Feminism as a Marketing Tool: Calgary’s Urban Curvz

by Shelley Scott

On their website, Urban Curvz bills itself as Calgary’s Feminist Theatre Company. Artistic Associate Lindsey Zess-Funk runs a blog entitled “The Other F-word” that actively seeks to engage in conversation and debate on the meaning of feminism. Toronto’s Nightwood Theatre, as a contrasting example, calls itself a women’s theatre company and the word feminism does not appear on its website. The Nightwood blog primarily promotes its play development projects. As someone who has researched Canadian women’s theatre companies, mainly Nightwood, I have long been interested in whether and how theatres use the word feminism in their advertising and on their websites. In this paper and in the roundtable discussion, I will specifically address Urban Curvz and their assertive use of the word, drawing on conversations with Lindsey Zess-Funk and Jacqueline Russell, the company’s artistic director. While the language of equity may indeed be a form of cultural capitol in institutional contexts, is the language of feminism similarly attractive as a marketing strategy for professional theatre?

Marketing Online

A primary reason to create an interactive website and blog is to build an engaged audience, a tactic that applies to a feminist theatre company as much as any other kind of company with a product to promote. According to Martin Hayward of Marketing Magazine, “In many ways, loyalty needs to act as the antidote to short-termism, engaging customers in a longer term perspective and a rewarding relationship that makes a lot of the tactical noise from competitors less relevant” (7). While Hayward claims that “digital now makes up 31% of overall
advertising spend in Canada,” he also cautions that “only truly customer centric companies can
create mutually rewarding relationships over the longer term” (7). Applying these findings to a
theatre company, it makes sense to try to figure out who your audience is and to build a long
term relationship with them, by giving them what they want and engaging in dialogue to find out
what that is. In the case of Urban Curvz, much of this investigation takes place on the blog with
the ongoing (some might say never-ending) task of defining feminism and articulating the
relevance of feminist theatre for a younger generation. Lindsey Zess-Funk explains that her
intention is to create a “dialogue that goes both ways. Not just talking about and selling what
shows we’re doing, but engaging people in what our company thinks about.”

Contemporary marketing research supports this approach. First, women in general (and
interestingly, mothers in particular) are the highest users of social media (“Digging into Data”
18). Second, consumers want to feel that they are supporting a positive social agenda. According
to Jeromy Lyon, again in Marketing Magazine, “84% of Canadians would switch brands to one
affiliated with a good cause if price and quality were comparable” and “shoppers can be swayed
by charitable actions, but marketers need to be aware that a cookie-cutter approach won’t work
on all consumers.” Furthermore, 73% of Canadians polled defined themselves as “socially
responsible” (14). Substituting the language of theatre, one could infer that a theatre-goer will
want to support a theatre company they consider a “good cause” – in this case, one that promotes
a feminist message – but are more likely to do so if the “price and quality” of the show is
comparable to theatre without an explicit social agenda.

According to Judith Madill of the University of Ottawa’s Telfer School of Management,
marketing is now being used as a way to make positive changes in society. Madill defines this as
“the application of commercial techniques for social good.” Interestingly, she sees the goal of
social marketing as persuading people to love the subject of the campaign, to declare themselves publicly as “part of the club” in the same way they are willing to carry around a Starbucks cup. In this case, the goal would be for theatre-goers to want to publicly identify themselves as supporters of Urban Curvz, perhaps by wearing a t-shirt or button or volunteering. But similar to the findings of Marketing Magazine, Mardill has found that, in the dilemma of whether to market a company based on “we do social good” or “we have the best product,” the latter has been shown to be the most effective.

Mardill points out that a socially aware company does not want to be seen as spending too much money on marketing. This is one of the other advantages of blogging and social media tools like Twitter and Facebook: it has the perception of being free and grassroots, plus it can allow the audience a way to offer input. Jill Dolan, in The Feminist Critic in Action, imagines that “The growing cadre of ‘citizen critics’ will become more and more influential to arts productions, as people circumvent conventionally authorized commentators to make their own decisions based on their own criteria for what constitutes useful and pleasurable cultural consumption” (12). Dolan asks, “What power might be derived from a kind of informed amateurism in cultural criticism…”? For Dolan, the answer is a virtual community of feminist critics, drawing attention to the way that power circulates through issues not only of gender, but also of sexuality, race, and class (3):

Feminist criticism provides a lens through which to filter the culture we consume intentionally or not, and that helps us organize the cacophony and chaos of images that come at us from multiple directions at once. Living in western culture these days is like standing perpetually in New York’s Times Square. Where do we look first? Is it possible to look away? What does all this stimulation mean? Who are we in the face
of these blaring, bright meanings calling for our attention and our dollars? (4)

So, in this sense, the marketing choices of a theatre company like Urban Curvz – the images used, the language employed, the events hosted – can provide an alternative message to the cacophony of other theatres’ advertising campaigns, and can create an alternative intention for theatre-goers in Calgary.

Using the term Feminism to Include Men

While she does not explicitly use the kind of marketing language I have been introducing, Urban Curvz artistic director Jacqueline Russell is definitely trying to market a particular perception of her company by choosing to next produce *Legoland*, a popular comedy with name recognition, written by a man. In our interview, Russell emphasized: “I desperately wanted to do a comedy.” By highlighting that the comedy is feminist and told from the perspective of a teenage girl character, Russell can be seen to align the guarantee of a “good time/good product” (a popular comedy) with a good cause (a feminist perspective). Interestingly, Lindsey Zess-Funk explained that the decision to call Urban Curvz a feminist company – rather than a women’s company – was driven by a desire to be inclusive of men and to acknowledge that men can be strong feminist allies: “How do we include men in our dialogue, because they are a huge part of the solution?” Thus their comfort with producing a play by a man. Zess-Funk pointed out that, while Urban Curvz of course encourages women to write plays,

Many of my favourite plays about women are written by men – Michel Tremblay, Daniel MacIvor, Tomson Highway – and we should be encouraging men to write strong roles for women because both genders can do that and that helps.
Both Russell and Zess-Funk mentioned they also think a lot about attracting a younger audience. For example, the people they saw come out to *Untitled Feminist Show*, on tour from New York in January, were described as young, diverse, urban professionals, mainly women but not necessarily traditional theatre-goers. By producing *Legoland*, which they describe as an “exciting, fun, very feminist play,” Urban Curvz hopes to attract this younger and more diverse crowd.

**The Dangers of Marketing Feminism**

Returning, then, to the question of how to market a feminist show, a number of interesting issues arise. The message needs to be managed carefully – and continually. Amanda Berg, Fine Arts box office manager for the University of Lethbridge, believes that the use of social media to build theatre audiences takes time and commitment. Twitter, for example, needs to be updated three times a day and monitored. It is not enough to just send out information, the recipient must be able to respond and interact somehow. The audience wants to be engaged in the event rather than just hearing about it. Berg observes that this is often done by initiating discussions, but warns that “conversations on social media can go south quickly” (Berg).

Similarly, using feminism in a marketing campaign can backfire, or at least incite a level of scrutiny the marketer may not have anticipated. In the 28 Feb. 2015 “Style” section of *The Globe and Mail*, Nathalie Atkinson critiqued the use of feminism as a fashion statement for the Chanel spring 2015 runway show. Her article, “The F Word,” begins with the question: “Is Karl Lagerfeld’s latest appropriation homage or insult?” and promises that Atkinson will “separate the glib from the genuine” (1). The ready-to-wear preview, which took place in fall of 2014, was staged on “an elaborate set called Boulevard Chanel, where a crowd of fashion models gathered
at the end of the runway in very expensive clothes, waving signs of feminist faux-protest” (2). Chanel creative director Karl Lagerfeld claimed “that he wanted to be light-hearted about feminism or, indeed, any sort of protest, about anything” (2). Atkinson laments “that something that provoked such strong mixed feelings and waggling fingers six months ago about trivializing the feminist cause – or cop-opting any of the familiar imagery and vocabulary of dissent and agitation for change – has been forgotten” by the following spring, except for the arrival in stores of a Chanel “suffragette-chic clutch” bearing the slogan “Féministe Mais Féminine.” Atkinson calls the slogan a “glib” way to “accessorize past feminist victories still being defended (and new ones being fought),” but then spends the rest of her article detailing how fashion has in fact “played an incremental but essential role” in women’s emancipation, charting the long road to acceptance for women wearing pants (2).

I offer this example from the world of fashion for its potential resonances in theatre. If the issue here is not that fashion has nothing to do with feminism (Atkinson demonstrates how they are related), then it must be a question of who has the right to use feminist symbolism. Not Karl Lagerfeld, evidently, but why not? Because he is a man? Because some prior history of abusing women makes this moment hypocritical? Because models wearing expensive clothes cannot be feminists? Or is it that Lagerfeld has professed to take a “light-hearted” approach to feminist protest, a topic that must always be dealt with in a serious manner? I find it interesting that Atkinson assumes the reader will be automatically outraged, without actually spelling out why. Further, the most she can claim is that the runway show provoked “strong mixed feelings” (which almost seems an oxymoron) and “waggling fingers” – in itself a trivialized image of a supposedly outraged feminist.
Is Urban Curvz in any similar danger of causing offence by being cheeky and light-hearted with its advertising? The annual cabaret is called Girls Gone Wilde and bears the slogan “Show us your wits.” Does this marketing strategy risk trivializing the sexualization and sexual exploitation of young women? Or, as Russell would argue, does it achieve that desired marketing combination of “good time” and “good cause”? Russell states that her intention is to “incite dialogue” and that she doesn’t want to “define feminism for anyone.” Interestingly, she has also found something of a generational difference in the acceptance of this kind of tongue-in-cheek tone: some of the older women on the Urban Curvz board came to Girls Gone Wilde expecting to see a more serious approach to issues and were surprised by the irreverent, pop cultural approach that Russell is encouraging.

And this is significant because, as much as Urban Curvz may be identified with the play it produces annually, it will potentially make more of an impact through the growing profile of the Girls Gone Wilde festival and other special events it sponsors, and the media attention they attract. As Russell admits, “The one, little, one-woman show that we do per year isn’t really having a huge impact on the systemic problem we have in our theatre community. So how do we program stuff that’s different and differentiates us but also has a voice in the community?”

One initiative has been *Not Buying It!*, a media literacy camp for teenagers that Urban Curvz began in 2014 and will continue in 2015, in collaboration with The Calgary Foundation and Calgary Young People’s Theatre. As the website explains: “Participants in *Not Buying It!* will not only gain the tools necessary to analyze, review, and critique media messages but will also take the process one step further by re-writing stereotypes into new and unexpected stories, utilizing improv games, theatre exercises, and group discussions. The camp will conclude with a cabaret style performance featuring original pieces of theatre created by our participants and
based on their discoveries over the course of the week.” *Not Buying It!* is clearly an excellent way to raise community profile and to establish a relationship with a young demographic.

An even better example is *Take Back Halloween*, an event held in 2014 in partnership with Hillhurst United Church. The press release reads: “There is nothing scarier on Halloween than a visit to the Girl’s Costume Aisle. Year after year, a growing, multi-billion dollar industry costumes girls, boys, women and men in sexist, racist costumes.” The event was billed as “an alternative to this terrifying trend. *Take Back Halloween* offers an unparalleled Halloween Party that is not only uniquely creative and fun but also promotes the opportunity for all genders to make and wear costumes that are empowering, clever and diverse.” *Take Back Halloween*, which raised funds for the Women’s Centre of Calgary, featured a patriarchy haunted house, a screening of a film called *Wonder Women – The Untold Story of Superheroines!*, and live performances, and a feminist costume contest that specified that “Feminist costumes do not appropriate cultures, are not racist, and are not misogynistic while at the same time are not slut-shaming.”

But the implications of “slut-shaming” return us to the earlier questions of marketing and its dangers. On one hand, the event was promoted as light-hearted, alternative fun. Organizer Pam Rocker was quoted in the media and on the website as saying, “… there is something for everybody. Awareness doesn’t have to be a drag and that’s really important to us, so we want it to be an exciting night for people.” In other words, it is an event that is both good value (fun) and a good cause (initiating dialogue about the difference between sexuality and sexualization). The event drew a lot of media attention – it was covered by CBC news and the Calgary Eyeopener radio program, and Rocker was even invited to appear on the Glen Beck program on American television. But on the other hand, and perhaps predictably, much of the media coverage implied
that the event was about “angry feminists that hate other women” (Russell). As much as the organizers insisted that they were not condemning women or men who choose to dress in sexy costumes and that their intent was only to provide awareness of another choice, it was apparently too subtle a distinction for some people to grasp. Nasty comments were posted online and, despite the fact that the organizers felt it was a successful creative event, it was not an unqualified or uncomplicated success in terms of public profile.

**Conclusion – Creating a Space**

Jacqueline Russell believes that the issue of gender equity continues to be ignored by important members of the Calgary theatre community. Others express genuine gratitude that Urban Curvz exists, but do not have the time or money to do much to support it. But she continues to believe that Urban Curvz’s strength is in being “scrappy” and “risky,” and in providing opportunities for emerging artists. The 2015 Girls Gone Wilde festival included an improv night, a reading of a new play called *The Clinic* (about an abortion clinic), and a panel discussion on gender equity, as well as two nights of cabaret performances. *Legoland* opens in June. And next year, Russell plans to program their annual production to take place at the same time as and as part of Girls Gone Wilde, to continue to build attention and profile for that event. Lindsey Zess-Funk has tried to create a space for dialogue with her blog, by posting interviews with playwrights and artistic directors. Interaction – building a community – is not easy, and creating an effective marketing image is challenging. But to a very real degree, a feminist theatre company exists to answer Jill Dolan’s question: “Who are we in the face of these blaring, bright meanings calling for our attention and our dollars?”
1 *Legoland* was written by Jacob Richmond and premiered in Toronto in 2008.

2 *Untitled Feminist Show* by Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company ran at Calgary’s Theatre Junction GRAND, 14-17 Jan. 2015.

3 Consider, in contrast, the blatantly offensive “Dsquaw” collection unveiled by Canadian design duo Dsquared in March of this year and the backlash it evoked.

4 *The Clinic* is by Calgary playwright and performer Alice Nelson.

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**Works Cited**


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