw this “infernal machine”, “they were laughin’ and screamin’ and holdin’ their sides” (104). But one day, when a poor widow shouted that both of her sons were caught in the flash flood, all the farmers hurried to the riverside and tried to save the boys but the flood surrounded them. So, they went back to bring the horses to get the boys freed but the horsed did not move for they were afraid of lightning and thunder. Finally John Deere came out from his barn riding the tractor and went to the rescue of the boys and saved them. But, again, when he went to save the girl’s pet kitten, the “White water upstream” (105) unfortunately carried him away to a watery grave, but not before he has strapped the kitten to his redoubtable machine. The people remember the brave deed of John Deere, and in memory of this heroic deed, the tractor was branded with his name John Deere.

*The Farm Show* in its original performance was considerably more than an entertainment; it indeed effects a transformation in the relationship between the company of actors, who had created the show, and the farming community, which was the subject of the show, and its first audience. Moreover, this transformation is
embodied in the substance and structure of the play script and can be recreated and relived in subsequent performances. Reading or hearing about the original performance, one realizes that something very significant was happening. The farmers did not know what they would see and the actors were quite uncertain about the reaction their mimicry would get. The performance itself evidently produced an exchange of energy intense enough to leave all concerned to talk of it only in superlatives. The performers mirror their audiences directly, emphasizing their identity as performers through their theatrical mode of performance.

The style of *The Farm Show* may be that of a photographic reproduction, but the arrangement of these reproductions has been carefully calculated to achieve the desired effect on the audience. The subtle emotional manipulation of the public through the inner structure of the play is one of the reasons for its success. The entertainment value of *The Farm Show* and its subsequent success even in places remote from Clinton has probably obstructed a clear view of the play’s assets and liabilities. Certainly, its form is more an assemblage than a work of the imagination. Yet, in the hands of the original cast the play radiated an affectionate humour, an appealing vitality and a palpable honesty. It was genuinely new, fresh and likeable. Overnight, imitators of this collective creation sprouted up all over the map and, for a while, playwriting seemed threatened with redundancy. Urban audiences, in particular, who were only now catching up to the back-to-the-earth movement of some years before, could feel that the decline of the family farm was their loss too. The facts of this loss were made much less bitter by the actors’ obvious affection for their farming friends, who became somewhat like curious in what might have otherwise been an agit-prop event.
The present play is emblematic in so many ways of the important alternatives that the Theatre Passe Muraille was to choose under the leadership of Paul Thompson. The demand that the show created meant that it could be toured. Moreover, its actor-centred non scenic presentation allowed it to be and formal theatre buildings. To the people of theatrically isolated communities the play was indigenous, popular theatre of a kind that had vanished with the advent of the movie house. The play judged in terms of its success as an in-depth study of a farming community, is certainly superficial. If one attends to the play itself one can discover that the fibre it captures is primarily the process by which it came into being – that is, the company’s six week encounter with the farming community, the interviews, the preparation, and the first performance, in and for the community.

The present play taken for the study shows the merits as a living portrait of a farming community and it succeeds brilliantly at portraying the special experience of community that developed during the six-week encounter and reached its climax in the first performance. ‘Special experience’ here means the experience of the community in which diverse groups, whose social roles normally keep them separate, experience a unity transcending social roles in a special moment on the boundaries of normal social life. It is in capturing something of the special quality of this luminal situation that this play effects a fusion of the documentary and the ritual.

Thus, when judged as a theatrical statement in performance, *The Farm Show* is a complex work of art that succeeds because the actors were able to document the community from within. The plan stands as a subjective report of a personal encounter with farmers, in spite of its deceptive surface simplicity and of a highly complex production. It is clearly the most successful in its genre produced by Passe
Muraille. The play taken for study stands as the best example in the category of sociological plays produced collectively.