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cultural diversity and the stage

VOL. 7, NO. 3 MARCH 2010 **$5.00**

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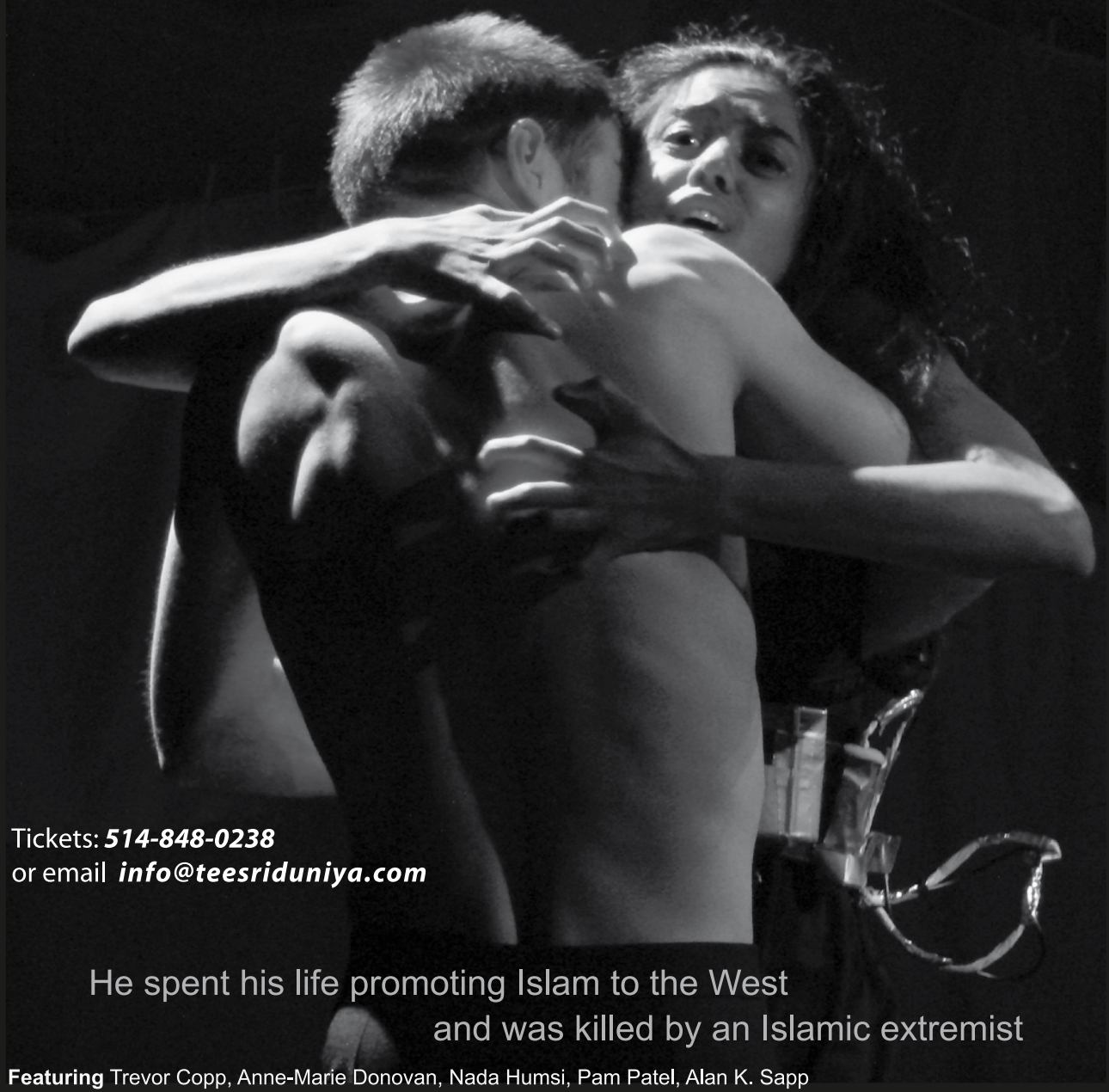

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He spent his life promoting Islam to the West
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Using movement, dance, video and text, this multi-media play explores the topic of terrorism. The work constructs an imagined physical and verbal dialogue between the victim and his killer. It starts from the tragic deaths of Syrian-American filmmaker Mustapha Akkad and his daughter Rima during a series of co-ordinated attacks in the Jordanian capital in 2005. Akkad is the director of two major films both starring Anthony Quinn, The Message: the Story of Islam – 1976 and Lion of the Desert - 1982. Akkad saw these films as a way to bridge the gap between the Western and the Islamic world. He was also the producer of the Halloween film series.

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Upcoming in alt theatre

Rob Ormsby talks with Guillermo Verdecchia about directing *Rice Boy* and the question of nontraditional casting at Stratford, Ontario.

Phillippe Ducros reflects on his production of *L'Affiche*—a play about the occupation of Palestine—at Montreal's Théâtre Espace Libre in December 2009.

DISPATCH
Jennifer Capraru of Isôko Theatre responds to Lisa Ndejuru's questions about a Canadian-led theatre and reconciliation in Rwanda.

BOOK REVIEW
Renna Reddie on *Love and RelASIANships: A Collection of Contemporary Asian-Canadian Drama* (Vols I and II), edited by Nina Lee Aquino.

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THEATRE

"Change the World, One Play at a Time"

COVER PHOTO
Caroline Laberge
Une truite pour Ernestine Shuswap by Tomson Highway. Mise en scène by André Brassard. Production ESPACE GO, Montreal, 2009. l to r. Violette Chauveau as Isabel Thompson, Sharon Ibgui as Délila Rose Johnson, Pierrette Robitaille as Ernestine Shuswap.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT
TEESRI DUNIYA THEATRE
1006 Rue de la montagne, Suite 111
Montreal, QC H3G 1Y7
Tel. 514. 848. 0238
email : info@teesriduniya.com website : www.teesriduniya.com

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WHEN POLITICS GETS PERSONAL

ON THE OCCASION OF TEESRI DUNIYA THEATRE'S TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY IN 2006, I WROTE "STAGING PEACE IN TIMES OF WAR" IN RESPONSE TO THE US-LED WAR AGAINST IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11.[1] IN THAT ARTICLE, I ARGUED THAT THE "WAR ON TERROR" WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A DISGUISE FOR AGGRESSION, THAT NOW ALL ARTS ARE BEING CREATED IN TIMES OF WAR, AND THAT ARTISTS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO RESPOND.

BY RAHUL VARMA

Playwrights across the world have responded. There has been an increase in production of political plays since 9/11. Much of the work has been fact-based, built upon documentary evidence or personal testimonies and showing reality. But there have also been plays that go beyond revealing reality—plays which reveal the truth that instigates further inquiry, supports social justice, and sides with the oppressed. This outcome of theatre is closely linked to the very nature of the medium; Habib Tanvir always said that theatre in its nature is fundamentally subversive and must always question power and the establishment. I add to this that the theatre that is not subversive, theatre that is merely "art for art's sake"—which is found in abundance on our stages—simply serves the "consumers" who would purchase cultural amusement.

Yet many in the mainstream media and certain powerful voices within the theatre world characterize political plays as polemical, partisan, and predictable. Dissenting discourse is perceived as preaching to the converted. Difficult issues, dealt with well or badly by the playwright, are simply dismissed as political epithet lacking the personal without serious assessment. The problem is that these critics apply the yardstick of conventional family drama to a genre of political theatre that is hugely complex.

Take for example *Montreal Gazette*'s theatre critic, Pat Donnelly. In her review of my play *Truth and Treason*—a play that tackles the invasion of Iraq—Ms. Donnelly wrote, "Varma tries to tell a far more sweeping tale, of Shakespearean ambition and didactic purpose, in which the personal gets blown away by the political." On Centaur Theatre's 2010 production of Jason Maghanoy's play *Dust*, Ms. Donnelly wrote, "Knowing that it was about Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, I was prepared for a preachy, predictable political piece." She continues, "The writing is subtle, focused on characters, allowing only brief talk of horrific details," and concludes, "*Dust* is not so much about the sociopolitical, systemic reasons why the Abu Ghraib scandal happened, as the psychological how. It's something we need to know."

I saw *Dust*, and like Ms. Donnelly, I thought the play was very good. But I challenge Ms. Donnelly's account of the relationship between the political and the personal. If privileging the "psychological how" is all that was required to tell the story, couldn't that be achieved by setting the play in, say, Bordeaux prison? Why appropriate Abu Ghraib, a location that caught the world's attention with its revelations of horrific systemic problems ranging from Geneva Convention violations to atrocities like rape, sodomy, beating, and psychological abuse. Isn't she ignoring that the "psychological how" of the characters is inseparably linked to the political reality set within the specific conditions of Abu Ghraib?

Ms. Donnelly's view is shared by many mainstream critics and certain artistic directors who seem to be locked in a habit of divergence, creating boundaries between political and personal when there is none. Behind this type of compartmentalization exists what playwright Tony Kushner has described as the denial of politics in arts: " . . . what Roland Barthes or Bertolt Brecht says, that the denial of ideology is an ideology—a bourgeois ideology. The way you protect your interests is by pretending you are not speaking from a historically determined or dialectical place, but rather from some position of immutable truth that lies beyond history and critical thinking."

Truth and Treason shifted the question from the "war on terror" to the "terror of war," and like all plays, the story exists in the lives of its characters—occupier, accomplice, betrayer, freedom-fighter, victim, etc. The political situation that produces occupier and betrayer also produces victims and resisters. Psychological explanation alone is not enough to make sense of actions that are clearly dictated by the political climate, a climate that—except for the unequal power—is same for all characters. As a playwright I must therefore confront what is constant: the political circumstances as they unfold in the (personal) lives of characters, either in triumph or in defilement of human dignity. Truth then is manifested in the lives of characters as well as in their political circumstances.

The problem is not that political theatre is ineffective because it isn't personal. The problem is that the "personal" is privileged in theatre. For playwrights like Tony Kushner, David Fennario, and myself, the political and the personal are two sides of the same coin. We take our cue from the likes of Sartre and Brecht, who say that all theatre is political. What defines political theatre as political is its progressive nature: it points fingers at political powers and expands or connects the conflicts—both personal and political—to a larger viewpoint. It examines competing truths rather than mere conflicts. Hence, critically examining a play in the wholeness of its political context—positive or damning—would be more accurate than compartmentalizing it into personal or political.

Finally, political theatre is an aesthetic theatre, a theatre of quality and excellence. It must not deliver a top-down speech; it must explore truth from all angles. The story must live in the characters and the characters must not be the proxy voice of the playwright—they must travel their own journey. A political play must have a full range of emotions:

fear, anger, love. Political playwrights must draw on their personal experiences for their characters, but they must also be guided by the experiences of human society, preserved in the form of rituals, traditions, and cultural expressions. Playwrights must not be moved by knowledge or emotions alone, but by the whole of their imaginations and creative impulses rooted in the desire to express, to put form to the material world, the community, and of course their own personality. But in the final analysis, self-expression or self-awareness should not be the primary motive. The driving force should rather be the relational beauty of life that seeks an outlet in creation of theatre, for our world is built upon the relational existence of different people and cultures. When playwrights rely exclusively on the personal—concerned solely with the desire for self-knowledge, self-expression, and self-awareness and with no reference to society's experience—then their creative impulse has lost touch with the life and civilization that shaped them.

There can be no separation between the political and the personal, between the issue and the aesthetic. The issue lives in the characters. But the characters don't exist in isolation as individual entities—they exist in a socio-political context that determines their personality, experience, and humanity. A character's human experience is multilayered—biological, psychological, socio-cultural, spiritual—and all of these things are determined by the political system surrounding the character. The exploration of a character's personality isn't simply that of an individual—especially its exotic and attention-grabbing attributes. If this were the case, issues of immense complexity, both personal and communal, would be reduced to a quasi-important biography of "me, me, and me"—with little substance. But when the character's personality embodies multilayered human experience, truth is revealed—a truth that connects the otherwise compartmentalized areas of personal and political life.

Those who reduce the genre of political plays to partisan propaganda should perhaps re-examine the issue. Are they not aware of the tense relationship between political propaganda and art? Every work of art is propaganda from the standpoint that it propagates an idea—unless the artist concedes that there is an absence of ideas in his/her work. But of course the corollary—that every work of propaganda is art—isn't true! Many of the facts and the truths surrounding an issue may be the same, but the point of view of an artist may not be the point of view of a propagandist. Communication of an idea or a point of view is not propaganda—it's a dialogical relationship with the audience. Political theatre traces its origins to the need to express difficult issues of public interest with aesthetic enjoyment. It extends the frontiers of artistic endeavours and saves theatre from stagnation. Through artistic beauty, political theatre attacks corrosive political powers that deny human beings individual dignity.

Political plays should be criticized as rigorously as possible—but through analysis of goals, dramaturgy, and craft. Instead, we are faced with a glut of commercially driven, superficial analyses by critics and powerful peers who are the very people professing to eliminate ideology from the theatre in the first place. To me, this amounts to an exercise in censorship.

NOTE

[1] *alt.theatre* 4.2-3 (2006): 4-7.

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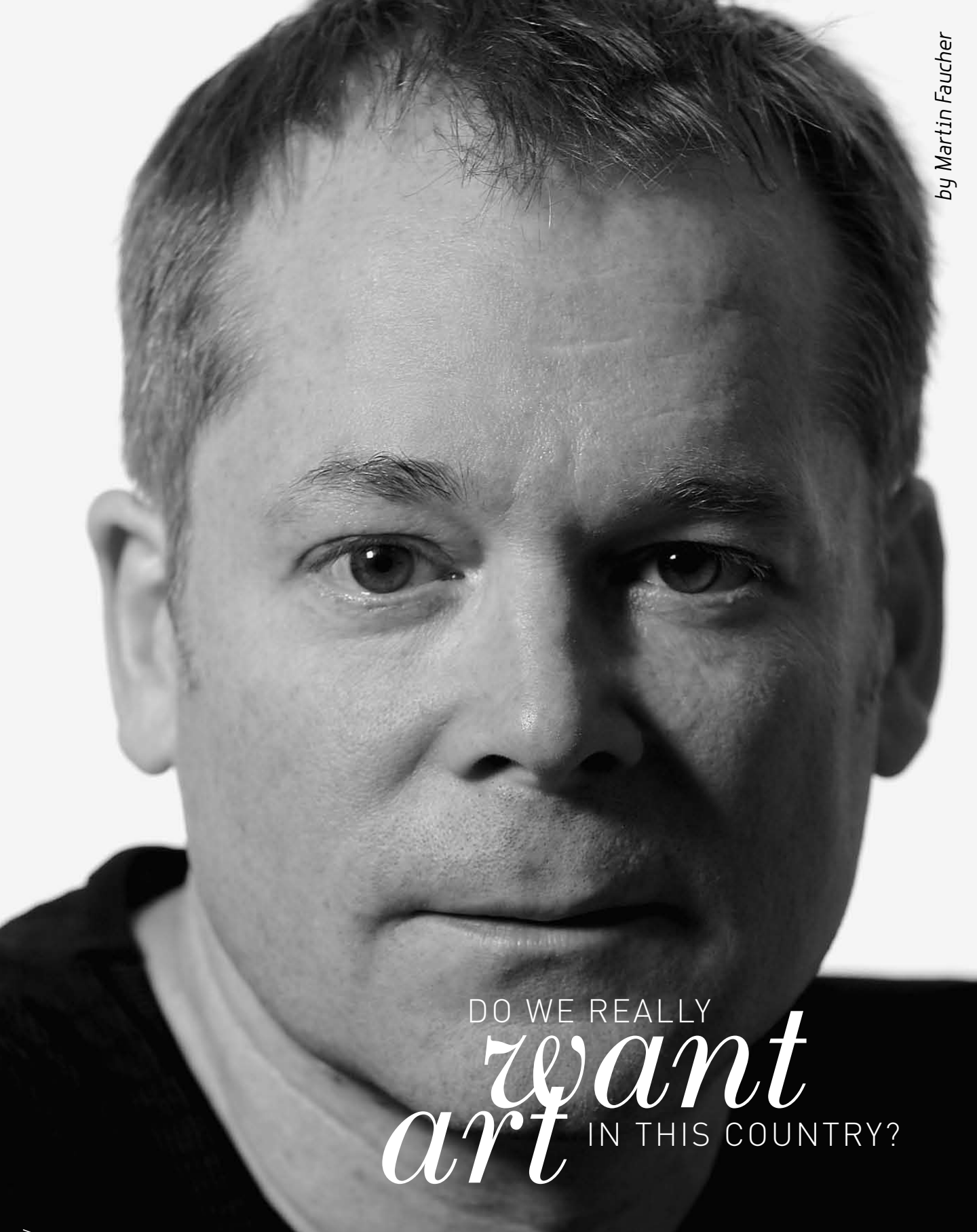
BIO

Rahul Varma IS A MONTREAL-BASED PLAYWRIGHT AND FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF TEESRI DUNIYA THEATRE.



by Martin Faucher

DO WE REALLY *want art* IN THIS COUNTRY?

Martin Faucher wrote this opinion piece during his term as President of *le Conseil Québécois du Théatre*. It was first published in *Le Devoir* on 31 March 2009 as "*Veut-on vraiment des arts en ce pays?*" The article was subsequently posted on *le Conseil*'s website: www.cqt.ca/accueil/editorial/18. *alt.theatre* is grateful to M. Faucher and *le Conseil* for permission to publish this English-language translation by Neil Kroetsch. As the 2010 deadline for the Government's review of Tomorrow Starts Today looms, Faucher's analysis remains as cogent and prescient today as it was in March 2009.

On 31 March [2009] the *Trade Routes* (Department of Canadian Heritage) and *PromArt* (administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade [DFAIT]) programs expired. The current government made a decision, controversial to say the least, not to renew the programs, sometimes invoking the high operating costs of the art projects being financed, sometimes the supposedly negative values projected by those projects that were thus damaging Canada's image. The abolition of these two programs should not be viewed as an isolated incident nor as an unfortunate consequence of a chaotic economic situation, but instead as part of a movement to eliminate support for culture, a much broader and more insidious focus that counts professional artists among its principal victims. Through manipulation of political discourse aimed to create confusion in the thinking and ideas of the citizens of Quebec and Canada, the Conservative government, due to profound ignorance or contempt for artists, the arts, and its social dimensions, deliberately twists the meaning of the term so that art becomes submerged in a concept of popular entertainment and mass tourism. Behind the logic of financial imperatives lies a conservative political ideology that conveys a narrow-minded vision of artistic life and Canadian culture.

enlightened policies for arts support

In 2001 Ottawa launched *the Tomorrow Starts Today* initiative, considered at the time and since as "the most important commitment in 50 years to the development of Canadian arts and culture." Backed by a budget of $560 million over three years, to be renewed on an annual basis of $173 million until 2010, various programs were established "to promote excellence, diversity, access and sustainability in the arts." Diversity, accessibility, and viability were the guidelines driving federal funding for the professional arts milieu. Moreover, in the eyes of the government, arts and culture represented "one of the most powerful tools for economic and social development," as described in Canadian Heritage reports at the time. The main programs—*Arts Presentation Canada, Cultural Spaces Canada, Canadian Arts,* and *Heritage Sustainability Program and Trade Routes*—established the foundation for unequivocal government support for artists and evinced clear recognition for the profession. Ottawa also allocated financial and human resources for the presentation of Canadian works abroad. For example, DFAIT renewed the *Arts Promotion Program,* in existence since the mid-1980s, by guaranteeing four-year financing of $22.4 million. Furthermore, embassies and consulates assigned part of their diplomatic corps to prospect for new artistic opportunities. Canadian diplomacy often engaged the services of individual citizens, including several members of the Canadian arts community, whose creative talents were employed to consolidate the excellent reputation that Canada now enjoys around the world.

the arts under siege

The election of a Conservative government in 2006 marked the beginning of a vast inquisition into the professional arts, whose funding had been revitalized by grants from the *Tomorrow Starts Today* program in the early years of this century. As a consequence of the new definition of arts and culture now promoted by the federal cabinet, Canadian Heritage and the Department of Foreign Affairs embarked on a process of rationalization of existing programs. Less than three years after Stephen Harper's party came to power, the situation is quite simply disconcerting. No less than sixteen programs supporting arts and culture have been abolished, for a total exceeding more than $60 million. While the extent of these cutbacks represents a considerable sum for the arts milieu, it is nonetheless a derisory sum for the coffers of the state. In order to dismantle on the sly programs that it deemed to be contrary to its narrow vision of culture, the government made use of all conceivable techniques of political rhetoric and accounting sleight-of-hand.

A close reading of the main Canadian Heritage documents published since 2006 sheds light on the radical structural overhaul of federal programs that are driving this shift toward mass culture and entertainment. In the report on plans and priorities for 2007-2008, for example, art is defined as an "opportunity to participate in the nation's cultural and civic life." Viewed by the previous government as an key tool for social, economic, and diplomatic development, art is now reduced to spectacles that are ephemeral in nature. This simplistic vision of art represents a disturbing shift in meaning. The 2008-2009 edition of the report deals the death blow to the arts by removing them from the realm of Canadian Heritage priorities. Art has undergone a radical metamorphosis, becoming simply an activity that serves to "promote Canada through community engagement and major events." This new formulation is a clear indication that the winds of reform are blowing heavily in the arts sector so that any disturbing ideas expressed by artists in their works are marginalized as much as possible.

reactionary ideology

For the professional arts milieu, the repercussions of this reversal of position are significant in many respects. First of all, art must now respond to the imperatives of economic profitability, optimum yield, and the highest possible attendance rates. What could be more absurd than assessing the value of a theatre performance in terms of its profitability? This same government has never demanded of its military intervention in Afghanistan or of the Canadian Olympic delegation that they reach a financial break-even point. If that is the new mercantile philosophy at Canadian Heritage, then perhaps the Department would benefit, out of concern for transparency, from renaming its financial support programs so that they be known as mortgage loan programs. The current prevailing logic is a constraint on the artistic expression of Canadian creators, and also dangerously compromises the potential of up-and-coming artists.

In addition to this pejorative vision of the arts, the new financing guidelines exert a second extremely serious consequence that threatens the very nature of artistic practice. Priority is henceforth placed on blockbuster cultural events that fall within the scope of large-scale entertainment, cultural tourism, historical pageants and celebrations, or community development by means of arts and heritage. Although these four categories of events contribute to enriching the Canadian cultural and economic landscape, they do not adequately reflect the realities of professional artistic practice. Consequently, art has been stripped of its true essence and struggles for expression in a congested context.

Different segments of culture are placed on equal footing, or indeed in conflict with each other, as they fight for financial support from the state. Is that not tantamount to relegating professional artists to the cultural hinterlands? The new structure of federal programs thus becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it substantially increases the pool of potential recipients, while on the other hand it restricts the arts to activities that have little to do with the work of many talented artists.

IF THESE BUDGET CUTS ARE INDEED NOT MOTIVATED BY A CULTURAL REFORM PROJECT THAT CONSISTS OF DROWNING THE PROFESSIONAL ARTS IN A SEA OF POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT, THEN THE POLICIES OF THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT ARE THE PRODUCT OF SHEER INEPTITUDE.

precarious future for the arts

If these budget cuts are indeed not motivated by a cultural reform project that consists of drowning the professional arts in a sea of popular entertainment, then the policies of the Conservative government are the product of sheer ineptitude. A reading of Heritage Canada and DFAIT documents, however, leaves little doubt regarding the real nature of its ambitions and the meticulous drafting of its policies. The expected termination of the *Tomorrow Starts Today* initiative in 2010, or its only partial renewal, is thus very much in keeping with the palliative treatment administered to professional artists over the past three years. From a diversified arts scene free of financial imperatives or restrictive ideology, we are slowly drifting toward a culture of entertainment that is homogeneous, consensual, and integrated into an embarrassing logic of profitability. What is the future of the arts in Canada? In the short term, it is a watered down landscape that looms on the horizon. As a consolation, despite the determination of dogmatic politicians, waves of artistic creation will continue all the same to break on a land at times unresponsive to its own wealth, where political power is nothing but a face of sand.

BIO

Martin Faucher GRADUATED IN ACTING FROM OPTION-THÉÂTRE OF CÉGEP DE SAINT-HYACINTHE IN 1982. SINCE THEN HE HAS WORKED AS AN ACTOR AND A DIRECTOR FOR MANY THEATRE COMPANIES. FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, HE HAS DEVOTED MOST OF HIS TIME TO DIRECTING THE WRITINGS OF QUEBEC'S CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS AS WELL AS THOSE FROM THE WORLD REPERTOIRE. ALWAYS VERY INVOLVED IN THE THEATRE MILIEU, HE WAS THE PRESIDENT OF *LE CONSEIL QUÉBÉCOIS DU THÉÂTRE* FROM 2005 TO 2009.

Staging Oppression on the Québec Stage

Une truite pour Ernestine Shuswap at Théâtre Espace Go

by Karis Shearer

"*You*, yes you."

It's barely ten minutes into the Fall 2009 Théâtre Espace Go production of Tomson Highway's *Une truite pour Ernestine Shuswap (Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout)*. I'm sitting in the front row centre and the actor playing Annabelle Okanagan (Kathleen Fortin) is no more than five feet away, pointing directly at me.

I shift uncomfortably and glance around myself as she continues and points to others in the audience: "And you and you and you, and you and you and you, and you and you and you, and you there in the tight red sweater." For the Canadian government to forbid the people of the Shuswap Nation from fishing in rivers they've fished in for hundreds upon hundreds of years, Annabelle Okanagan explains, "would be like me telling you, 'No more breathing. Stop right now.'" At the moment in question, the fourth wall is broken and "you" becomes "us"—all the non-Indigenous people in the audience, including myself.

If Indigenous narratives are to have transformative powers, Métis critic Jo-Ann Episkenew has argued, "they must first implicate the audience before transformation can occur" (15). And indeed, Annabelle Okanagan's address has the effect of implicating the non-Indigenous audience early in the play, asking us to become conscious of our own role as settler subjects in the oppression of Indigenous peoples in contemporary society as we witness the outcome of the play. "Indigenous narratives," Episkenew continues, "serve a sociopedagogical function in that their objective is to change society by educating the settler readers [and spectators] about the Indigenous perspective of Canadian society" (17).

Having recently taught a course called "Performing Social Justice in Canadian Theatre" at McGill University, I've had a chance to think through—in conversation with a group of engaged and generous students from diverse backgrounds—some further conditions, in addition to the playtext and performance themselves, that might be necessary for theatre to work toward positive social change. These conditions are strongly tied to questions of who (in terms of race, class, gender, and ability/disability) has access to the performance space (as a spectator and as a performer). But the possibility for change is also dependent upon how the play is situated through printed material such as playbills, posters, and leaflets (elements that are akin to the paratextual material of a playtext), helping to contextualize the performance and carry out some of the sociopedagogical work to which Episkenew refers. Thus, it was considerations such as these that guided my reflection on the production of *Une truite pour Ernestine Shuswap.*

Since it unfortunately remains the case in Canada that settler readers and spectators are by and large ill-informed (or are misinformed) about Indigenous peoples and their histories, one of the challenges for producing a historically based play such as *Truite* is that one cannot rely on the audience's familiarity with Shuswap and Okanagan history or with the historical document known as the "Laurier Memorial" that is central to the play's narrative. The Théâtre Espace Go production anticipated this, however, and in the lobby prior to the show, spectators could find large spiral-bound booklets containing far more than the usual actor biographies and play synopsis. In addition to interviews with the director and crew, these booklets featured maps of the Shuswap territory; a list of terminology and definitions for words such as *"Premières nations," "Indiens inscrits," "Indiens non-inscrits," "une bande indienne;"*[1] and the text of historical documents—all of which served to help educate spectators and contextualize the play they were about to see. And, to be sure, many of those in the lobby were engaged in reading the booklets as I arrived to join them.

Thus, by the time I took my seat for the show, I had learned that Highway's play takes place over the course of a single day, 25 August 1910, when the Shuswap Nation of Kamloops B.C. prepared to receive the then-Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier—the "Grand Gros Kahoona du Canada"—for an enormous feast. At this time the chiefs would present the Prime Minister with what is now known as "The Laurier Memorial": a list of grievances put forward by fourteen chiefs from the Shuswap, Okanagan, Thompson, and Couteau tribes of the Thompson River basin. These grievances—ultimately ignored by the Canadian government—came in response to the Canadian state's regulation of traditional Aboriginal lands and ways of life, including government bans on hunting and fishing and the use of Indigenous languages.

Highway's play, co-commissioned in 2004 by Western Canada Theatre and the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society and produced in French for the first time in Montreal, features four women—Annabelle Okanagan, Délila Rose Johnson (Sharon Ibgui), Isabel Thompson (Violette Chauveau), and Ernestine Shuswap (Pierrette Robitaille)—in a tragicomedy that not only exposes the absurdity of these government regulations, but also presents itself as a tribute to the resilience of Indigenous people.

The absurdity is dramatized by moments when the women conceive of farcical solutions to comply with the new laws. If her community can't trap or fish, how, Annabelle Okanagan asks, is she "supposed to feed two thousand people and the Great Big Kahoona of Canada?" (60). Annabelle manages to obtain from her neighbour an extra beaver that she decides will probably only be enough for the "Grand Gros Kahuna du Canada," and which prompts an endless series of bawdy jokes about beavers—jokes only those fluent in English will pick up on, since this is one double-entendre that doesn't translate. The beaver also becomes one of the most memorable props, appearing as a leathery tail hanging over the side of a large cooking pot.

In another moment of absurd humour, the play's characters also wonder how they will speak to one another if they can no longer use the Shuswap language: "We're not allowed one phrase," Annabelle Okanagan explains, "not one word, not a syllable, not a vowel, not even a period" (69). The answer? They will neigh:

> Ernestine: Neigh?
> Délila Rose: Neigh?
> Annabelle: Yes, neigh.
> Délila Rose: You mean like...like horses?
> Annabelle: Just like horses.
> [...]
> Ernestine:Neigh-heigh-heigh-heigh-heigh-heigh!!! (70)

Similarly, when the word "reserve" is mentioned, Isabel Thompson, who cannot conceive that this word might be something the Canadian government would apply to people, asks Annabelle Okanagan: "Reserve? What in the name of George and the dragon are you talking about now? Reserve?! Let me guess. It's a game park for wild animals. No. A summer camp for lunatics" (26). Those of us in the audience, of course, realize just how serious the Canadian government is in its desire to create policies to contain and then assimilate Indigenous peoples. These moments of absurd humour are significant instances of resistance because they defamiliarize conditions that the nation state has worked to normalize, and exposes them as artificial and oppressive.

As with many of Highway's previous plays, particularly *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing,* women embody a spirit of hope and resistance. Often marginalized in traditional narratives of history, women are instead active agents in Highway's *Truite*. Where the history of the Laurier Memorial has traditionally focused on male agency, *Truite* features women who collaboratively rewrite and revise sections of the Memorial, and also highlights the women's labour that goes into finding and preparing the food for the feast. Director André Brassard recalls a conversation in which Highway revealed to him the inspiration for the play: "Tomson m'a raconté qu'il a eu l'idée de dire de cette façon le drame de son peuple en voyant *La Cène* de Léonard de Vinci: il s'est demandé qui avait preparé le repas!"[2] ("Théâtre"). The intertext of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* is integrated into the set, appearing as the first panoramic backdrop-slide before the play begins and invoking the absence of women that the play will redress. In the play that Brassard calls "un véritable hymne à la femme,"[3] it is Ernestine Shuswap who, after waiting nearly all day for her husband Joe to come home with the trout, decides to go catch it herself.

Ernestine's triumphant moment is rendered larger than life by Olivier Landreville's magnificent set design. In contrast to Highway's set description ("There is none" [*Ernestine* np].), Landreville's set features a steeply raked stage made of unevenly layered planks of wood, as well as large totems and a series of miniature log cabins. The incline and the rough, unfinished quality of the stage's numerous planks, in addition to evoking the vast

woods of western Canada, also signify the destruction of those forests by the lumber industry. During Ernestine's quest for her trout, however, the set transforms into a magic-realist style river: both the music and lighting that fade in create the impression that Ernestine is underwater; meanwhile stylized mechanical fish, reminiscent of west coast Aboriginal art, leap from beneath the floorboards of the set. The fantastic elements of this scene suggest that Ernestine's spiritual connection to the river will endure despite the Canadian government's attempts to regulate the Shuswap people's relationship to the land. When Ernestine's trout appears, carried in on a banquet table by Annabelle and Isabel, it is similarly magic-realist—realistic in every way save for its enormous size—and we later learn that Ernestine used a secret trick to catch it: "Waded in, right over my neck, my head, my hairdo, and got it with my own sharp teeth!" (90).

While there may indeed be certain parallels between the oppression of Indigenous peoples and the oppression of francophone Québécois, it would, I think, be highly problematic to conflate the two

Given this formidable homage to and display of Ernestine's agency, I found it somewhat regrettable that Brassard chose to translate the play's title, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, as *Une truite pour Ernestine Shuswap,* or *"A Trout for Ernestine Shuswap,"* which effectively erases her as active subject in the title. Though the question of translation is always a complex one, it is especially so for a play that puts the issue of language at the forefront and explicitly confronts the colonial government's systematic oppression of Indigenous peoples.

As an anglophone from northern Ontario who is reasonably fluent in French, I am doubly implicated by a play that invokes colonial history along language lines, referring to the French as "les vrais blancs" and the English simply as "les blancs." And I suspect I am probably one of few anglophones in the audience here to see Highway's play produced for the first time in French in Montreal, which leads me to wonder not only how my experience of the play might be different from that of francophone spectators (What subtle nuances of the language might I be missing? How am I differently implicated by the play?), but also what the significance might be of staging this particular play for a francophone audience in Montreal and in the province of Québec.

Director André Brassard, whose interest in the play dates back several years to when he first read it in English (Interview), is also responsible for translating *Truite* into French. Brassard has described feeling that there exists an affinity between Indigenous peoples and the condition of the Québécois: "Dès la lecture, j'ai senti dans ce chant d'un people en voie d'extinction un lien avec notre condition à nous, avec ce qui se passe ici, au Québec" (Théâtre).[4] While there may indeed be certain parallels between the oppression of Indigenous peoples and the oppression of francophone Québécois, it would, I think, be highly problematic to conflate the two, as such an elision risks obscuring Québec's own role in the oppression of Indigenous peoples by appealing to the "universal," and could also deflect attention from the specific conditions of the injustice the play examines. I am also uncomfortable with Brassard's use of the term "voie d'extinction" [road to extinction] because of the way it echoes the discourse of the "vanishing Indian," an idea White colonizers and the Canadian government employed to justify their colonial project and their mistreatment of Indigenous peoples.

It seems to me that the real power of the production of this play for a francophone audience does not lie in whatever parallels it may evoke, but rather in the play's resituating of language issues in a new context wherein non-Indigenous francophone spectators are compelled to consider their own positionality in relation to Québec's own history of oppression of Indigenous peoples and their languages. One way the play does this is by making humorous distinctions between English- and French-speaking Whites:

> Ernestine: The French love being considered 'distinct,' Joe tells me, makes them feel...wanted. So it's best to humour them, Joe tells me. (61)

> Ernestine: The French... are extremely particular about what they eat, Joe says to me, the English? Not particularly particular. (41)

Moments such as these allow francophones and anglophones to laugh at themselves, respectively (and there was much laughter from the audience), and for imagined communities to develop within the audience through the mutual recognition that comes from laughter.

But the play also has very serious moments in which it uses these distinctions to address a

specifically francophone audience. Annabelle's reading of the Laurier Memorial, for example, is theoretically addressed to the absent (francophone) Sir Wilfrid Laurier, but could easily be a direct address to the francophone audience in the theatre: ""We speak to you the more freely because you are a member of the white race whom we first met, and which we call, in our tongue, 'real whites'..." (59). "The real whites," Annabelle explains, are "what we Indians [call] the French" before she continues: "Ahem. '....We could depend on their word.' That's the real whites the chiefs are talking about here, not the other ordinary... whites" (61). The earlier reference to the French as a "distinct" people momentarily blurs the distinction between contemporary francophone spectators, the earlier French ("les vrais blancs") colonizers, and Laurier himself in order to extend the address to the francophone audience in whom it seems to place greater faith.

Those of us in the audience, of course, realize just how serious the Canadian government is in its desire to create policies

The production, in fact, is framed around the direct and indirect implication of the non-Indigenous francophone audience: a large poster featuring a poem by André Brassard greets the spectator outside the lobby at the front of house, with the poem's near-final lines reading:

> elles sont « Les Premières Nations » dont le Canada ne reconnaît même pas le droit à la Vie
> les « Vrais Blancs » auraient-ils fait mieux? .....[5]
> ("Mot du metteur en scène")

If it seems ineffectual to wonder what the "real Whites" *would have* done, the play's diachronic address transforms this question in order to ask what its contemporary spectators might do from here. For me, that begins with my own reflection on my position as a White anglophone woman living in Montreal—with the acknowledgement that because of my positionality I have benefited from a system that continues to privilege White over Indigenous. This reflection in turn causes me to ask how I might work fruitfully as an ally with Indigenous people in my community toward a more just society. Perhaps other spectators at *Truite* will be moved to consider their own positions and take positive action toward greater equality. Highway's play seems to retain faith that we will, as one line echoes as the play comes to a close: "Ils finiront bien par faire les choses correctement."[6]

Elles sont « Les Premières Nations »
dont le Canada ne reconnaît même pas le droit à la Vie
les « Vrais Blancs » auraient-ils fait mieux?

André Brassard


© Caroline Laberge / Délila Rose Johnson (Sharon Ibgui) and Isabel Thompson (Violette Chauveau), and Annabell Okanagan (Kathleen Fortin)

NOTES

1 "First Nations," "status Indian," "non-status Indian," and "band." These terms and definitions, and some of the other information on Indigenous peoples in the booklet, were provided by Éric Cardinal, a specialist in "droit constitutional autochtone," who teaches a course on "le droit des autochtones" at UQÀM.

2 "Tomson told me that he'd had the idea to tell the story of his people in this way when he was looking at Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*; he asked himself who had prepared the feast!" (my translation).

3 "A veritable ode to women" (my translation).

4 "Since reading it, I felt, in the song of a people on the road to extinction, a connection with our own condition, with what is happening here, in Québec" (my translation).

5 "They are the "First Nations" whose right to life Canada did not even recognize. Would the 'Real Whites' have done better?" (my translation).

6 "They will do the square thing by us in the end" (Highway, *Ernestine* 80). The line quoted in French in the body of my text comes from André Brassard's translation, as I transcribed it from performance.

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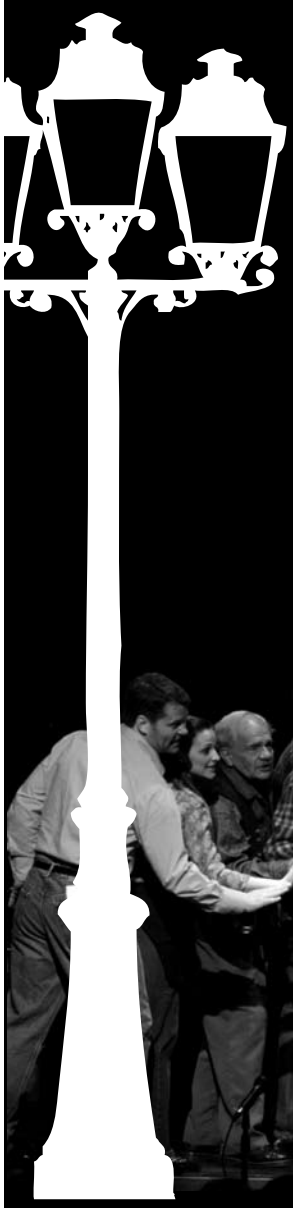
BIO

Karis Shearer IS A SSHRC POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY, WHERE SHE IS WORKING ON AN EDITION OF CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN LOUIS DUDEK AND EZRA POUND. HER RESEARCH FOCUSES ON THE INTERVENTIONS CANADIAN WRITERS MAKE IN THE LITERARY FIELD THROUGH THEIR CULTURAL WORK AS EDITORS, CRITICS, PUBLISHERS, AND PROFESSORS. SHE HAS RECENTLY CO-EDITED THE "NEW FEMINISMS" ISSUE OF *MATRIX* MAGAZINE AND HAS ALSO EDITED A VOLUME OF LOUIS DUDEK'S POETRY, *ALL THESE ROADS: THE POETRY OF LOUIS DUDEK* (2008).



Courting Audiences across the Neighbourhood Divide:

Bruce — The Musical in the Downtown Eastside

by *Sarah Banting*

"It's too bad," mused the man behind me to his companion at intermission. "The music is so good and the show is so well put together, but the topic is so regional. I mean, who is the audience for this?" "Well," she replied hesitantly, looking around at the crowd. "I think it was sold out every night..."

It was November 16, 2008: the closing-night performance of *Bruce–The Musical,* an original play dramatizing the life of the late Bruce Eriksen, a Vancouver activist and long-time city councillor who founded the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association (DERA) in the 1970s. A packed house was milling amiably in what little standing room was left in the aisles of East Vancouver's Russian Hall auditorium. Ranks of extra seats had been brought in at the last minute for closing night.

I looked curiously at the man I had overheard speaking, wondering if his clothing or his carriage would mark him as an outsider to the Eastside. His question—"Who is the audience for this?"—seemed to ignore the people filling the hall. And it implied, I thought, a presumption about the class of audiences suited to attend high-quality theatre, an idea that excellent music and polished stage performance are best enjoyed by people with means. In his estimation, *Bruce* was unlikely to reach such audiences because its concerns were local to a specific community: impoverished residents of the Downtown Eastside.

The man looked as casually dressed and at home as the people around him, of course. It only occurred to me afterward that my interest in discovering him a misfit amidst that buoyantly chattering crowd reflected my own anxiousness to fit in there. I live in tony, middle-class Kitsilano, a long bus ride across town from the Russian Hall. I feel a little awkward about where I live when I visit places that prompt me to consider my relative privilege. (Such silly guilt helps no-one, I know.) I wanted to see the man standing sorely and snobbishly apart from the crowd so that I could see myself standing comfortably within it.

Just before that intermission, Steve Maddock, playing Bruce Eriksen, had delivered a confessional song about the toll Eastside activism takes on someone who cares. "These streets are full of sorrow," Bruce sang, "and it can make you sad." The houselights had just come up when I heard the man speak behind me. I was still under the spell of the song.

> And if you went where I go
> And if you saw what I see
> Yes and if you did what I do
> You'd need some healing too

Bruce's chorus had evolved over the course of the song, as he took heart at how even suffering residents of his neighbourhood find courage to help one another through difficulties. He had closed Act One of the musical by concluding, "And if you did what I do/You'd *find* some healing too."

Listening to Bruce sing, I admired those struggling for the rights of the underprivileged. I also felt my jealous little wish to belong among them—to deserve inclusion in the solidarity being enacted in the Russian Hall auditorium. When

members of the audience cheered, or laughed, or sighed empathetically along with the characters onstage, they claimed membership in the play's target community of concerned locals. Onstage, Bruce instructed a young Jean Swanson not to assume that the old men she was serving in the beer parlours were hopeless drunks: "You know, Jean, I'll bet we probably got fewer alcoholics here than in [wealthy] Shaughnessy. Only difference is, ours are more visible. They don't have nice living rooms to pass out in." People laughed in delight at this idea. They laughed again when one character—an audience favourite played by Jason Logan—jeered at a city alderman character who was speaking against Bruce's plea for a Downtown Eastside community centre. "Go back to Dunbar!" (Dunbar is a Westside neighbourhood, close to Kitsilano.)

Class lines were drawn, onstage, between those who were sympathetic to the local cause and those who were not, and those lines coincided with neighbourhood borders. When audiences laughed, they demonstrated their comfortable position on the sympathetic side of those lines. Doing so, they were finding some healing, perhaps, for the hurts of marginalization, taking heart at the spectacle of their neighbourhood hero's life onstage. I was living vicariously through their sentiments, having crossed the city to join them in the audience. I did not want to live in the poverty the characters were describing. I was admittedly pretty happy in Kitsilano. But there in the Russian Hall, I wanted to feel myself a part of the community convened by the play.

In a city like Vancouver, neighbourhood boundaries are popularly understood to demarcate class divides and, by extension, different arts communities. To Bob Sarti, who wrote *Bruce*, and Jay Hamburger, who directed it, Eastside Vancouver theatre audiences are different from Westside ones. Residents of the Downtown Eastside in particular are not what Sarti calls "theatre-going audiences." Those audiences live on Vancouver's wealthier Westside. Hamburger observes that many members of *Bruce*'s audience were people who "hardly have any money," who were seeing theatre for perhaps the first time in their lives. They were not theatre patrons, precisely, not having the means to buy subscriptions or sustain a season of productions with consistent attendance. Both Sarti and Hamburger acknowledge a long history of inventive theatre- and arts-based community activism in the Downtown Eastside.[1] And Theatre in the Raw, the company producing *Bruce*, has always sought to make its own productions affordable for neighbourhood residents—so that they too might become theatre-goers, so to speak—as well as offering them the chance to participate in developing and performing plays that reflect their community's concerns. The outspoken man behind me in the intermission crowd meant to say, perhaps, that from an economic perspective, poor people do not count as an audience. But, as his companion seemed to understand, they counted decidedly as an assembly of people appreciative of *Bruce* and its concerns.

Courting audiences

Indeed, Downtown Eastside residents were the primary target audience of *Bruce*. Sarti has said that his conscious priority for the play was "to write for the people of the neighbourhood, to see them recognized for themselves onstage" (Interview). And Theatre in the Raw noted in the house program that the play's primary intention was to "equip current residents [of the neighbourhood] with an understanding of how their community came to be what it is." The not-for-profit company did its best to make the play accessible even to poor Eastside residents, giving away as many free tickets as it could afford, and channelling the free tickets through local community centres. And *Bruce*'s jokes and local references spoke with special directness to the Eastside community. After the curtain fell at the close of the final act, I overheard amid the happy buzz one audience member talking excitedly about how he had recognized his own home named onstage. The play ended with a song about Bruce Eriksen Place, the social housing apartment building now standing at the corner of Main and Hastings streets. Its exterior walls are engraved with words that the song had turned into a stirring incantation: Voice. Vision. Home. Respect. "...I live in that building," the man said to his companions with evident pride. "And on my balcony it says, Respect!"

Addressing itself first to a neighbourhood audience, *Bruce* was a political event in the spirit (if not precisely the method) of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. By putting the Downtown Eastside onstage and inviting the Russian Hall assembly to enjoy and participate in the performance, the play publicly claimed the legitimacy of both the neighbourhood's concerns and its theatre audiences. And by offering local residents in the audience a chance to recognize their own social and geographical position as the one privileged by this play and its inside jokes, the play echoed Eriksen's own historical efforts to reframe

Class lines were drawn, onstage, between those who were sympathetic to the local cause and those who were not, and those lines coincided with neighbourhood borders.

the neighbourhood as an important centre of community and culture in its own right.

Onstage, Bruce struggled to make even those people who lived and worked in the area to recognize it as a place worthy of respect: "I thought it was the Skids," Jean said, when Bruce and Libby reintroduced her to her familiar place of work, framing it for the first time as a neighbourhood. "You heard of the West End? ...of Shaughnessy?" they asked. "Of course," she replied. "Well," Bruce claimed, proudly, "now you're hearing of the Downtown Eastside." *Bruce* took a similar pride in reminding its Eastside audiences of Bruce's historic successes. Reflecting on its warm local reception and overflow Eastside audiences, Hamburger admits to feeling that *Bruce* succeeded in rekindling a certain sense of community and political possibility for a core of people already invested in the neighbourhood. I believe him: I had absorbed some of the radiant warmth of their newfound fire in the Russian Hall auditorium.

But Sarti and Hamburger had hoped for audiences from across the city for *Bruce*, as well as neighbourhood audiences. Sarti and Hamburger explain that they wanted to include the Westside, partly because they hoped the wider civic community would come to appreciate the play's vision of the Eastside as a "great little neighbourhood"—and thus come to feel, and want to share in, the very warmth I am writing about (Interviews). Partly, too, Theatre in the Raw needed an audience with means. Especially during a time when government funding for the arts is being cut, a ticket-buying audience is often a welcome one.

Always reserving its most direct address for the Eastside community, *Bruce* sought to bring a neighbourly mixture of audiences together in the Russian Hall. Theatre in the Raw hired professional actors and musicians to carry the lively score's tune. According to even my skeptical intermission commentator, the resulting music, composed by Bill Sample and Earle Peach, was "so good" as to broadly appeal. And neither the script nor the play's publicity was designed to speak exclusively to the Eastside. Bob Sarti's storytelling style is thoroughgoing and explanatory, perhaps owing to his former work as a *Vancouver Sun* journalist. As a result, *Bruce* spoke inclusively even to people in the audience who lacked really local knowledge. A character named the Reporter narrated the play, offering generous amounts of background information. "Hello folks, welcome to the Downtown Eastside," beamed Mikal Grant, playing the Reporter, as the musical opened. "It's a great little neighbourhood. The proverbial million stories. I've reported on a few of them myself." The Reporter's warm embrace and the cast's heart-stringing enthusiasm offered to make anyone feel welcome.

In an effort to draw people from across the city, Theatre in the Raw purchased ad space in the widely circulated free weekly newspapers *Georgia Straight* and *Vancouver Courier.* They applied to Vancouver's Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA), hoping to be granted free advertising space through the city's Transit Shelter Advertising Program for not-for-profit organizations. The company that provides the program's ad space ostensibly places ads at random in bus shelters across the city. Theatre in the Raw was delighted to be granted advertising space on ten bus shelters. According to Hamburger, this gained them otherwise unaffordable exposure. But they were disappointed to realize that, by some accident, the shelters assigned for *Bruce* ads were all confined to the Eastside—despite the fact that the OCA's stated aim is to make the widest possible Vancouver population aware of the cultural events being advertised. None of their ads made it west of Main Street.

Sarti and Theatre in the Raw wanted to include the Westside for directly political reasons too. With the Canadian federal election and the highly publicized American presidential election just recently concluded, a provincial election on the horizon, and a municipal election just over a week away, *Bruce* opened during an unusually spirited season of political campaigning. Theatre in the Raw hoped to draw the politicians running for mayor and city council to the play, thus highlighting the Downtown Eastside as a constituency worth courting and briefing the campaigners on the neighbourhood's history and human face. They hoped for a show of support from the civic politicians representing those parties whose support is strongest in the wealthier, Westside Vancouver neighbourhoods—especially the Non-Partisan Association (NPA), whose principles include private property rights and freedom of private enterprise.

Seeking to bring the NPA to the Russian Hall, Theatre in the Raw was echoing Eriksen's example once again. The play showed Bruce arranging to have a city council committee hold a meeting in the Carnegie building at Main and Hastings when deciding whether the building should become a Downtown Eastside community centre. Bringing resistant aldermen from Dunbar to the Eastside was a strategic move. "It's always better to get them on your turf," Bruce explained to Marty. "It's easier to convince them then." Hoping to attract civic politicians and politically minded Vancouver citizens to Downtown Eastside turf, Sarti visited a number of mayoralty candidate meetings across the city, handing out promotional fliers for the play, in the weeks leading up to the opening. "Vote for Bruce! He's the People's Choice!" the fliers said. While the fliers went on to make it clear that *Bruce—The Musical* was a play, they framed the

across the neighbour-hood divide

play as participating in contemporary political events. "Yes, Bruce Eriksen is back…singing and dancing his way into this election campaign," they proclaimed.

In Sarti and Hamburger's estimation, *Bruce* did not get the Westside audiences it hoped for. There were Westsiders among the Russian Hall crowds; my own companion and I were not the only people who crossed town to see the Downtown Eastside alive in lights onstage. But we were too few. Perhaps a well-known and well-equipped performance space and being part of an established theatre's advertised season could have helped Theatre in the Raw attract "theatre-going" audiences. But the cost of a centrally located and widely respected venue was prohibitive. The Russian Hall was a deliberately strategic choice—its location on Downtown Eastside "turf" made it accessible to the neighbourhood audiences who were Theatre in the Raw's first priority. Moreover, its antiquated lighting system and gymnasium floor were affordable and its size could accommodate the crowds that did flock to see *Bruce*. Although mixed audiences are not unheard-of at performances in the Russian Hall, its location, just off East Hastings Street in residential Downtown Eastside, may nevertheless have been a barrier for Westside flocks.

The municipal election took place on the date of the show's penultimate performance, and on the nights preceding it, political parties and advocacy groups did establish a presence in the Russian Hall. But, predictably, those who attended and made a show of support for the play were the more left-leaning politicians, from parties already invested in and supported by Eastside voters. NDP MP Libby Davies addressed the opening night audience, and several of the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE) candidates for public office sat in the front row the same night, standing up at Hamburger's request to acknowledge and be acknowledged by the Russian Hall crowd. Their attendance was fitting and appreciated: Eriksen was once a COPE city councillor. COPE's municipal platform promised homes, transit, and neighbourhoods—for everyone.

But a more mixed gathering would not only have enabled crosstown audiences to see the Downtown Eastside's concerns appealingly staged; it would also have allowed the Eastside audience to enact their solidarity and demonstrate their rekindled community spirit for their fellow citizens and civic representatives from across town. To Hamburger's knowledge, and to his disappointment, none of the NPA candidates attended the play.

For theatre companies hoping that their productions will appeal across neighbourhood boundaries, the fact that these boundaries are compounded by class divides, political polarities, and diverging local investments can prove an obstacle. Or perhaps it is especially the popular perception of this compounding as fact that is the problem. The man behind me at intermission thought *Bruce*'s content was too "regional" for broad appeal. This was meant, I think, to be a polite way of saying that the play was too bound to a specific geographical position—and thus too bound to a specific, and marginal, socio-political perspective—to be really successful as theatre. I think he was wrong in several respects.

For one thing, our urban neighbourhoods are already more socially mixed than his statement recognizes: the Downtown Eastside may still be Canada's poorest neighbourhood, but expensive new condominiums are rapidly being built there—a development that does nothing to reduce poverty but does change the area's composition. There are homeless people struggling for survival in my Westside neighbourhood too. (And as Bruce said onstage, there are drunks everywhere—in Shaughnessy as well as on the Eastside.)

And many people's sympathies are not exclusively local. One Westside audience member at *Bruce* was Mel Lehan, a Kitsilano resident who would run as an NDP candidate in the May 2009 provincial election. Lehan was "so impressed" with the play's message and the quality of its music and performances that he felt "it should be seen in venues all across the city and not just in the Downtown Eastside." Bringing performances across town had worked before. Earlier in 2008, Lehan had successfully helped to bring a Downtown Eastside-based theatre project about homelessness—the opera *Condemned*—to Kitsilano, where it received standing ovations and three sold-out performances. *Condemned* featured amateur performers, many of whom had themselves experienced homelessness. Unfortunately, the substantial cost of remounting *Bruce*, with its professional actors and musicians, has so far prevented a crosstown tour.

On the other hand, *Bruce*'s concerns were precisely "regional," but in a wider sense than the man behind me intended. So long as diverse urban communities across the Vancouver landscape continue to share city resources and be governed by a common city council, their lives are intertwined. As the Downtown Eastside gentrifies, its poorest residents are pressed to move elsewhere in the city. And while the idea of expanding audiences for a play like *Bruce* by exporting it to other neighbourhoods promises to reintroduce the Eastside to people who might otherwise avoid it, I think that Theatre in the Raw's original attempt to welcome a mixed audience to the Russian Hall offered more potential to engage Vancouverites from across the city in the Downtown Eastside. To the extent that *Bruce* succeeded in making outsiders like me yearn to find a home in the community convened by the play, it offered a vision of Vancouver that placed the Downtown Eastside not at the city's margins but at its centre (or, to borrow from the Eastside's Heart of the City arts festival, at its "heart"). If only it were easier to get audiences to cross town.

The author would like to extend sincere thanks to Jay Hamburger, Bob Sarti, and Heidi Taylor for their generous help with the writing of this article, to Mel Lehan, and to the cast and company at Theatre in the Raw for their wonderful productions.

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NOTE

[1] Hamburger cites Vancouver Moving Theatre and Headlines Theatre as companies that engage local residents and issues in their Downtown Eastside-based productions. *Bruce* closely followed the fifth annual Heart of the City Festival, a collection of eighty cultural events produced over twelve days in venues across the Downtown Eastside. Vancouver playwright and dramaturge Heidi Taylor reminds me, as well, that the critically acclaimed theatre- and circus-based company Leaky Heaven Circus has been in residence at the Russian Hall for a number of years. Their productions have frequently involved children and adults from the surrounding neighbourhood.

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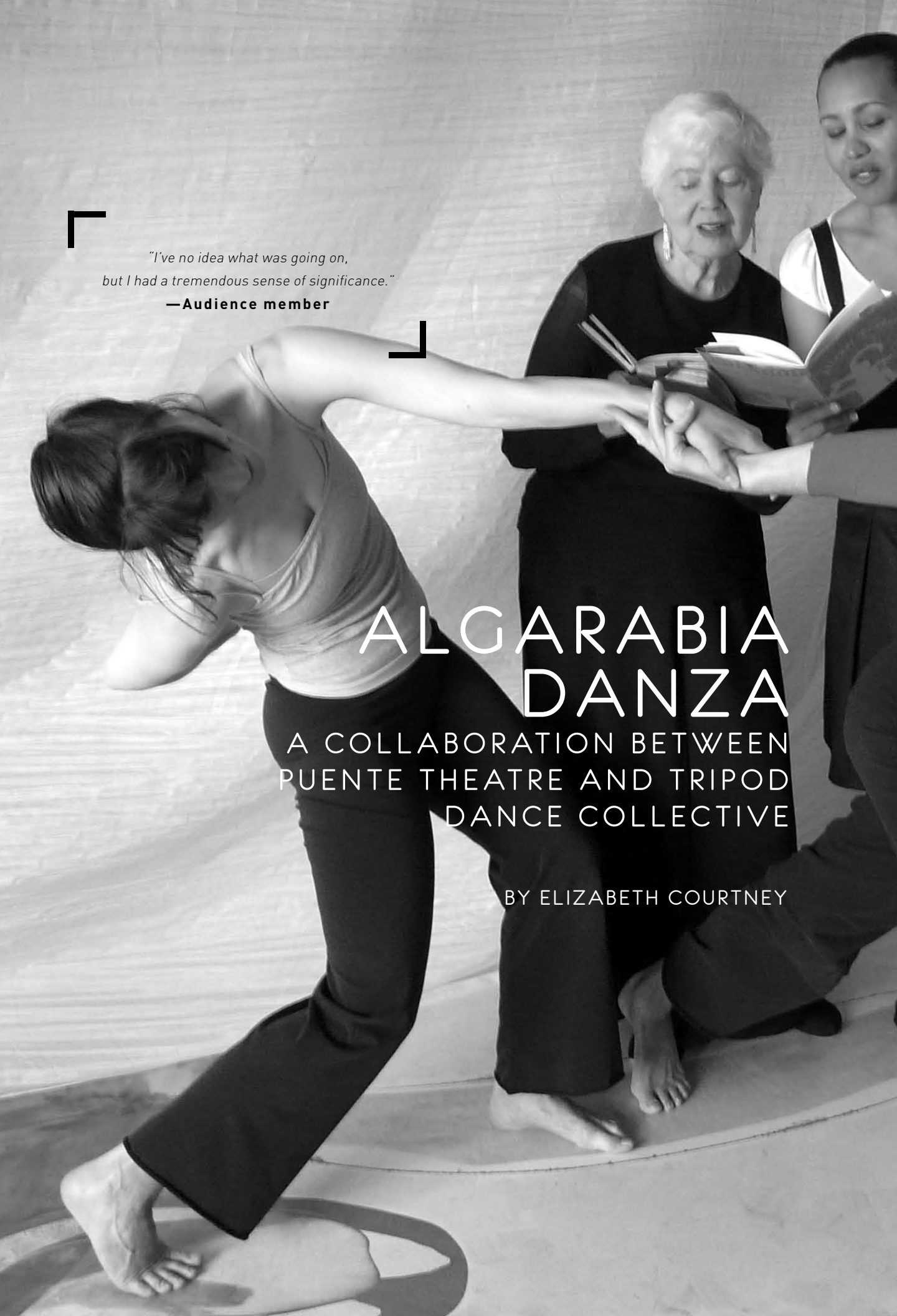
BIO

Sarah Banting IS A DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, WHERE SHE IS CURRENTLY WRITING A DISSERTATION ENTITLED "COMMON GROUND AND THE CITY: ASSUMED COMMUNITY IN VANCOUVER FICTION AND THEATRE." ATTENDING PLAYS IN A WIDE VARIETY OF VENUES ACROSS THE CITY HAS TAUGHT HER ABOUT THE COMPLICATED WAYS IN WHICH THE GEOGRAPHIES OF PERFORMANCE AFFECT THE AUDIENCES WHO ATTEND, AND ARE ADDRESSED BY, THE THEATRE.

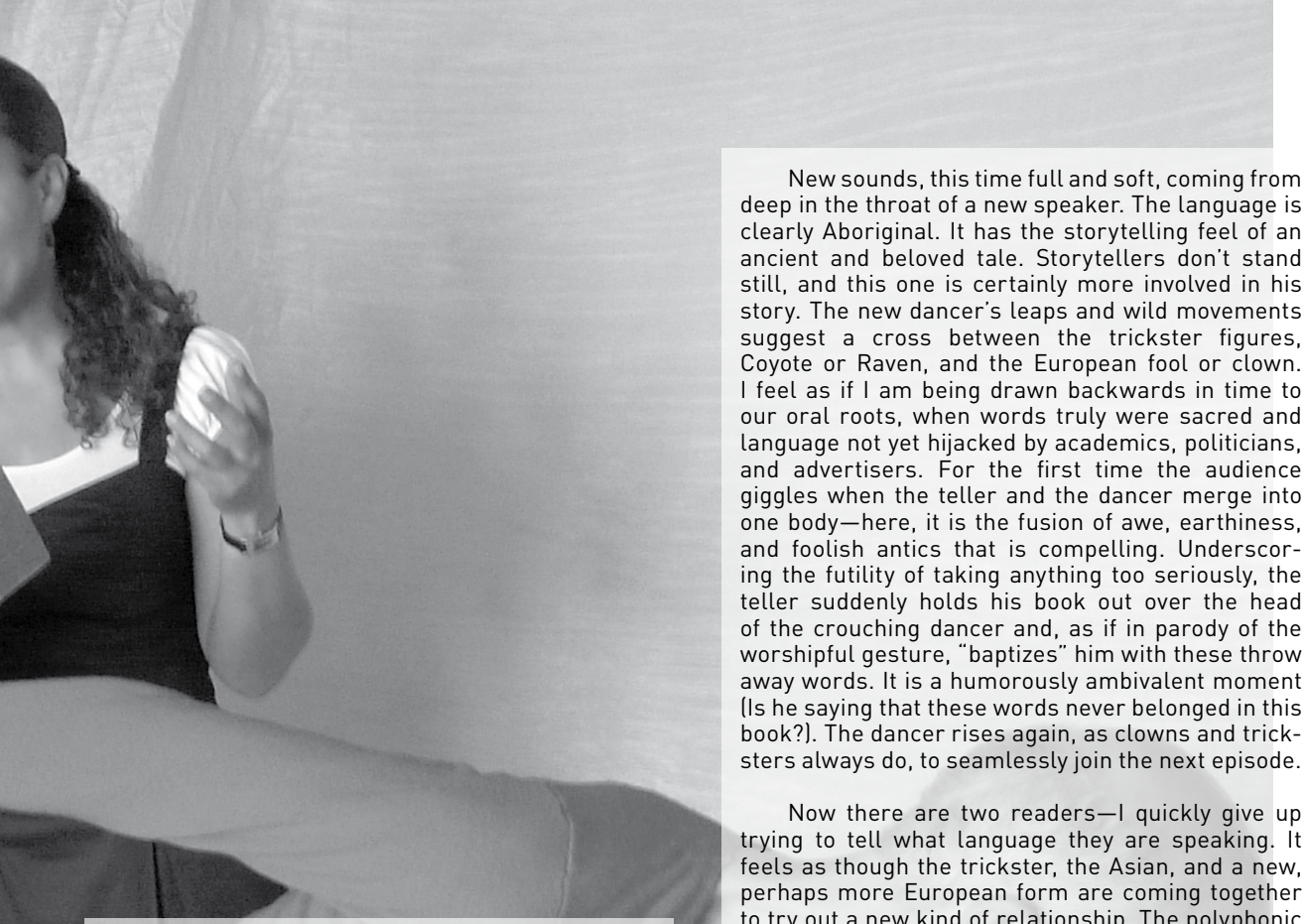


"I've no idea what was going on,
but I had a tremendous sense of significance."
—Audience member

ALGARABIA DANZA

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN PUENTE THEATRE AND TRIPOD DANCE COLLECTIVE

BY ELIZABETH COURTNEY



It is dark. A quiet voice begins to speak in an unfamiliar language. Lights. Four dancers, frozen together as if in a half-formed block of stone, wait for the sculptor to release them into their individual lives.

After a few moments of trying to isolate and extract meaning from this lilting language, my attention is drawn more fully to the dancers, allowing the sound to become the substratum from which they are emerging, slowly, delicately at first, then with increasing confidence, metamorphosing from block to form, from script to individual letters. The voice rises and falls in rhythmic cadences, and I find myself floating, enchanted, in the space between the utterance and the manifestation of meaning in the dancers' gestures.

The poet stands still, wearing black, only her face, her act of speaking, visible. The dancers, lean and colourfully dressed, both forming and driven by the sound, create phonemes with their arms and bodies, like new butterflies shaking out their wings to emerge into life. I begin to relinquish the compulsion to "get it" and surrender to what is perhaps closer to a mystical experience of knowing without words.

The light fades and the first voice is replaced by a powerful chanting song I recognize as Japanese, modulating into a softer, spoken sound as two new dancers leap onto the stage. I know at once that I am in the presence of a very different culture—the bodies convey bulk and the movement is all power and purpose, sometimes suggesting martial disciplines, sometimes the timeless activities of women in their domestic work, planting or pounding grain, perhaps. Sometimes the movement reflects the relationship between the dancers—the blending of power and tenderness is particularly affecting.

New sounds, this time full and soft, coming from deep in the throat of a new speaker. The language is clearly Aboriginal. It has the storytelling feel of an ancient and beloved tale. Storytellers don't stand still, and this one is certainly more involved in his story. The new dancer's leaps and wild movements suggest a cross between the trickster figures, Coyote or Raven, and the European fool or clown. I feel as if I am being drawn backwards in time to our oral roots, when words truly were sacred and language not yet hijacked by academics, politicians, and advertisers. For the first time the audience giggles when the teller and the dancer merge into one body—here, it is the fusion of awe, earthiness, and foolish antics that is compelling. Underscoring the futility of taking anything too seriously, the teller suddenly holds his book out over the head of the crouching dancer and, as if in parody of the worshipful gesture, "baptizes" him with these throw away words. It is a humorously ambivalent moment (Is he saying that these words never belonged in this book?). The dancer rises again, as clowns and tricksters always do, to seamlessly join the next episode.

Now there are two readers—I quickly give up trying to tell what language they are speaking. It feels as though the trickster, the Asian, and a new, perhaps more European form are coming together to try out a new kind of relationship. The polyphonic voices mesmerize, and the beauty of the slender fair form, the earthy dark one, and the slippery trickster-snake are somehow deeply reassuring.

Quickly, another voice intones sounds that seem made for chant—full of resonance, humming nasals, and open vowels. When the light falls on the speaker, he is wearing white and his features reveal that he is from the Indian subcontinent. The seven dancers now seem to represent all humanity—there is a wholeness in the tableau of eight. This is no longer storytelling—more like a "priestly" passing on of wisdom on how to live our lives, reinforced by the speaker's own gestures of authority and blessing. There is a listener at his feet, and the roaming trickster of the previous dance, moving at his own sweet pace; yet the whole coheres as if connected at the heart. The listener rises and joins the speaker as together they lead the dancers off the stage, hands crossed in front of their hearts, leaving one dancer to welcome a new language song.

It is Chinese—delicate, precise, and subtle, all expressed through the dancer's tiny, staccato, yet flowing movement with a decidedly Middle Eastern flavour. The voice is reciting, not reading, and as she and the dancer move in and out of each other's orbit—one dark, one luminous—they are like two dimensions of the same reality, two sources of the same meaning, two lovers, unique, yet sharing an identity.

As this exquisitely profound moment dissolves, an explosion of scarlet forms erupts across the stage, and the dancers move in a beautiful evocation of fiery feminine energy to the oceanic sounds of a flowing Spanish, giving way as a harsher, more urgent male voice takes the microphone—I assume it to be Russian. One dancer in red answers him—strong, full, round, decisive, architectural.

I begin to relinquish the compulsion to "get it" and surrender to what is perhaps closer to a mystical experience of knowing without words.

And then it is Ogden Nash's poem. We are not drawn aside into plumbing literal meanings—Miss Cavendish and Miss Rafferty wearing their lavender and taffeta is Nash's way of restoring primacy to sound. Yet the experience is very different: delight, childlike humour, and lightness. For the second time the audience laughs. Delighted, yet not challenged into opening to new depths, this is a small scherzo before ushering in a passionately somber French voice. Two dancers are summoned into a sinuous dance of yearning, regret, and melancholic confusion: a romantic struggle whose value seems to lie in its faithfulness to its own desire and beauty, regardless of the outcome—the partners leave separately.

A triple braid of polyphonic Spanish, Cree, and Chinese manifests a kaleidoscopic quartet of identically clad dancers, contracting and expanding in different patterns that mirror our current global experience of humanity's migrations in an unexpectedly hopeful way. The segment ends in silence, the dancers moving with their vast shadows.

More dancers emerge to engage with their own shadows; the new language is ancient, the dancers, primitive, chaotic. Frights and terrors, a world of indistinct forms animated by a dark spirit. This is Old English, the one word I recognize, the name of Grendel. The nightmarish, disjointed mood is overtaken, first indistinctly, then in a wildly joyous "hullabaloo" of voices—an "algarabia."

After a moment of utter silence, the audience erupts into wild applause.

The idea for *Algarabia*[1]—the original meaning of the word no doubt derived from the Spanish experience of the polyglot society that flourished in mediaeval Spain—came out of the overlapping histories in dance and theatre of three collaborators. Drawing on experiences of evenings of poetry from a variety of immigrant cultures, with translations provided by selected readers, and dance improv performances with local poets reading their own works, Hugh Macpherson, Lina de Guevara, and Lori Hamar set out to explore the possibilities of improvised movement to the sounds of different languages without the intervening distraction of the meaning of the words. This would, in effect, shut down certain language processing parts of the brain in favour of a more visual/musical response. Macpherson and Hamar collaborated on the choreography, while de Guevara invited a dozen different language speakers to choose poems in their native tongues.

The performances drew on two modes of perception, which made the experience closer to a sacred ritual than mere entertainment. The first was the felicitous use of polyphony, in which each voice has its own place—unique, distinct, but blending without creating any hierarchical harmonic relationships. The other mode is synaesthesia, a condition not uncommon in children but rarely developed in adults. Literally "beauty together," it describes a state in which sense responses to perceptions can be rearranged. I believe that this was some part of what was happening here—sound was seen and movement heard. And in the sudden loosening of our familiar perceptual habits, something akin to joy flowed in.

* * *

Hugh Macpherson is a dancer/choreographer with a background in performance art and massage therapy for dancers.

Macpherson:

> I was blown away by the palette of sounds and rhythms of twelve or so different languages when I heard the Puente poetry production. I hoped to intensify that experience by leaving out the translations and trying to express response in improvised dance. Somewhere, T. S. Eliot claims that poetry's challenge is to remain transparent to meaning, not to trivialize or cloud it with the language itself. A seventeenth-century Samurai warrior trains in becoming aware of self, other, and natural rhythms. Listening to language without knowledge of its meaning is like listening to the wind, water, or birds. I felt so clear about exploring this that I made the decision not to provide translations to anyone, dancers or audience, till the day after the performance, when I posted them online.
>
> The rehearsal process consisted of small groups of readers and dancers coming together over a period of several months to engage as deeply as possible with the expressive power of each language as music. Choreography was mainly concerned with providing the limited structure of entrances, exits, and transitions between each language, within which improvised movement could respond to the poems. Everything derived from the readers—Lina worked with them so they could develop their presence and comfort with the language as sound. The readers became more and more improvisational themselves—three of them spontaneously deciding to recite at once—and the effect was riveting. No two rehearsals were alike. In the end, the process seemed like a validation of each language. The Chinese reader, SuSu Ma, for instance, could not believe the pleasure and sense of power she felt in the experience of dancers responding to her language and culture. And as a dancer myself, I found the experience almost overwhelming—opening up to different languages was exciting. Languages are so varied, rich, subtler than music, so complex—the awareness of thousands of years behind each one. It was a unique opportunity to respond so attentively to such a range of language, each so unself-conscious of its own value, so organic.

Originally from Chile, Lina de Guevara is the founder and artistic director of Puente Theatre, a company in Victoria whose mandate is to create theatrical performance for and about the immigrant experience—making a bridge between immigrants and the culture they find themselves in. Over the years, her work with Puente has had a significant influence at many levels on how immigrants are perceived and appreciated in this city.

de Guevara:

> The poetry readers all came from the Puente "community" and included Swahili, Japanese, Cree, Spanish, Tamil, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, English, French, and Old English. Some of these languages would be familiar to very few citizens of Victoria. The English poem was read by my thirteen-year-old granddaughter, an Ogden Nash nonsense sound poem. In the sequencing of poems I was looking for a balance between languages, lyricism, sonorousness, percussiveness—working with the dynamics of sound, encouraging the readers to play with their own sound, changing in response to the dancers' movement. They were gradually able to let go of the literal meaning, using repetition or changes of register and rhythm at will
>
> Then there was the blending of languages—Swahili and Spanish for instance. All the elements had to be very clearly defined—readers were not dancers, and reciters were not readers. Reciters moved more freely than readers, and it made me want to explore further some of the differences between literature and oral poetry. I definitely sensed from the audience a certain liberation from rationality, a rediscovery of a lost aspect of the pure spoken word. We put the dancers in bright colours chosen to reflect an aspect of the language—red for Spanish, metallic silver for Chinese—and the readers in muted tones. The rehearsal space was very warm and inviting and helped free up and nourish the creative process between the readers and dancers. Being confined to one culture is very limiting—it was a wonderful opportunity to have this experience in Victoria. I want to take this further in the future and work with some of the languages where very few speakers are left. The Spanish speakers in the audience were so thrilled to hear their own language in the place they now live—how about Welsh, or Romanian, or Greenlander? Discussions about multiculturalism so often miss the point: honouring ancestry in a mutually reinforcing setting can be so meaningful.

© Elizabeth Courtney /
Lori Hamar, Lina de Guevara, Paulina Grainger,
Hugh Macpherson, Karun Thanjavur

Discussions about multiculturalism so often miss the point: honouring ancestry in a mutually reinforcing setting can be so meaningful.

Choosing not to know what the texts meant felt like entering language in an ancient and sacred way.

The constant in Lori Hamar's richly varied adult life has been dance performance and choreography. She has lived and worked in Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary and, for the last nineteen years, Victoria, dancing with Constantine Darling in the early days of the Victoria Arts Collaborative, and later at Lynda Raino's Dance Studio. In 1992 she founded Suddenly Dance Theatre with David Miles, and in 2003, together with two other dancer/choreographers, she founded triPOD, now a collective of thirteen who meet to improvise and perform dance.

Hamar:

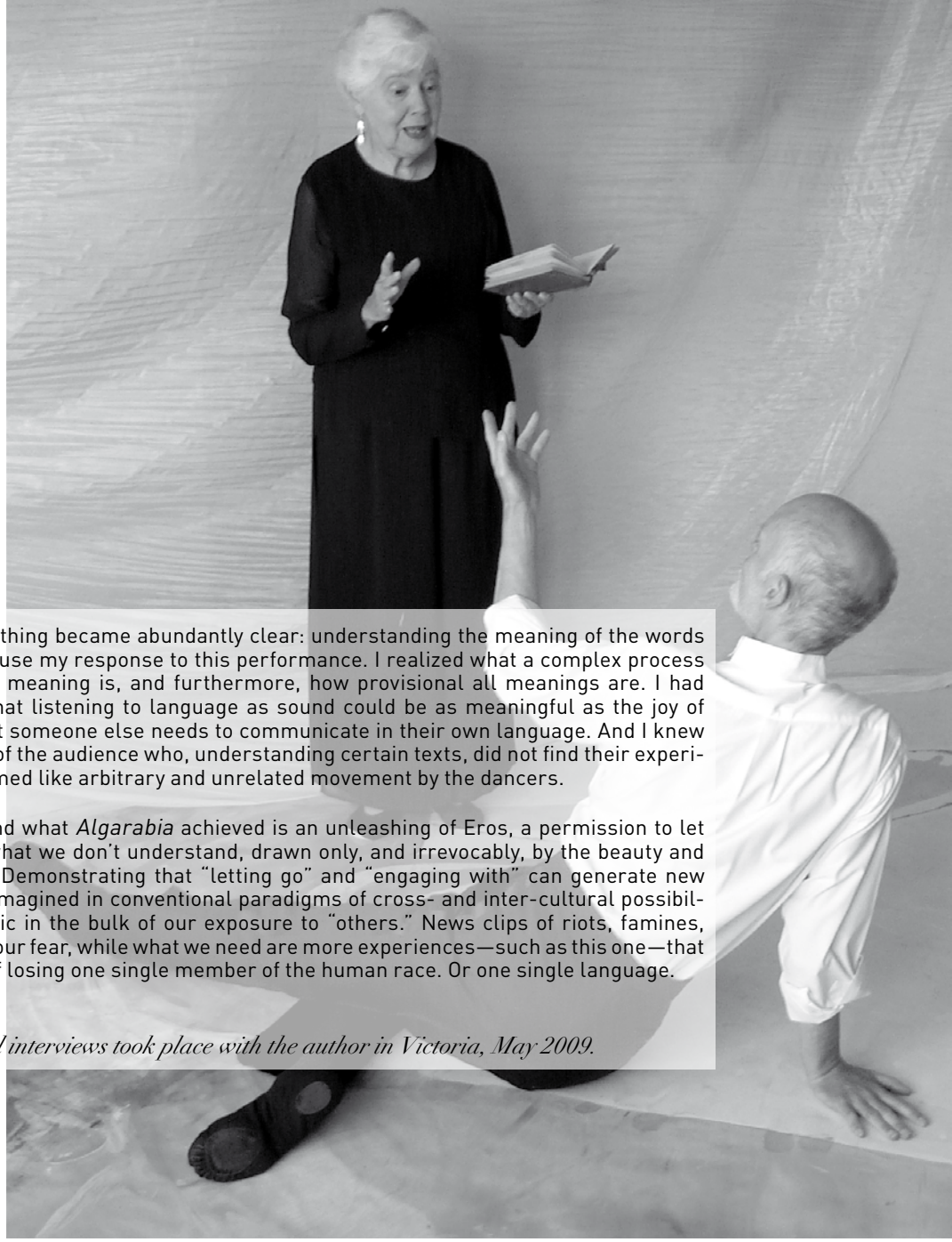
The biggest challenge I felt as a dancer in *Algarabia* was feeling secure in honouring the languages—it needed a very wholehearted, open kind of listening to find a truly authentic response to what was pure sound. The readers really wanted to share the meaning of their poems at first! But freed from the need to communicate a predetermined set of meanings, they became much more flexible themselves. The Japanese reader developed from a lilting, rather feminine style to a very energized warrior-like chant, which had an immediate impact on the dancers. Choosing not to know what the texts meant felt like entering language in an ancient and sacred way. The scoring emerged out of the rehearsing and only provided the simplest of structures—pathways of movement to or away from the reader or forming concentric circles around the reader, for instance—but the gestures remained improvised in the moment. In a sense, the audience was in the same boat as the dancers, forced to listen deeply and having nothing outside the moment to hang their responses on. It was a huge gift to have enough time to develop this kind of attentive, scored improvisation, which resulted in a very grounded feeling in the actual performance—it had become the product of a genuine history, not just a quick process. The movement always felt fresh and I felt our body vocabulary had been enriched

Karun Thanjavur is an astrophysicist from the University of Victoria. He grew up in Southern India surrounded by many languages, including Tamil. He had previously been part of one of Puente's multilingual poetry evenings, and has also enjoyed play readings and a poetry lovers' circle. He wanted to find something both lyrical and wise by one of India's most celebrated Tamil poets, Thiruvalluvur, but in the end had to settle for what he could find online in Tamil.

Thanjavur:

The *Algarabia* rehearsals were my first exposure to "all out improv" and I found it more liberating than terrifying, a wonderful experience, and as enriching listening to the other languages as speaking my own. Every rehearsal brought out something new, with different dancers on hand each time. Knowing myself what the poem meant gave me a feeling of being something like a puppeteer—noticing and enjoying the effect of my words on the dancers. I found myself trying to influence them with changes in tempo and rhythm and pitch, but by the last few rehearsals, when the movements had been selected, then I found myself being affected by them. There was a point when the dancers were all around me, mirroring my movements—it was really very moving and I found myself becoming even more expressive. Normally, I try to use my voice to convey the meaning of a poem, but here the dancers were intermediaries. It lessened the burden, and not needing to convey anything filled me with a kind of childlike playfulness—the pleasure in each rehearsal grew, and they were just as much fun as the performance itself. Where I come from, the community support for vibrant performing arts is very strong, and as a cosmologist, I want to explore more blending of interests myself. Even small villages have patrons who support all kinds of artistic activity—as well as its cultural significance, this kind of support is wonderful for one's confidence!

* * *



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After I read the poems, one thing became abundantly clear: understanding the meaning of the words only served to dilute or confuse my response to this performance. I realized what a complex process the attachment of sound to meaning is, and furthermore, how provisional all meanings are. I had struggled with the notion that listening to language as sound could be as meaningful as the joy of actually understanding what someone else needs to communicate in their own language. And I knew there were some members of the audience who, understanding certain texts, did not find their experience enhanced by what seemed like arbitrary and unrelated movement by the dancers.

We protect what we love, and what *Algarabia* achieved is an unleashing of Eros, a permission to let ourselves fall in love with what we don't understand, drawn only, and irrevocably, by the beauty and mystery of language itself. Demonstrating that "letting go" and "engaging with" can generate new forms and relationships unimagined in conventional paradigms of cross- and inter-cultural possibility highlights what is so toxic in the bulk of our exposure to "others." News clips of riots, famines, genocide, and disaster feed our fear, while what we need are more experiences—such as this one—that make unbearable the idea of losing one single member of the human race. Or one single language.

All four personal interviews took place with the author in Victoria, May 2009.

NOTE

[1] Developed, produced, and directed by Hugh Macpherson, Lina de Guevara, and Lori Hamar: Metro Theatre, Victoria, 29 November 2008.

BIO

ORIGINALLY FROM THE UK, **Elizabeth Courtney** HAS AN MA IN MYTHOLOGY/DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY FROM PACIFICA GRADUATE INSTITUTE, SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA. SHE IS INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORLD MUSIC, MYTH, AND MEANING AND IS DEEPLY INDEBTED TO THE SECWEPEMC (SHUSWAP) PEOPLE OF B.C. FOR THE INSIGHTS GAINED BY STUDYING THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE. SHE IS CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN A BHARATNATYAM DANCE CLASS AND SINGS MEDIAEVAL POLYPHONY IN A WOMEN'S CHOIR, ENSEMBLE LAUDE, IN VICTORIA, B.C.

Vancouver Wrecking Ball

Vancouver's November 2009 Wrecking Ball landed hard on the heels of major provincial budgetary cuts of the arts. Arts and culture organizations in BC are looking at a cut of 92 percent over the next three years—with a funding reduction from $47.675 million in 2008/09 to $3.675 million projected for 2011/12.[1] In BC, provincial funding makes up an average of 7 percent of the operating budgets of performing arts organizations (BC's average proportion is the lowest in Canada; the national average is 13 percent; Quebec's is 26 percent).[2]

Faced with these draconian cuts, the WB organizers challenged playwrights, filmmakers, and performers to contemplate *a world without art*. The Wrecking Ball started in 2004 in Toronto to engage the theatre community with politics on both local and global levels. In November 2008, Vancouver joined in the national chain reaction of Wrecking Balls galvanized around the federal election and the Anyone-But-the-Conservatives campaign.

The 2009 WB took place at the historic Vogue Theatre on Granville Street. The evening started with *Grey Square,* a street-level public intervention by choreographers Lee Su-Feh and Justine Chambers. The audience entered the theatre, walking past sixteen artists standing in four rows of four, each of them completely dressed in grey and holding candles. The show started when the artists walked onto the stage and blew out their candles.

Host Denis Simpson manoeuvred the audience through a night built around four short, satirical works: Mark Leiren-Young's sharp *Arts Puppies* presented an imagined speech by BC's Minister of Tourism, Culture, and the Arts rationalizing the difficult budget choices facing the government: to fund museums or widows and orphans? theatre or crippled children? music or puppies? Camyar Chai's *Window to an Epidemic* explored a dystopian future in which the artist's shackled imagination makes what was once colourful and bright merely grey. In Daniel MacIvor's *2020*, theatre was deemed "too close, too messy" to fund—better stick with cows in formaldehyde. And finally, Carmen Aguirre's *The Duende Is Here* was a potent reminder of how art and artists have been co-opted and discarded by government strategists, and a reminder also of the importance of fighting for arts—"because the universe is not made of atoms, it's made of stories. Because, in the final hour, art is what remains." The evening also featured a rant by Linda Griffiths, an episodic murder mystery by Monster Theatre, and performances by folk legend Jim Byrnes and by the Eastside Carnival Band.

More than four hundred people came out. Over $2000 was raised with proceeds donated to the Alliance for Arts and Culture and the BC Association for Charitable Gaming. But I'm always left wondering about the effectiveness of this sort of event as an advocacy tool. Did we raise awareness or were we preaching to the choir? Advocacy continues for the arts and culture sector in BC—a sector that employs 78,000 people; that returns between $1.05 and $1.36 in tax revenue for each dollar invested; that generates $5.2 billion annually; and, more importantly, that contributes to the well-being and health of all citizens. When we advocate, sometimes morale flags and depression can take hold. In those moments, I believe the choir needs to be preached to—and celebrated.

Adrienne Wong

EDITOR'S NOTE

Since this was written, the BC government has announced its 09/10 budget. For a breakdown of the budget as it applies to the arts, visit: www.allianceforarts.com/blog/reality-check-arts-funding-cut-bc-budget

NOTES

1 "The Numbers—BC Provincial Arts and Culture Funding/2008-2012," *Alliance for Arts and Culture (AAC) Advocacy Toolkit*, 10

2 "Talking Points—The British Columbia Context," *AAC Advocacy Toolkit*, 14.

BIO

ADRIENNE WONG IS A VANCOUVER-BASED THEATRE AND RADIO ARTIST. SHE IS CO-ARTISTIC PRODUCER OF NEWORLD THEATRE AND PERFORMED IN THE NEWORLD/TEESRI DUNIYA CO-PRODUCTION OF *MY NAME IS RACHEL CORRIE.* ADRIENNE'S WORKS INCLUDE *MIXIE AND THE HALFBREEDS* (WITH JULIE TAMIKO MANNING), R*ADIO SCRABBLE, PLACEBOOK*, AND *PODPLAYS* (IN DEVELOPMENT).

Reflections on a crosscountry collaboration in community arts training

In November 2009, Vancouver Moving Theatre and Toronto's Jumblies Theatre joined hands across Canada to present the Downtown Eastside Arts4All Institute—six days of learning, idea-sharing, films, panels, art-making, mutual support, and inspiration. Produced for the first time in western Canada, and specially tailored for the Downtown Eastside community, the institute provided an in-depth introduction to principles and practices of art that engage with and build community

Host director Savannah Walling and lead artist and facilitator Ruth Howard joined forces to adapt an intensive course developed by Jumblies in Toronto over the past three years as part of the Jumblies Studio. The name 4All springs from a close relationship between this initiative and Jumblies Offshoot project, Arts4All, at Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre.

Joining Savannah and Ruth as facilitators were Canadian community play movers Terry Hunter (VMT), Varrick Grimes (Toronto/Newfoundland), Keith McNair (Jumblies), Cathy Stubington (Runaway Moon Theatre, BC), and Lina de Guevera (Puente Theatre, BC). Panels on forming community partnerships and making room for diversity reflected a spectrum of community-engaged arts as practiced by Judy Marcuse (ICASC), Rosemary Georgeson (urban ink), Bruce Ray (gallery gachet), jil p. weaving (Vancouver Parks Board), and others. Coordinator Susan Gordon organized nourishing lunches. Community partners included Carnegie Community Centre, Community Arts Council of Vancouver, DTES Heart of the City Festival, UBC's Humanities 101, Ukrainian Hall, and Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation.

Reflecting most community art projects, the twenty-one participants represented a diversity of backgrounds, skills, interests, and purposes. Most were local, but some arrived from other neighbourhoods, from Victoria, from Kamloops. All shared an interest in gaining skills and in processes that engage with community. Participants included veterans in the field wanting to revisit basics, challenge skill-set weaknesses, learn from and share with peers; professional and emerging artists wanting to engage more effectively with communities and learn how this differs from mainstream arts presentations; and others who've participated in a variety of arts-related community activities wanting to learn how to go about becoming professionals in the field.

Some wanted to put Downtown Eastside-created projects onto the road to share with friends and relatives, to shed light on realities of city life, and to inspire other communities to put on their own plays. Most had big or small projects in mind and were ready for tips and tools on project start-ups; on facilitation, communication, conflict-resolution, delegation; on preparing (and maintaining) budgets, business plans, and funding proposals; on forming partnerships; on assembling collaborative creative relationships; and on documentation, evaluation, and legacies.

Big questions were addressed. What do artists need to know to work successfully with community members on arts projects? How do we create projects accessible to diverse levels of experience, age, cultural and social backgrounds, and openness? How do we ensure that community-engaged artists focus on a community's real issues and understand that when we risk opening up old wounds with tough themes, we must ensure that these communities and individuals will be okay after we leave?

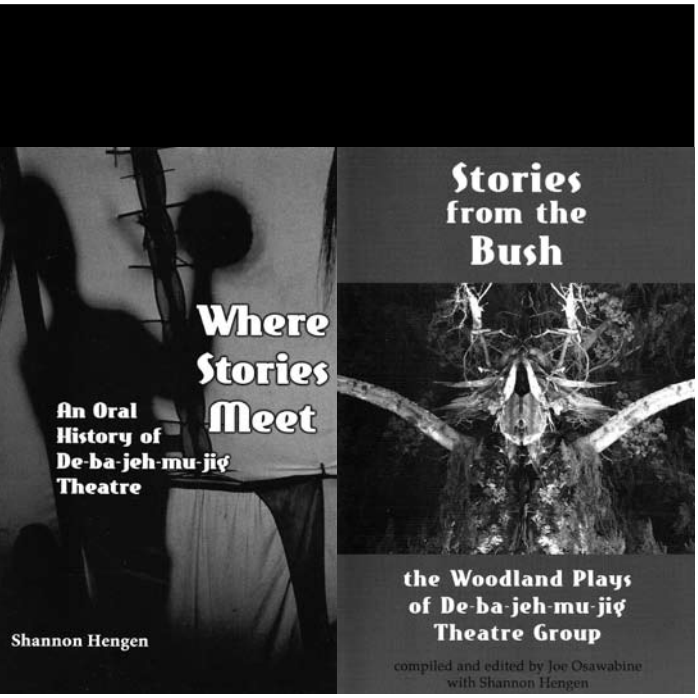
The energy and enthusiasm during the institute were contagious. Collaborations were great fun. Participants appreciated the diversity and willingness of people to be themselves, the respect and humour displayed throughout, and the shared wealth of resources and breadth of life and artistic experience. Everyone learned.

Savannah Walling and Ruth Howard

BIOS

SAVANNAH WALLING IS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF VANCOUVER MOVING THEATRE, AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COMPANY PRODUCING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ART AND THE DTES HEART OF THE CITY FESTIVAL. CONTACT: WWW.VANCOUVERMOVINGTHEATRE.COM OR WWW.HEARTOFTHECITYFESTIVAL.COM

RUTH HOWARD IS A THEATRE DESIGNER AND CREATOR AND FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF JUMBLIES THEATRE, A COMPANY THAT MAKES ART WITH, FOR, AND ABOUT PEOPLE AND PLACES OF TORONTO. CONTACT:INFOR@JUMBLIESTHEATRE.ORG, WWWJUMBLIESTHEATRE.ORG.



BOOK REVIEW

BY ARMAND GARNET RUFFO

WHERE STORIES MEET & STORIES FROM THE BUSH

As someone of Ojibway heritage very much interested in Native drama, I greeted the arrival of these texts with anticipation. Although I have seen only a few of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre's productions—since they are located up on Manitoulin Island—I can confidently say that their reputation precedes them. They are credited as being seminal in establishing contemporary Native theatre in Canada. This was immediately confirmed when I flipped open Shannon Hengen's text and encountered names like Tomson Highway, Alanis King, and Kennetch Charlette.

As we know, Highway has written some of Canada's best known plays, King worked for Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto (as artistic director), among other companies, and Charlette co-established the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company in Saskatoon. Clearly, these texts fill a long-standing void in providing information about a little-known company that in its own way has changed theatre in Canada.

Where Stories Meet: An Oral History of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre.

BY SHANNON HENGEN.
TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2007. Pp. 108.

Stories from the Bush: The Woodland Plays of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group

COMPILED AND EDITED BY JOE OSAWABINE WITH SHANNON HENGEN.
TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2009. Pp. x & 190.

The first thing that occurred to me was the question of audience. Who are these texts intended for? The answer is twofold: Aboriginal people who are familiar with the work and reputation of Debaj (as they are commonly called) and want to know more about them, and the larger Canadian (and to some extent Aboriginal) theatre-loving public who know little, if anything, about the company.

Where Stories Meet: An Oral History of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre sets out to do exactly what the title explicitly indicates: it provides an oral history of the company from the perspective of its key players, giving us an overview of the company's development since its formation in 1981 to the present day. Consisting of a mere 108 pages, the text begins with a short introduction of a couple of pages and ends with an equally short conclusion. Unfortunately, these do not provide us with much in the way of context or analysis, although the introduction does situate the company at Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island and indicates the general methodology of the text; and the conclusion, although rather general and perfunctory, does point out the importance of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre's Native voice within a historical framework. Consequently, it is the body of the text here that is worth the read, which consists primarily of a series of interviews—first-hand accounts of each interviewee's involvement with the theatre over his or her particular tenure. The questions that Hengen asks are diverse, covering everything from living conditions, community, personnel, language, and funding, to artistic inspiration and intention. The responses are candid and personal, and, much like traditional orality, they more often than not animate the text in the form of narratives rather than simple declarative statements.

What we get here then first and foremost are Native voices—voices that for generations have been either dismissed or ignored, voices telling their own history from a Native perspective and, moreover, from those who were or are still involved with the company. This ultimately results in a very personal text that in fact goes beyond De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre itself and provides insight into a thriving Native arts community. Beginning with Shirley Cheechoo, the founder and first artistic director of the company, Hengen goes on to interview seven others who figure prominently in the history of Debaj: Tomson Highway, Alanis King, Audrey Debassige Wemigwans, Rose Marie and Majorie Trudeau, Ron Berti, and the current artistic director, Joe Osawabine. The one exception to the interview format is the section on former artistic director Larry Lewis, who died of AID's related illness in 1995. He is remembered in a short commentary under his name and referred to by the others in the course of their interviews.

So why is this text important? According to Hengen, De-ba-jeh-mu-jig is "the longest running Native theatre in North America" (14). What one realizes immediately from Cheechoo's interview is that prior to her forming the company in 1981, the idea of professional Native theatre in Canada was just that—an idea. While it is clear from the interviewees that a dramatic tradition exists among the many First Nations across the country, contemporary Native theatre itself—drama written and performed by professional Native artists—was more or less nonexistent. The plays that were produced, like Nona Benedict's *The Dress (1970)* and George Kenny's *October Stranger (1977),* were minimal and by mostly nonprofessionals.

Many of Canada's preeminent Native playwrights—such as Drew Hayden Taylor, Joseph

Dandurand, and Tomson Highway—have all had their plays workshopped by De-ba-jeh-mu-jig and their careers kick-started there. For example, contrary to the popular belief that Highway's *The Rez Sisters* was workshopped and developed in Toronto, both Cheechoo and King remind us that it was first workshopped in Wikwemikong, and Highway himself adds that De-ba-jeh-mu-jig's "was the best workshop" (15). Audrey Debassige Wemigwans explains how Larry Lewis, the first director of *The Rez Sisters*, came up with the casting for the play: while visiting her and her friends on the reserve, he realized that "[he was] sitting right in the middle of *The Rez Sisters* right here, the very original" (37). Such anecdotes pepper the text, the informality of the responses making for an interesting read.

It was the empowering experience of seeing themselves in terms of the rest of the province, particularly northern Ontario, and not trying to measure themselves against what was happening in southern Ontario that breathed new life into the company.

An appendix provides a useful "Production Chronology" from 1981 to 2006, and tells us that since its formation De-ba-jeh-mu-jig has produced or co-produced some fifty plays. After years of struggling to attract funding as well as to get qualified theatre professionals up to Manitoulin Island, Debaj has finally achieved a level of success that other theatres only dream about. And yet, most of the plays and playwrights the Debaj produces will not be recognized, even by the Canadian theatre community. There are reasons for this.

First and foremost, despite their longevity and success, they are guided by a unique mandate that appears to have changed little since the company's formation; Alanis King indicates that the content of the plays in which she was involved in the mid-1980s arose from the Native cultures of the region, with "the Ojibway language [. . .] our determining factor" (26). Berti speaks of the oral storytelling in the context of building self-esteem, reaching out and nurturing, and creating a healthier community through the arts, and Joe Osawabine, the current artistic director, states matter-of-factly that "De-ba-jeh-mu-jig chooses to work with, the revitalization of Anishinaabeg culture" (79).

The other main reason they are "virtually unknown" undoubtedly has to do with the company's isolation up on Manitoulin Island. Combined with their specific mandate, one would think that this would inevitably lead to their demise. However, as the interviews with Berti and Osawabine indicate, quite the opposite has occurred. According to Berti, in 1995 the company made a significant change that has sustained and revitalized them. Realizing that they needed to keep their artists in the north, they invested in training them to become trainers themselves so that they could reach out to the Native communities across the province (and country). It was the empowering experience of seeing themselves in terms of the rest of the province, particularly northern Ontario, and not trying to measure themselves against what was happening in southern Ontario that breathed new life into the company.

In her concluding interview with Osawabine and Berti, Hengen touches on the company's recent productions, the National Aboriginal Arts Animator Program, and what they call "the 4D Creation Process," which they use "for developing new works, validating the traditions of orality, integrating foundation teachings, observational and operational learning, etc." (90). Additional questions that Hengen raises have to do with the company's influence beyond their immediate environment. The interviews conclude with references to the possibility of partnership and co-creation between them and their southern neighbours; and again we learn something that comes as a surprise: according to Osawabine and Berti, organizations like "Soulpepper Theatre Company [...] have acknowledged that their professional training model is an adaptation of ours [De-ba-jeh-mu-jig's]" (91). Such a remark certainly asks for a response from Soulpepper Theatre, and it is here, for example, that Hengen's text appears rather thin; questions at times elicit responses that warrant fuller explanations. Nevertheless, considering that this is the first book on any one Native theatre in Canada, it is certainly a good beginning. Shannon Hengen's *Where Stories Meet: An Oral History of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre* is an important and necessary contribution to growing body of literature about Native theatre and Canadian theatre in general.

Stories from the Bush: *The Woodland Plays of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group*, compiled and edited by Artistic Director *Joe* Osawabine with Shannon Hengen, answers the essential question: What exactly does De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre produce? The title makes it clear that the plays included in this collection are what Osawabine and Hengen call "woodland plays"—the term "woodland" normally used to denote a style of visual art developed by Norval Morrisseau in the 1960s. The

text consists of a two-page preface by Osawabine, a four-page introduction by Hengen, and six plays of varying lengths produced by the company.

At the outset, I must say that this text cries out for a longer and more thorough introduction to flesh out essential questions that the plays raise. For example, the preface specifically talks about the term woodland in the context of an artistic tradition among Aboriginal people and as a "distinct genre of Canadian plays" (iv). Further, it raises the crucial question, "What is Native Theatre?" and, without going into detail, indicates that the "Woodland Plays are, at the very least, a significant part of the definition" (iv). Osawabine's brief commentary is interesting and provocative when one considers that "woodland" is yet to be defined fully in terms of a narrative/theatrical tradition.

Turning to Hengen's introduction, aptly titled "Woodland Theatre," I thought that she might elaborate on Osawabine's comments. On the contrary, however, she gives us little more than an inkling of the characteristics of this type of theatre. To her credit she does focus on the specificity of landscape, a foundational characteristic of traditional Aboriginal narrative, writing that "legends are rooted in the place where Debaj tells them" (vii). Furthermore, she quotes anthropologist Julie Cruikshank's words—that the "'narrator [. . .] combines traditional narrative with individual experience'" (viii)—and uses this as a jumping-off point to note that "the artists at Debaj weave legendary and personal accounts to create and produce their work" (viii). And it is here that I ran into problems, because although it acknowledges that there is a theatrical tradition for Aboriginal people, the introduction does little to tell us what this tradition is, other than referencing the genre of legend as being fundamental to it. In other words, Hengen goes no further, other than to say that *"Stories from the Bush...* contributes to our education in 'Aboriginal literatures' and is therefore invaluable"(ix).

Turning to the six plays themselves, one is immediately aware that they all share certain characteristics of the oral tradition common to the Anishinaabe. Considering that De-ba-jeh-mujig has been in operation for nearly thirty years and has produced some fifty plays, it is clear that the editors have culled their repertory to give us a particular kind of play and a particular perspective on the company. According to Hengen, Debaj has workshopped and produced two kinds of plays over the years, those written by individual playwrights and those written by the Debaj collective. This collection is focused almost solely on the latter, with the exception of two plays credited to Larry Lewis (their now deceased (non-Native) artistic director) who nevertheless worked closely with community members. What of course Osawabine and Hengen are doing here is allowing the work to speak for itself, letting the plays provide a definition for "Woodland Theatre." Okay, so what do we get?

It is in answering this question that I have to say that I had difficulty with this text, arising from the problem of translating work based on an oral tradition to the written page. This is not to say that plays employing elements of the oral tradition cannot translate well, but only that here, for the most part, they do not. It seems to me that in publishing these plays, the editors have literally tried to bang a round peg into a square whole. The oral tradition of the Anishinaabe has its own world-view and hence its own characteristics, which are evinced in the extensive record of myth and legend upon which the plays are based. For example, the legend or mythic "branch" of traditional narrative is not tied to Western realism (for example, animal-people speak); it does not focus on extensive character or plot development (the reader is expected to know who Nanabush is and what he did to the birch tree, for example); it is episodic (each new location offers a new adventure); it is didactic (it has a moral agenda); and it speaks to community (Nanabush, for example, represents community).

The plays included in this collection—with the exception of one or two—not only arise from this tradition but closely adhere to and exhibit its traits. For example, *Lupi, The Great White Wolf, Ever! That Nanabush!*, and *New Voices Woman* employ "mythic" characters and focus more on the concept of the "journey" than on character, plot development, and complication. (And, of course, they emphasize moral standards for the community and they teach.) Other plays like *New World Brave* and *The Gift* are ostensibly more contemporary (*New Voices Woman* has a gay theme), but they too acknowledge their oral antecedent and employ movement, voice, and image that unfortunately make for rather dull reading compared to the vitality that must come with the live production. In fact, *New World Brave* employs clowning, music, and stylized movement that are impossible to replicate on the page, and *The Gift* presents a rhetorical, essay-like format that comes across as pedantic when lifted from its theatrical context. Furthermore, the traditional creation story upon which it is based is not told verbatim "in order to maintain the integrity of the oral tradition"(180). Ironically, the play that seems to work best on the page, *The Indian Affairs,* based on a traditional wolf teaching, is actually the least interesting in that it has a straightforward didactic message and underplays its mythic roots.

Okay, it sounds like I am coming down hard on this text and the work in it. On the contrary, what I am saying is that it is very difficult to translate work based on the oral tradition onto the written page and make it effective. As noted above, in Hengen's *Where Stories Meet,* De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre has a specific mandate that makes these plays invaluable to the Aboriginal community at large. Whether such work translates well onto the page is another issue. In fact, De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre has done this elsewhere—through developing the work of individual authors who have been inspired by the traditions of the Anishinaabe and by Manitoulin Island itself. Of course, Tomson Highway's plays immediately come to mind.

However, the difference is that a play like *The Rez Sisters* translates to the page because it is literally a "melting pot," meaning that it arises out of both Western and Aboriginal traditions. (Highway himself has spoken of his diverse influences.) In contrast, in creating its woodland plays, De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre has emphasized specific traditions that are the foundation of the company. In doing so, they give us a glimpse of work, and a world-view, that is rarely seen—work that is valuable in its own right. For me, a play like *Lupi, The Great White Wolf,* which is performed solely in the Ojibway language, makes me want to jump in my car and head to Manitoulin Island. The same can be said for the other plays: reading them makes me want to see the productions. Hopefully, this is what *Stories from the Bush* will ultimately accomplish.

BIO

Armand Garnet Ruffo, A MEMBER OF THE FOX LAKE FIRST NATION, CURRENTLY LIVES IN OTTAWA AND TEACHES AT CARLETON UNIVERSITY. HIS WRITING ON ABORIGINAL LITERATURE HAS APPEARED IN *ABORIGINAL DRAMA AND THEATRE: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CANADIAN THEATRE IN ENGLISH* (2006); *THE CANADIAN JOURNAL OF NATIVE STUDIES* (2009); *THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF CANADIAN LITERATURE* (2009); AND *ACROSS CULTURES/ACROSS BORDERS: CANADIAN ABORIGINAL AND NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURES* (2010). HE ALSO WROTE AND DIRECTED THE FEATURE FILM, *A WINDIGO TALE* (2009).

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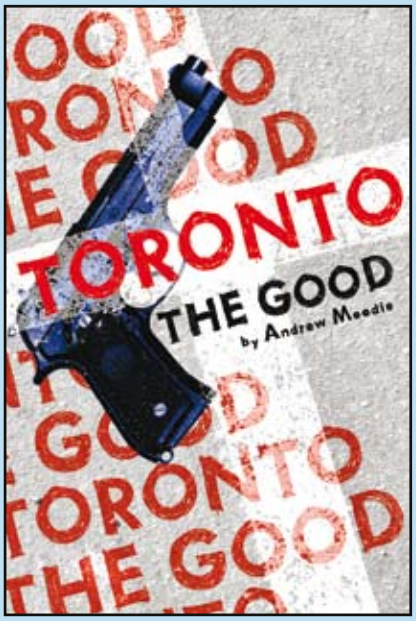

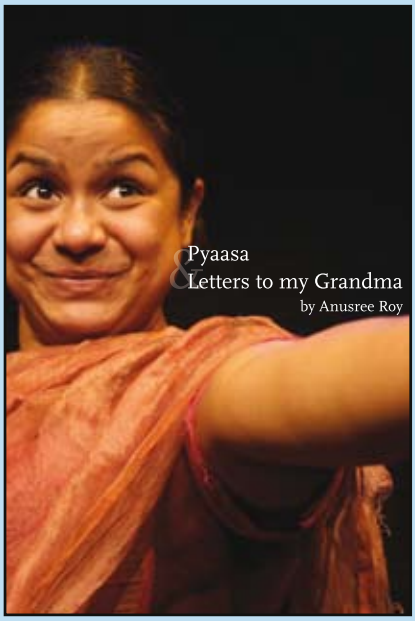

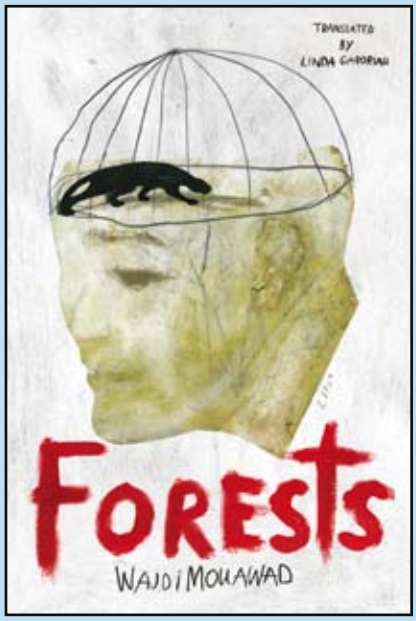

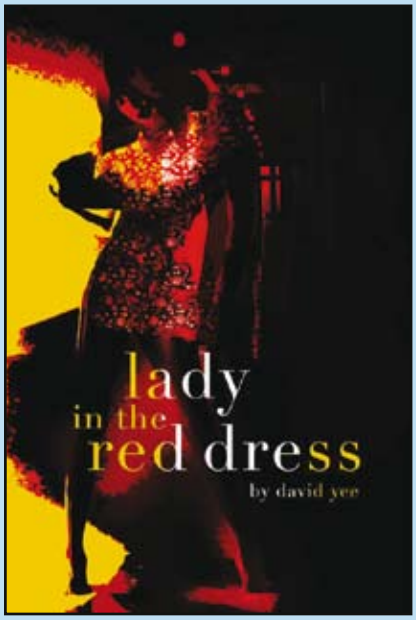

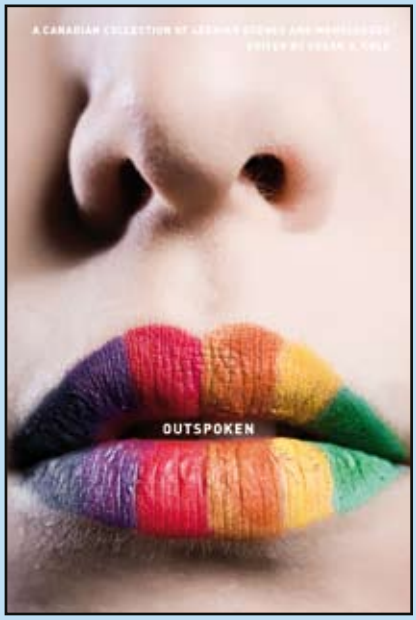

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