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An Open Letter To Whomever It May Concern

from

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The attacks on the artistic integrity of our gay/lesbian and queerly avant-garde theatre company, *Buddies in Bad Times*, have been both callous and dishonest. They have incited hateful phone calls and death threats and have, not surprisingly, caused extreme despair to the artists, technicians, volunteers, families and friends who either work at *Buddies* or are in some way associated with the theatre. It is now imperative that our politicians and our press (whatever their æsthetic and— not unrelated— sexual tastes might be) take note: an attack based on hatred may do many things; it may secure votes; it may secure a readership; it may even garner a few contributions. But it will definitely do one thing: it will promote a fear so bitter as to poison the very life-blood of our city, no matter what one may think of gay people, be they female or male or anything in-between, including tax-payers.

The simple truth must be said. And this truth must be repeated as many times as is necessary to get the message across: We are all in this together, in this great city or ours— and we sink or swim, according to whether a politics of hate versus that of respect is allowed to prevail and multiply.

But when times are as grim as these— when times are soaked in the epidemic deaths and dying of our friends and lovers; when times are covered in the shrapnel of racist bigotries and riot squad mentalities; when time itself becomes the only marker for hope as one waits out a recession unemployed and forlorn— well, it's during these moments that we here at *Buddies* almost despair at ever being able to explain clearly and succinctly the why's and wherefore's of our so-called decadent productions, and the connection between (or rather, the strange intersection amongst) all the crazy or angry or camp forms of play, sexual vitality, and this thing called art, not to mention the very ethics of everyday life.

At the risk of sounding almost shrill, and certainly a bit tired, may we here at *Buddies* try once again to explain, in greater detail, and as best as we are able, this queer kind of magic, a celebratory magic (even if it appears on the surface to be otherwise) so life-affirming and sustaining to any arts-oriented person, irrespective of age or skin colour or genital designation or economic (de)privation, that it almost seems a bit mad that one could

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actually miss the connections or rework them into some utterly misleading and dishonest caricature of our work, professional or otherwise. Nevertheless...

Nevertheless, let us begin. There are thousands of points we could discuss around joy and pleasure, aesthetics and intellectual creativity— hey, hard, sweaty sex, lust and the great opera conundrums of this and other centuries— but given the context here, there really are only three, and they come down to these: (i) questions of censorship, and, without overstating the case, that potent and very real freedom called “freedom of expression; (ii) questions of sex and its relation to art (and all this implies, particularly in terms of the very things that piqued the not-so-benign nerve endings of certain politicians and press; namely female ejaculation and sado-masochistic sex); and finally (iii) arms-length funding for non-profit arts organizations (and indeed, the very meaning of this odd entity called ‘non-profit’ theatre, not to mention the term ‘arms-length’).

First Point: If poetry, in whatever form taken: plays, photos, long narratives or utterly broken-up ones, is to be both meaningful and sublime; if, that is to say, it is to evoke or invent or supplement a kind of elegant rawness that gives grist and shape to our otherwise banal and shapeless existence, it can only do so when a kind of indeterminate ‘something’— and not rules or dogma— becomes the container of, or the limit to, our truths. But to say this is to immediately say as well, that this ‘limit’ or ‘contour’ to our individual perceptions and community standards, is one that is both permeable and absorbing, both flexible and penetrable. Why? Precisely so that there is room for a kind of elasticity or ‘play’; indeed, precisely so that one of the most fundamental rights of a democratic world is never far from sight: i.e. the right to ‘change’ to become ‘better’ however that change or betterment can be envisioned, or imagined. Here at *Buddies* we have a name for that strange kind of limit to the imagination— that odd kind of limit, which in reality becomes both the ground and the horizon of our basic right to transform and create. We call it, at it’s most simple and tiny point: art. An art, whose indeterminate ‘something’, is very queer, indeed.

Now, for this basic right around change and imagination to remain a living right, one must stand firm on the side of freedom, and in particular, freedom of expression. This means, amongst many, many other things, that the content of any expression must be judged in relation to, and indeed upon, the very terrain of multiple possibilities and creativities, in all their positive and negative ways; i.e. in all their infinite suppleness, uncertainty and decay. Some people call this radical pluralism. But it could probably and just as easily be called good common sense.

Does this mean to imply (or say), then, that ‘anything goes’? Does this mean that nothing can ever be certain? or ethical? Or, for that matter, that anything and everything

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appearing to be 'decadent' (and in particular, sexual) is, ipso facto, art and therefore, good'? Have we fallen to our knees only to worship the godless God of relative nihilism?

No. No, it does not mean this at all. For as we all know, starting with the surrealists (or better yet, Einstein—or even with Goethe so many centuries before) meaning and truth no more fall from out of the sky than does language erupt from only one mouth. It is a social phenomena, utterly confined to the multiple surfaces of history; and therewith, utterly connected to the people who make that history, in all our imperfect permutations, whatever those permutations may become, given the context of history itself. To say, then, that art is thus 'relative' and 'radically pluralistic'; to say that art can only ever be 'art' when there is freedom of expression (which may force one to swim with or against the tide, or do both at the same time); to say that 'art' always entails (though is not limited to) a decadent kind of play with and against sex or death, is simply to re-acknowledge the importance, the profound importance of change and mobility as a basic right. **But more than that, it is to remind us of yet another simple truth:** for while it is the case that imagination fuels the democratic right to change and while it is also true that change, interestingly enough, bears as its fruit this odd creature called imagination— guess what?: this strange thing, this odd creature, this fiction, is no more or less relative, no more or less rootless, no more or less terrifying for heaven's sakes, than is the statement $e=mc^2$ or, for that matter, the east-west-north-south directional points on a round globe.

So, just because we may play with the variables and change them according to— to whatever— and just because the variables are themselves relative to each other, this does not mean for one single minute that we are lost, though we very well may be wandering. And if we are not entirely lost, then we have a sense of direction and if we have a sense of direction, then we have a sense of 'where we ought to go', then we sure as hell have a sense of ethics—moveable and permeable as they must, of necessity, be.

Alright then, here's the second point: let's say we agree, in principle, to maintaining the position that freedom of expression—in all its manifold implications—is what is at stake here and, more to the point, is not a privilege but a right, one that must be kept alive if we are to take seriously the responsibility (and joy) of living in a free society. Let's also say that things which are 'relative' do not necessarily mean 'rootless' or 'nihilistic' (at least in the 'anything goes' sense of the term), which means then to say as well that not everything decadent or for that matter, sexual, comes under this category called 'art'. The hard, knotty question must now be put: Could it not then be asserted that sado-masochistic sex and female ejaculation might be precisely those things which fall afoul of the first principle by way of the second? Indeed, is this not exactly what is at the heart of those attacks, which have instead been draped in some malevolent and dishonest caricaturing of

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our work, while at the same time offering almost tragi-comic 'solutions' to re-route funding from our theatre to 'city garbage pick-up'?

Yes, it could be so asserted, but it would be wrong to do so. Here's one reason why (though another one follows): As with language itself, it is not 'out of the air' or 'only from one mouth' that the practices of s&m or female ejaculation have come to the fore. At one register, what this means is that the very identity of who we are as gay people, is, at least for most of us, propelled and/or secured by the multiple aspects of being sexual in all its changing and charming (and perhaps, not so charming) arenas. To put this slightly differently, being lesbian for example (though one does not need to be lesbian to get this point); well, being lesbian is not simply a 'life-style' choice. It entails (as it turns out) a profound relation to one's own body, to one's own sexual body (not to mention, other sexual bodies), grasping in that relation the very potent, powerful, and heady forms of pleasure which in days of yore were delegated as the sole property of the male genitalia and therewith, of a so-called 'masculine' world.

The effect of this knowledge, this body knowledge was, and remains, extremely liberating, not the least for the women concerned, but also for the men, whatever their sexual orientation might be or become. For apart from rethinking what it actually means to be male or female or transsexual or gay or straight or bisexual or some other category of life yet to be invented, it reasserted into our vocabulary—the vocabulary of the above named beings—one word that, heretofore, seemed to have lost its currency: respect. A respect for the power of the body, or for change, or for limits, or for pleasure, or for death; indeed, for the very skin of life, be it sweaty or heartily scrubbed.

Now, that kind of reality, and the ethics thus implied, has a right to be represented. And, as we are, among other things, a queer theatre, it is imperative that we do so, representing, re-packaging, even re-inventing those images, in all their profane and impure imaginings, and expressed by and from the very people for whom they are a part.

But having said this, let's not beg the question: for something else, quite a bit different (though maintaining a family resemblance) is being insisted upon here, irrespective of the fact of our gay mandate and all this implies around sexual communities, representations and the like. We want to say, that sexuality (or rather, its pluralized form: sexualities) molds the very stuffings of art itself. Or perhaps better put, there is a strange, indefinable elision between art and sex, a kind of passionate embrace, mutation or mad dance, without which, we want to insist most of all, that art itself can only ever remain banal mediocrity. This is not just some 'interesting fact'; it is one that becomes, if not the most significant ingredient to producing great works of art, then at least one of the most significant ingredients and certainly one of the most pleasurable. Indeed, we want to say, too, that in the distance

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between sex and art, in their doubling back or intermingling, or shiftings of boundary lines and/or breaking them altogether—in that space emerges a celebratory tonic, where life no longer simply imitates art, but reproduces, instead, its magic.

So we'll put it like this at the end of the day: despite all the hardships, bad press and the like, we at *Buddies* are willing to go the distance for that magic; and we certainly will do it. After all, the stakes are too high; the consequence of failing on this score, much too grim.

Which brings us to the third and final point: our kind of theatre (a not-for-profit theatre space accommodating a series of not-for-profit theatre companies, including our own) requires, as do artists everywhere, the kind of funding that does not restrict the content of any production. We hope by now it is clear why this 'arms-length' funding is so crucial: for even if one could tell beforehand what the exact aesthetic (and the political and social positioning it might be promoting or expressing) were to be, it would destroy the vitality of the piece (or pieces) to such an extent as to leave us, and Toronto in general, with mere mimicry of art rather than art itself.

It is not for nothing that freedom of expression—and therewith the ability to carry out that expression with the most minimal of strictures, though the highest of standards—is part and parcel for any struggle to create not only the best art imaginable but the most conducive space in which it can survive. At *Buddies* we have found that remaining a non-profit theatre is paramount to that commitment. This is not because, as the cynics and dry-roasted politicians might have it, that we at *Buddies* and elsewhere soak up 'free money', hiding anxiously from market forces. Quite the contrary: grants are extremely competitive, even more so given the economic ruin and despair weaving its way through our country and the international markets with which we are attached. Why would we receive those grants, especially when we are not making a profit, despite highly successful shows winning theatre awards every year?

There is no secret. We promise one thing, and one thing only: in an atmosphere of hard work, and despite the long hours and unimaginable conditions, we promise to produce the best, most professional and creative talent anywhere.

And we deliver on that promise. Time and again.