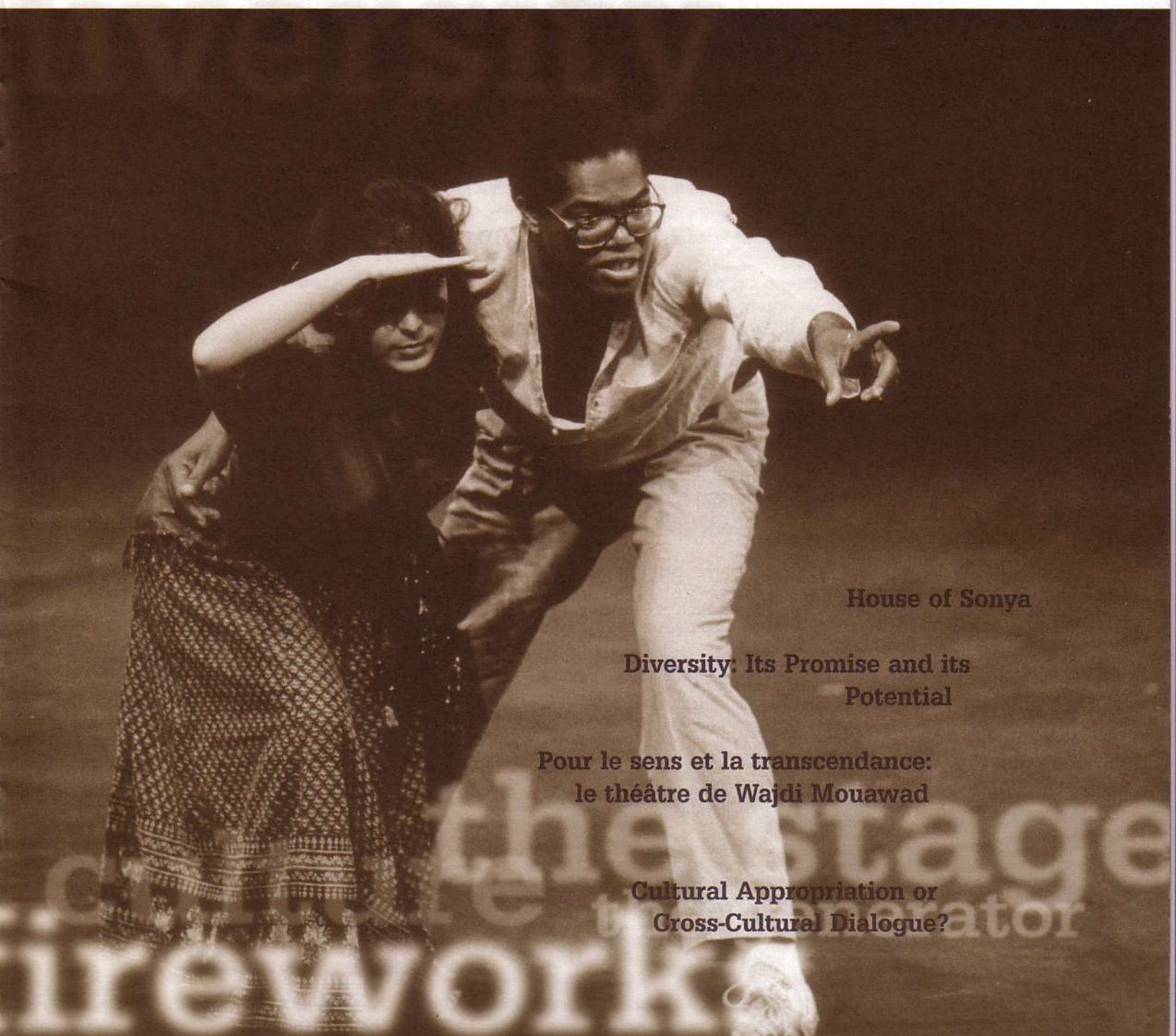




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alt.theatre
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alt.theatre is available on the web at the Teesri Duniya site (www.aei.ca/~tduniya)

Editorial

alt.theatre is a new quarterly review published by Teesri Duniya Theatre. Its aim is to celebrate cultural and artistic diversity and highlight their role in Canadian theatre. Through analytical, ideological and informative articles, **alt.theatre** seeks to place emerging theatre styles with-

in an his- torical, social and cultural context. We regard this initiative as an opportunity to raise awareness and trigger discussion, rather than as a forum for espousing a particular viewpoint. Accordingly, **alt.theatre** presents diverse viewpoints based on the assumption that any comprehensive appreciation of Canadian theatre requires a framework that reflects the cultural and artistic diversity of the country.

Over the years, Canada's cultural make-up has undergone a noticeable change. As more and more pieces have fused to our cultural mosaic, Canada has come to encompass the whole world. The viewpoint that multiculturalism is an idea imported by immigrants from countries of colour and ex-colonies has been replaced with the viewpoint that multiculturalism is a made-in-Canada idea that enables all cultures, dominant and minority, to coexist equally, in spite of differences and numerical disparity.

The constituent cultures and their respective theatre forms are advancing the frontiers of Canada's cultural and artistic landscape in a way that has never been seen before. Consequently (and fortunately), changes are happening in various arts funding bodies—notably the Canada Council for the Arts, which has already started to introduce policies to provide equitable support for the advancement of diverse and multicultural art. Although it is too soon to say how successful these initiatives have been, one thing is clear: there has been an appreciable

increase in artistic activity by artists from diverse communities.

A common characteristic among many artists of diverse backgrounds is that, in most cases, their art is a creative response to the issues of identity, dignity and representation. And since these creative responses, more often than not, are influenced by the theatrical elements of their respective cultures, we are seeing artistic innovation in the making. While I may well be wrong or overstating the case, it is still in the best interests of Canadian theatre to be alerted to and informed of the increasing importance of artists of diversity, the driving cultural politics behind it, the questions being asked—or not being asked—and what these artists are doing that is brand new.

Despite the increasing range of cultural and artistic diversity being reflected in the theatre today, seldom do we see a publication concerned exclusively with cultural diversity in relation to theatre. We feel that there is a need to complement and support the development of this type of theatre by engaging in insightful and focused discussion about the art forms involved and the artists that practice them. **alt.theatre** hopes to fulfill this need by connecting artists within cultures and across cultures.

All in all, **alt.theatre** is a proactive magazine that discusses artistic issues from the standpoint of cultural heterogeneity, multiculturalism and diversity. As the name suggests, it seeks to present different viewpoints and ignite discussion and debate on these subjects. We invite your comments, criticism, support and participation in this publication.

Rahul Varma

House of Sonya

This past winter, Cree playwright and director Floyd Favel Starr staged his own adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* entitled *House of Sonya* and set on a contemporary Cree reserve. Intrigued by the project, we invited him to write about his process and experience, and specifically, the relationship between the two plays.

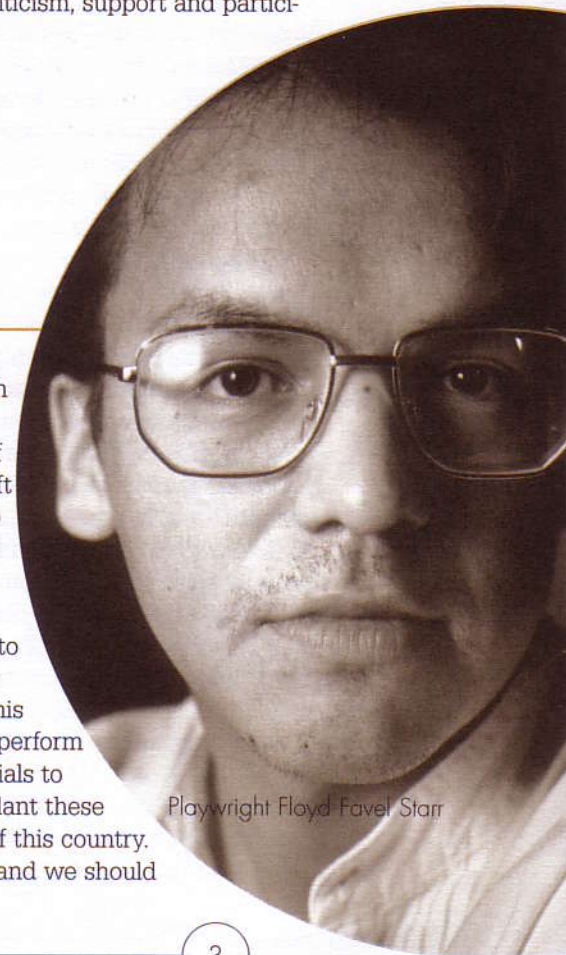
Written and directed by Floyd Favel Starr
Set design by Edward Poitras
Costumes by Lois Standing
Choreography by Robin Poitras
Performed by Mark Dieter, Robin Brass, Cheryl Dieter, Cecile Brass, Edward Poitras and Doris Linklater
Staged in Regina, December 15 to 16, 1997 at "The Other Side," a club close to the heart of the urban native community.

I wrote *House of Sonya*, or "*Sonya*", as an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. *Sonya* was essentially an offering to memory, ghosts and childhood. It

Floyd Favel Starr

was an elegy to a time which is painful to remember. Pain seems to be the sentiment of memory. Anyone who has left their home or their culture to live in a foreign environment can recognize this.

I have been thinking for some time now on the need to bury all drama that we do in Canada into the sources of this country. We should not only perform plays that are exiles or colonials to this land, but actually transplant these classical dramas to the soil of this country. We are all from this country and we should



Playwright Floyd Favel Starr

accept this. This is not only for dramas but I would say also for technique. We need to develop dramatic techniques that are informed by this land. When we do this that we can begin to make our own contributions to theatre. This is why I have been experimenting with a technique of dramaturgy based on the Plains Indian Winter Count.

The Plains Indian Winter Count system is a way of recording time through a series of images. Images which tell a story. Historically the chronicler of the Winter Count would create a key image embodying the central events of the year that had just ended, and that image would act as a catalyst into other stories depicting that year. Within the science at work in the selection and creation of the image lies the seed for a precise system

the script and our own pasts, I then went back to the original text and replaced Chekhov's scenes with our new ones, maintaining the basic structure of the original text.

House of Sonya is set on an old abandoned house on a reserve. An older Sonya comes home for Uncle Vanya's funeral. We learn that Vanya was found beaten to death on a Vancouver street and now has come home for the last time, in a coffin. Sonya returns to her childhood home which is an abandoned, destroyed house. She walks in, the ghosts and memories return, and she lives through a traumatic event in her life. The time she came to know the fragility of being a human; the time she fell in love with Doctor Astrov. This is how *Sonya* opens.

We approached *Uncle Vanya* as though it were a year that had just ended, first by breaking each unit down into specific images, and by isolating specific images in the text that resonated within our personal experience.

of dramaturgy of action and text. I do not think that I understand this science, but it is the quest and search which is the process. Essentially, this system is the fruit of, and fodder for, memory.

Prior to the rehearsal period I spent four weeks with the cast of Native actors exploring the text and ways of adapting it to our own experience. We approached *Uncle Vanya* as though it were a year that had just ended, first by breaking each unit down into specific images, and by isolating specific images in the text that resonated within our personal experience. (Some of these images were: Vanya in the garden, Yelena in the thunderstorm at night, Marina having tea, and the samovar, which represented tradition for us.) These images acted as catalysts for other, more personal stories drawn from the actors' lives and imaginations; from them we created new scenes or dances, or variations on the original scenes through solo improvisations.

Although the first couple of weeks of rehearsal were fruitful, initially there was much that didn't work. Having the actors do their own solo rendition of the play, or a specific scene, integrating a personal story, often simply resulted in a simple recreation of *Uncle Vanya*. We found that these scenes were not truthful because they were not related to the actors' own lives. We had yet to find the bridge between *Vanya* and our own memories and reality.

A breakthrough came after two weeks of work. Doris Linklater created an improvisation that touched and spoke to all of us and came to inform the style of the play. She played an older Sonya coming home and remembering the events of the past. I remember the day she did this scene as I had to go outside and smoke, so affected was I. After this, other actors began creating scenes that spoke of their pasts, they began to remember. This deep personalization helped us appropriate the text. *Uncle Vanya* now related to our lives.

After two weeks of exploring the links between

The abandoned house is a metaphor for remembering. I think that our bodies are much like an abandoned house full of evocative shadows and remnants, of past loves and joys. The movement qualities of the play were based on this principle. Once again it was about remembering. The postures of the body were based on half-completed actions as opposed to clear complete actions. This was because the body was remembering and if you complete the action then we are not remembering, but illustrating. In my hand is the hand of my father, in my chest is the event of childhood. In the angle of the head is the memory of grandmother's body on the day she said, "Don't be afraid," as I was leaving for school in the non-native world. There in a physical posture on the stage is the day the sun burned me as her words pierced my body.

By opening the play on the day of Vanya's funeral I was expressing a reality that many native people are familiar with. Many have left the reserve to get educated, to seek opportunity, only ever coming home for funerals. That is, those of us who were not in jail, lost in the cities, or dead. We would come home and not want to return again because we always came back in hardship and would remember the hardships we had when growing up. It was a way for me to make something beautiful out of something tragic. The tragedy of people of my generation trying to make a living in the larger society yet longing for our home, homes which stir such strong feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia was at the heart of the play and coloured every thought and action.

The music was selected to enhance and bring into relief these feelings. We chose Jewish Klezmer music as the base of our musical soundscape. Not only did this music express the proper pain, I also feel that this music helps to transcend a specific cultural expression of nostalgia into a universal expression that all can relate to.

These are some words on the emotional and spiritual process of the genesis of *House of Sonya*. The intellectual and theatrical process was informed by the emotional and spiritual and it is these intangible aspects which preceded all other actions.

For more details on the production itself, see Heather Elton's excellent and insightful review in the Winter 1998 issue of *Border Crossings*.

Floyd Favel Starr is from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan, and works primarily as a theatre director. He studied theatre at the Native Theatre School in Ontario, Tukak Teatret of Denmark, and at the Centro di Lavoro di Grotowski in Italy. He works extensively across Canada, and is also the Artistic Director of the Takwakin Theatre and the Red Tattoo Ensemble.

Cultural Appropriation or Cross-Cultural Dialogue?

Ken McDonough

There are two areas where I have a particular interest: writing and theatre. I wish to share my feelings on the above issue from the perspective of these two art forms.

Writing

First let me acknowledge that characters truly representative of "identities" other than those specific to the author are not always adequately rendered in the arts. There are numerous examples of stereotypes and biased interpretations which are used to substitute for what is, in effect, a lack of knowledge, insight, and comfort with the unfamiliar.

It has often been pointed out, for example, that many male authors create female characters who are coloured by male sexual fantasy, the culture of the day, or ambivalence born of the author's personal experience with women. Thus, some feminists would argue, the female characters lack an authentic female voice and, since men have traditionally dominated the literary scene, these male perceptions have shaped the views of people for generations, to the detriment of women.

A similar argument has been made—and justifiably so—about dominant-culture representations of First Peoples, visible minorities, and gays and lesbians: they are frequently stereotypical and speak more of the dominant culture's often immature perception of these groups than of their real lived experience.

Is the answer to demand that authors of one group decline from representing characters of another group or from writing stories about them?

I believe the answer is no, for two reasons. The first lies in the essence of artistic creation. Artists are engaged in a complex process, part self-exploration, part exploration of others, part exploration of human interaction. Their means are empathy and their skill at articulating alternative experience; that is, the ability to plug into a character's predicament and imagine all possible perceptions, reactions and actions based on intimate, fleshed-out knowledge.

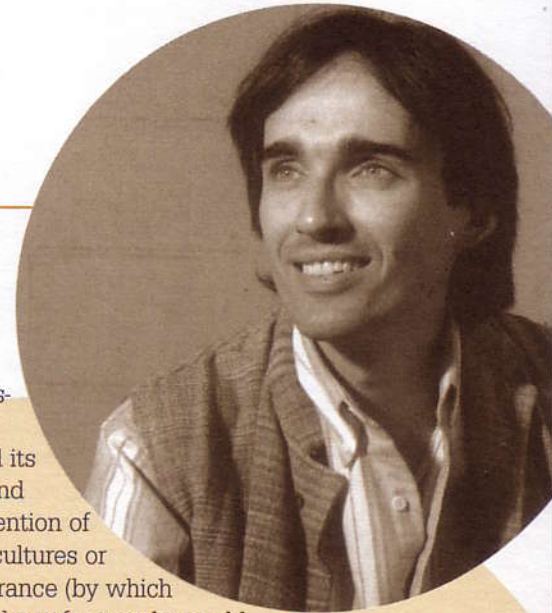
Artists, unless they are producing something for

mass consumption, are not simply going through this process to create a work tailored to an audience; rather, their art is motivated by a passionate desire to understand and articulate their world and its many disparate parts. I contend that it is generally not the intention of artists to misrepresent other cultures or groups. However, due to ignorance (by which I simply mean not knowing), they often settle on old preconceptions, usually defined by their immediate cultural environment.

Ignorance, though, is not addressed through a prohibition on exploring others' experiences but, rather, through continued creation by artists of all backgrounds. Their unique voices, by informing each other and the culture around them, will eventually effect a new understanding and awareness of those experiences, which will be reflected across the broad spectrum of artistic expression.

The second reason is tied to this notion of education. I previously qualified the traditional handling of non-dominant groups as "immature." I know some would have preferred "totally unbelievable" and even "degrading"; however, I put it to you that the core of the problem is immaturity. As in real life, maturity comes through actual contact and communication with others, followed by exploration, not in making everything beyond a person's most immediate reality off limits. Surely, each one of us can remember a time when we were afraid of someone because of some aspect of their identity. If we were lucky enough to put aside our preconceptions and learn about the person, we discovered that our preconceptions were unfounded. It was an opening to a new understanding and a richer life.

The problem has always been the lack of contact between artists of different backgrounds. Indeed, artists from the dominant community—and this is true in any



Above: Ken McDonough

country, not just those in the West—often write as though there were no one else around them; then, when this fact strikes them and the worlds they've been creating seem suddenly incomplete, they clumsily stitch together characters to fill the vacuum. Over time, however, as the writer seeks out experience and knowledge, these representations do actually mature and approach believability.

One need only look at the quantum leap that has been made in the depiction of homosexuals in the cinema. Or the numerous books by men and women which contain very sensitive renderings of the opposite sex. These are all healthy developments which, had the authors or filmmakers censored themselves, would not have occurred and their growing sensitivity would not have been used, in turn, to sensitize their audience.

I readily admit that satisfactory forays across cultures are still rare. I believe this is because writers are sensitive to their cultural limits and the dangers inherent in pushing too far into unfamiliar territory. However, I also believe that this will change as artists of diverse backgrounds continue to contribute to the common discourse of Canadian culture and that, over the long run, the representations of visible minorities, both by "visible" and "invisible" artists, will evolve accordingly. Indeed, for the urban Canadian experience to be depicted truthfully, this evolution is unavoidable.

I feel obliged to underscore the time element here. The claims of appropriation are an understandable reaction to having had one's voice and image frozen out or shaped by the dominant culture over a long period. This situation is particularly frustrating for the First Peoples, for whom the problem has persisted for hundreds of years.

However, stopping an artist of one group from talking about or representing another group will only result in further marginalization. Cross-fertilization over a longer

Ignorance is not addressed through a prohibition on exploring others' experiences but through continued creation.

time does achieve results: the dialogue of the past two or three decades, as we have seen in the case of women, gays and lesbians, is just now beginning to bear fruit.

The key, then, is to promote as many articulate voices out there as possible so the scene becomes more reflective of reality, and to support "cross-identity" collaboration and debate. I think that artists, and ultimately their audiences, will quickly learn that, however unique our realities are, our human values and overall capacity for empathy and identification are very similar.

Theatre

The problems in the literary world revolve primarily around content. With an international status and so many high-profile "visible" Canadian authors such as Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry, Canadian literature does not face the same practical hurdles as theatre or film.

Theatre has been slow to react to Canadian demographics. There are more minority actors, but they are still refused roles on the basis of their physical attributes. Whereas it is not unusual for Othello and First Peoples (particularly native leaders) to be played by white actors in make-up and costumes, visible minorities are often limited to "visible" roles. As a result, they have fewer opportunities to display the full range of their talents and less chance of making a living in theatre or cinema.

Is raising the cry of "appropriation" and demanding that minority parts be reserved for minority actors the answer? Again, I don't see how it can be. The situation would only deteriorate, as such a restriction would simply reinforce an already intolerable reality. If the theatre draws a line in response, reserving majority roles for majority actors on the one hand and minority roles for minority actors on the other, I think we can safely guess who will lose out. Anyway, a viable solution would have to offer substantially increased opportunity, and a policy of reserving roles based on ethnicity or sexual orientation, for example, would permanently leave minority actors competing over a limited repertoire.

A better solution would be if theatre made the shift to colour-blind casting, where, unless a person of a particular background were absolutely required, roles would be distributed on merit. It is a known fact that when roles are played well, the audience sees only the characters, not the colour of their skin.

To back this up, I give you my personal anecdote. In 1992, I co-wrote a play with Rahul Varma, *No Man's Land*, about a South Asian family that leaves India after partition. I also played the lead role. After the play, several white Canadians approached me to explain that they could understand my predicament, even though they respected that *my* country was different. I am white, English-speaking and from Scarborough, Ontario.

On the play-writing front, old frustrations about multicultural funding going to mainstream theatre groups that give a token nod to diversity are also fuelling claims of cultural appropriation. Yet it is also true that an increasing number of playwrights from diverse cultural communities are gaining recognition and, with it, access to mainstream funding bodies. In addition, Heritage Canada and the Canada Council have made significant strides to become inclusive and cross-cultural in recent years. The resulting exchange and cross-fertilization of art forms and creative innovation can only enrich the Canadian arts scene as a whole. The call to halt so-called appropriation would seriously damage this important trend by discouraging intercultural partnering.

In conclusion, while I acknowledge the obstacles that various groups have encountered in having their own voices heard, putting any restriction on the artist as to whom or what he or she can write about, direct or play, would be tantamount to censorship. More importantly, it would not have the desired effect. On the contrary, it would further marginalize groups which should

be striving to assert their place in the mainstream. Ideally, all artists of all backgrounds would, through their contributions, effect change and sensitize others. Artists across the spectrum will gradually reflect that living awareness in their own work.

Finally, it is worth remembering that, as frustrating

Diversity: Its Promise and its Potential

Diversity; diverse artists; artists of colour; multi-, inter- and cross-cultural... these are just some of the terms that have become commonplace in Canada in the past two decades. While respecting the distinct meanings of each, for the purpose of this discussion I have grouped them under the umbrella term "diversity." Diversity, as I am sure readers will guess, encompasses artists of non-dominant cultures and the wide range of their artistic practice.

That diversity is being discussed by art critics and artists may well be indicative of a new emerging cultural consciousness; one which acknowledges heterogeneity and thereby embraces the full spectrum of our cultural mosaic. This is the least that can be expected from a country that prides itself on being heterogeneous and, more specifically, multicultural. Accompanying this new consciousness is a growing recognition of diverse art forms and artists. I believe this suggests a new artistic sensibility among the artists and arts organizations and I would go so far as to argue that a new cultural politics is in the making in Canada.

This emerging new cultural politics, which results from and is responsible for the developments described above, is redefining the concept of heterogeneity. This redefinition represents a shift from monoculturalism, biculturalism and xenophobia, and towards diversity, multiplicity and multiculturalism.

Once a society begins to act on the basis of this definition of heterogeneity, it is faced with some important questions. The most important of these are the ones relating to ethical and political considerations. For some artists and academics, the central concerns are authenticity and representation. Their constant preoccupation is with the question of who speaks for whom and in what capacity. Often, the result resembles a turf war. For others, staking out territory is irrelevant; what matters is artistic innovation. These people give greater weight to new artistic approaches and their relationship to existing ones.

This new and, I believe, more accurate view of heterogeneity is immensely important if the depth and

as it may be sometimes, change is often measured in very small steps over a very long period of time. The best antidote is bridge-building and persistence.

Ken McDonough is a professional translator in Montreal. He is also an actor, playwright and member of the Board of Directors at Teesri Duniya Theatre.

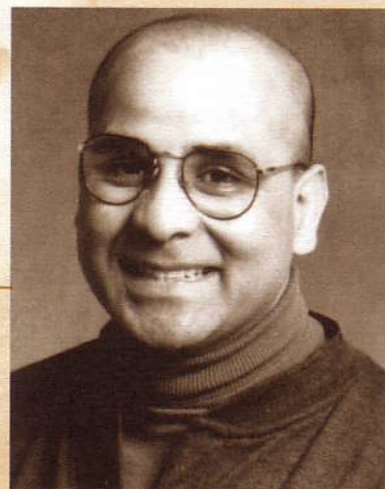
Rahul Varma

breadth of Canadian art and culture is to be appreciated. As a practising diverse artist and playwright, I hope to draw on my experience and, to the best of my abilities, discuss the importance and role of diversity in Canadian theatre. I will also attempt to address the challenges it presents for the future.

Diversity, of course, is the outcome of visible changes in Canada's cultural make-up. As new panels have joined the demographic quilt, there has been increased artistic activity and political lobbying to ensure representation of Canada's many sociocultural streams.

Be that as it may, the parameters of diversity must not be confined to the original settlers, immigrants and their descendants. Let me explain. There is a commonly held belief that "Canada was (is) built by immigrants." This belief grew out of the struggle for equality. I remember how, through my personal involvement in that struggle in the early years after my arrival in Canada, I quickly incorporated this statement into my own vocabulary. I can still recall using it in the heat of a discussion with a native friend. His eyes widened and I questioned my conscience. But instead of criticism, he smiled and graciously said, "Don't worry. I welcome you to my country." From that point on, I realized that we have all, in varying degree, benefited from aboriginal generosity, at an immense cost to their own history, nationhood and well-being. The point is that the idea that Canada was (is) built by immigrants may be appealing for immigrants and their descendants, but restricting our understanding of heterogeneity this way would perpetuate a grave historical injustice. Razing the monolith of homogeneity and replacing it with a new redefined notion of heterogeneity is therefore not simply a means of achieving cultural and artistic equality but also an opportunity to right an historical wrong of monumental proportions.

Any shift in the country's artistic sensibilities is probably due to the climate created by this new cultural poli-



Above: Rahul Varma

tics. For the trend to continue successfully, I believe it is important to enhance our artistic practice, focus on artistic innovation, and steer clear of the kind of tokenism exhibited by some large theatre companies who jump on the diversity bandwagon mainly because someone somewhere has a budget for it.

Promise and Potential

Based on my personal knowledge of and work with many diverse artists, I can identify certain commonalities in their "Canadian experience". After arriving in Canada, they don't look for an artistic job. Their first priority in Canada almost always is to put bread and butter on the table by engaging in any profession that they can practice. Subsequently, or concurrently, they begin practising their art. They are almost always very creative in finding ways to pursue their artistic endeavours, particularly if their work is not recognized by the funding bodies. Alignment with community organisations, community theatre, "variety" shows—all become tools in the artist's attempt to earn professional recognition from these agencies.

Fortunately, the progressive implementation of policies based on the new cultural politics means that central institutions such as the Canada Council for the Arts have begun to ease this situation. For example, the Canada Council has accorded equitable recognition to diversity. As a result, today second- and third-generation

In 1990 I wrote *Land Where The Trees Talk*, a play set in the James Bay area of northern Quebec. The play dealt with native land rights and environment and was produced during the Oka crisis—the armed stand-off between the government and the Mohawk nation. This time the play was directed by a noted Canadian director, Jack Langedijk, who combined the Indian *Nautanki* style in which the text was written with the high energy and high-paced "show" values usually found in the popular theatre of Canada. The result was wonderful. Since then we have been mixing various influences of Indian theatre with existing Canadian theatrical styles. The net result, in my opinion, is a unique brand of Canadian theatre created by new Canadians either in exclusivity or in collaboration with artists from the dominant culture.

Efforts along these lines are one concrete way in which ethnic and minority artists and artists without "clout" can achieve demarginalization. Such efforts would also present a tremendous marketing opportunity for Canadian theatre by providing the country's cultural communities with the opportunity to see themselves on stage. Happily, that journey has begun; but we have a long way to go. There are two important goals that we must strive for. One: we must intensify diverse artistic practice, and two: we must not repeat mistakes the mainstream has made. In other words, we must prevent diversity from being homogenized as in the past.

The idea that Canada was built by immigrants may be appealing for immigrants and their descendants, but restricting our understanding of heterogeneity this way would perpetuate a grave historical injustice.

immigrant children are opting for artistic careers. This is in direct contrast with the past, when immigrants from countries of colour insisted their children become engineers, lawyers and accountants. This shift probably reflects confidence in Canada's new artistic policies, a situation that bodes well for the country and the artists concerned.

As immigrants and their offspring enter the arts in ever greater numbers, a wonderful opportunity is opening up. With artists of all generations displaying stylistic, artistic and cultural influences from their ancestral countries, the clash and interaction of their inherited styles with those of the dominant culture are giving rise to something new—something uniquely Canadian!

Let me give you an example of the above. In 1987, I wrote and directed a play called *Job Stealer*. The play was written in response to racism that some refugees from Sri Lanka experienced after "fleeing the boat". The writing was influenced by a form of protest theatre in India, which by necessity is message-driven. Therefore the understanding was that the louder and clearer the message, the closer the play will come to achieving its goal. The presentation style was influenced by a form of theatre in India called *Nautanki*. I believe that the enthusiastic response to *Job Stealer* by audiences and critics alike was a result in large part of these "foreign" influences.

The question of authenticity keeps coming up and having said the above, I would argue that "speaking as" is not as important as "speaking about". "Speaking as" amounts to a kind of generalization that may not be in the best interest of the advancement of the art of diversity. I base this argument on the understanding that no community is a one-issue community and no community can be described or dramatized by one single voice. There are multiple positions that a diverse artist must inhabit simply because an artist, diverse or mainstream, is more than just one thing.

In the larger interest of continued exploration and innovation, it is important to shun tokenism and learn from other practitioners and their work. The road to where we are today—viewing our art through a new cultural consciousness—is centuries long. The challenge will now be to practice our art without distancing ourselves from the styles and ideas of the dominant culture or from our particular cultural heritage. Pursuing an all-inclusive approach not only will help channel diverse artists and their art into the mainstream but also will result in a mainstream that is more diverse.

Rahul Varma is Artistic Director of Teesri Duniya Theatre.

Playwright Comes of Age with Counter Offence

Winston Sutton

Rahul Varma is honest and uncompromising in his work as a playwright. As founding member and Artistic Director of Teesri Duniya (an East Indian theatre company), his plays target racism, injustice and inequality in Canadian society. The broad spectrum of his work includes *Isolated Incident*, about the killing of a black man by a racist white cop; *Equal Wages*, dealing with wage disparity between men and women; *Job Stealer*, exploring the perception that immigrants are stealing jobs from Canadian-born workers; and *Land Where The Trees Talk*, about the North Bay Hydro Electric Project and its effects on the Cree Indians.

Varma's early accomplishments burned with rage, an anger often obscuring the real message. However, this rage soon gave way to a skilful handling of material, and the true brilliance of his work began to reveal itself. This is most evident in his latest effort, *Counter Offence*, which played at the Monument Nationale, Montreal, September 25 to October 5, 1997. It was a co-production between Teesri Duniya and the Black Theatre Workshop.

In *Counter Offence*, Shapoor, an Iranian studying in Canada on a student visa, marries Shazia, the daughter of East Indian parents living in Montreal. The marriage is not without problems, and one day, in one of his many heated moments of anger, Shapoor hits his wife. Shazia calls the police and Sgt. Guy Galliard from the domestic unit answers the call. Because of his own experiences with conjugal violence (his mother was killed by his father), Galliard is rough in his treatment of Shapoor. In steps an Indo-Canadian anti-racist activist, Moolchand Misra, who exploits Sgt. Galliard's handling of Shapoor to advance his own views and uses racism as a platform against the predominantly white police force and its Brotherhood, headed by Gilles Prougault. Prougault, though seemingly fair, has political ambitions within the union, and is fully capable of machinations. Shazia finds support from her parents, Shafiqah and Mohammed Rizvi, but her father is more concerned with his standing in his ethnic community than with Shazia's real welfare. Shazia finds support in Clarinda Keith, a black woman running a centre for battered women, who understandably, has zero tolerance for domestic violence. Moolchand tries to play on divided loyalties, arguing that she should join him in nailing the whites, but she says she will testify in favour of Galliard, who is committed to her cause. Moolchand's tenacious pursuit of Sgt. Galliard pays off when Galliard is summoned to an inquiry, a development not taken kindly by the police or the Brotherhood. Soon after, in a seemingly bizarre coincidence, Shapoor is found dead in a YMCA hotel room, and suspicions are raised. According to Varma, "*Counter Offence* explores an explosive situation when crime against a woman is turned into a crime against race."

On entering the theatre one is immediately struck by the simplicity of the set, comprised mainly of doorframes illuminated by sharp contrasts of light and shadow. The downstage right corner is furnished with a frame and a makeshift bed representing the YMCA hotel room, while at the opposite end another frame is placed to define the centre for battered women. The empty space downstage centre becomes an outside location in one scene, then transforms itself into a courtroom when a frame is placed in the area in a horizontal position. Another vertical frame that begins as an entrance into a prison cell converts the area into another location by altering the frame's angle. This convention established by director Jack Langedijk and designed by J. David Gutman works extremely well and allows for fluid movement from scene to scene without breaking the movement or momentum of the play.

Gutman also uses light very imaginatively. The contrast of light and shadow satisfies the obvious intention of bringing focus to the action; however, the shadow element is important to Moolchand's movements as it serves as a metaphor for his hidden agenda of racism, a clear subplot of the play.

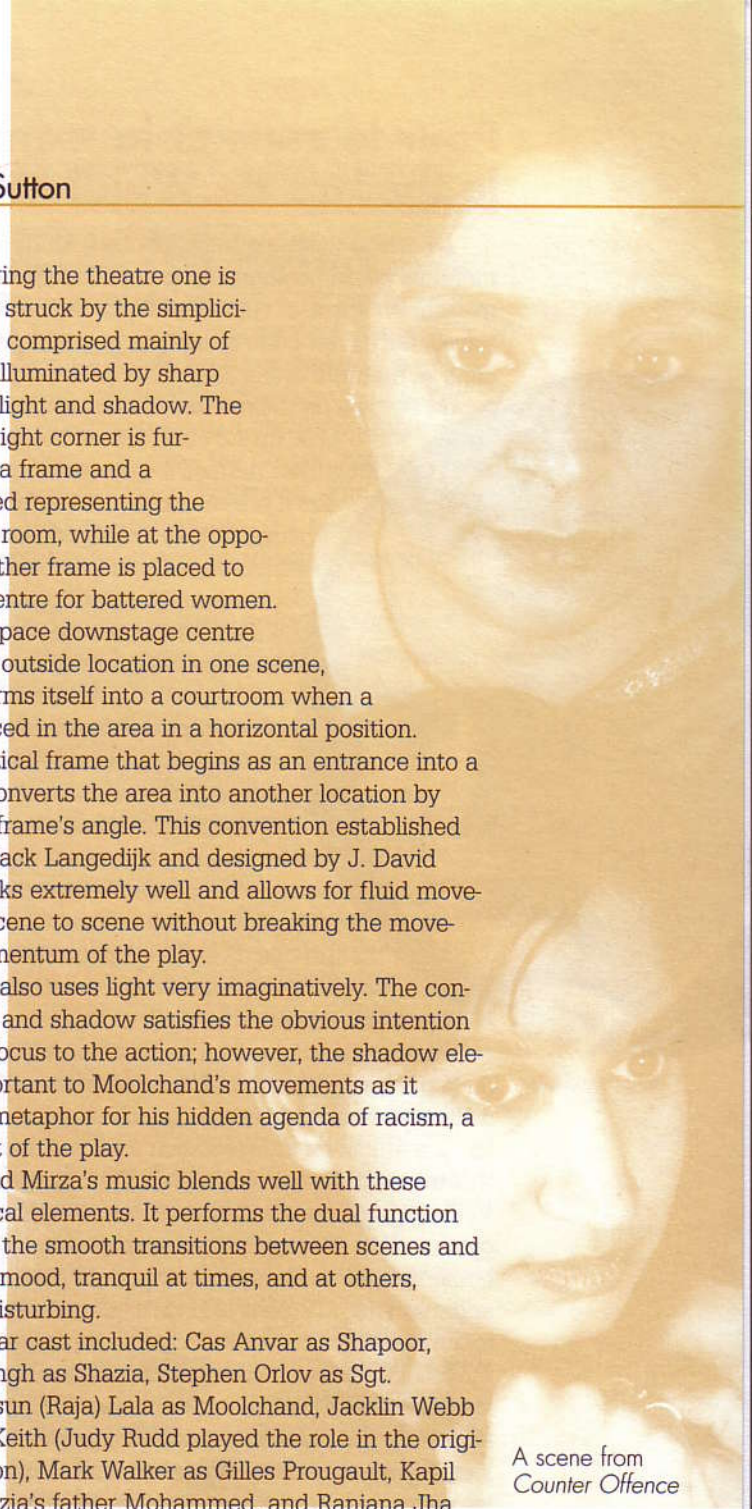
Raiomond Mirza's music blends well with these other technical elements. It performs the dual function of supplying the smooth transitions between scenes and establishing mood, tranquil at times, and at others, hauntingly disturbing.

The stellar cast included: Cas Anvar as Shapoor, Raminder Singh as Shazia, Stephen Orlov as Sgt. Galliard, Prasun (Raja) Lala as Moolchand, Jacklin Webb as Clarinda Keith (Judy Rudd played the role in the original production), Mark Walker as Gilles Prougault, Kapil Bawa as Shazia's father Mohammed, and Ranjana Jha as her mother Shafiqah.

The ensemble work and the truth and simplicity of the performances offer the audience an experience of the richness and complexity of the characters portrayed. With Varma's support and insight, Langedijk carves this sensitive and thought-provoking story into a truly wonderful theatrical experience.

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A scene from *Counter Offence*

Pour le sens et la transcendance : le théâtre de Wajdi Mouawad

Paul Lefebvre



Paul Lefebvre

La saison théâtrale francophone à Montréal aura été marquée par la personnalité exceptionnelle de l'auteur, metteur en scène et comédien Wajdi Mouawad, dont le travail, découvert cette année par le grand public, entre dans sa maturité artistique. Au printemps dernier, lors du Festival de théâtre des Amériques, on a pu voir son *Littoral*, qu'il a écrit, mis en scène et produit.

En janvier dernier, à quelques jours d'inter- valle, il présentait sa mise en scène de *Trainspotting* au Théâtre de Quat'Sous et sa mise en scène d'*Oedipe Roi* de Sophocle au Théâtre Denise Pelletier.

En mars, le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde montait son adaptation du *Don Quichotte* de Cervantès et, finalement, en mai il produisait et mettait en scène sa première pièce, *Willy Protogoras enfermé dans les toilettes*, écrite alors qu'il était encore étudiant. Or, non seulement ces spectacles ont tous remporté un succès public et critique, mais ce succès indique des tendances nouvelles : ce théâtre très divertissant pourtant aux antipodes du divertissement montre chez le public une soif de parole forte.

Wajdi Mouawad est né au Liban en 1968. À cause de la guerre, lorsqu'il a huit ans, il s'exile en France avec sa famille; et c'est à l'âge de quatorze ans qu'il s'installe ici. Il a étudié en interprétation à l'École nationale de théâtre, dont il a été diplômé en 1991. Sa première pièce, *Willy Protogoras enfermé dans les toilettes* raconte le geste radical d'un adolescent pour arrêter la lutte homérique entre deux familles pour la possession d'un appartement. C'est en 1991 qu'il est monté pour la première fois avec *Partie de cache-cache entre deux Tchécoslovaques au début du siècle*, une biographie imaginaire de Kafka. Sa pièce suivante, *Journée de noces chez les Cromagnons* (1993) montre comment, un jour d'orage et de bombardement, une famille organise les noces de leur fille narcoleptique alors qu'il n'y a même pas de fiancé. En 1995, il écrit *Alphonse*, le monologue d'un enfant qui raconte sa fugue. *Les Mains d'Edwige au moment de la naissance* (1996) met en

scène une jeune fille qui refuse de croire que sa soeur est morte. Et *Littoral* (1997) raconte l'errance d'un fils qui cherche un lieu pour enterrer le corps de son père, un sujet qui lui tenait à coeur depuis longtemps.

Le théâtre de Wajdi Mouawad est un théâtre de la parole, une parole proliférante, martelante, souveraine. (Ce qui ne veut pas dire que c'est un théâtre qui n'a pas besoin des corps, au contraire.) La langue n'a rien de réaliste et se promène à tous les niveaux, du plus trivial jusqu'à l'expression poétique la plus raffinée. Et lorsqu'il met en scène ses propres pièces, c'est d'abord lancer cette parole vers le spectateur qui le préoccupe : très souvent, les acteurs font face au public et le jeu tient toujours compte de la présence du public. En fait, Mouawad est peu intéressé au réalisme psychologique; lorsqu'un personnage dialogue, son interlocuteur est davantage le spectateur que l'autre personnage auquel il semble à première vue s'adresser. Dans la dramaturgie Mouawad, le spectateur reçoit les diverses facettes d'un discours qu'il doit intégrer pour arriver au sens.

Le théâtre de Wajdi Mouawad, sous-tendu par une quête de la transcendance, fait le pari du sens, et ce de façon très nette. Il tente de proposer autre chose que l'ironie intelligente et la déconstruction du discours, en fait, ce que le dramaturge René-Daniel Dubois appelle «le nihilisme militant». C'est à ce travail de recherche du sens que le public grandissant de Mouawad est sensible. C'est pourtant une dramaturgie qui n'impose rien au spectateur et qui n'essaie jamais de le manipuler. Avec *Littoral* et la présentation de *Willy Protogoras enfermé dans les toilettes*, Wajdi Mouawad a de son propre aveu bouclé un premier cycle. Ce premier cycle est basé sur le refus, surtout sur le refus de gagner à tout prix. Car le théâtre de Mouawad est centré sur des personnages qui, en perdant, gagnent. C'est la proposition de ce nouveau paradigme, opposé au credo du néolibéralisme, qui attire à ses pièces un public heureux de (re)trouver le théâtre comme lieu de pensée et d'exigence, et non de seul divertissement.

Paul Lefebvre est metteur en scène et traducteur. Il enseigne à l'École nationale de théâtre et occupe le poste de directeur littéraire au Théâtre Denise-Pelletier.

An English version of this article is available on the Teesri Duniya website (www.aei.ca/~tduniya).

At Teesri Duniya

MAKING SPARKS

This year has been marked by the launch of a multi-faceted Cross-Cultural Play Development program. Titled **MAKING SPARKS** and headed by Company dramaturg Shelley Tepperman, the program is Teesri Duniya's effort to support playwrights of culturally diverse backgrounds and develop works for the stage that are reflective of a

Shelley Tepperman

multicultural, multiracial vision of Canada.

At the core of the program are **THE GENERATOR**, a cross-cultural playwrights' unit (see page 11), **FLASH POINT**, a program of tailor-made dramaturgy to seed and nurture a small number of projects, and **FIREWORKS**, an intercultural showcase of fresh pieces for the stage. **FIREWORKS** is both an opportunity for pro-

jects developed in-house to have their first encounter with the public, and a unique opportunity for Montreal audiences to experience recent intercultural works from elsewhere in the country. Auxiliary programs include **SALON 4324**, a thematically driven forum held twice a month, aimed at bringing together members of Montreal's diverse artistic and academic communities, and **OTHER FIRES**, a series of staged readings of 8 outstanding plays from cultures rarely depicted on our stages, that will be co-presented with Centaur Theatre from October through May.

Schedules for **FIREWORKS** and **OTHER FIRES** will appear in the next issue of **alt.theatre**. Information will also be available on the Teesri Duniya website (www.aei.ca/~tduniya).

THE GENERATOR

Teesri Duniya's writers' unit, **THE GENERATOR**, was born of the desire to see the multicultural and multilingual reality of Montreal reflected onstage. Believing it essential to offer support to writers whose voices and concerns do not reflect the two dominant cultures, we began actively reaching out to emerging allophone writers and émigré theatre artists interested in writing for English-speaking audiences.

Part of what motivated this active outreach was our search for the authenticity of voice that occurs when immigrant writers write about what they know, in their own words. Four of the five participants in **THE GENERATOR** are writing in English as a second language. Although the project is just beginning its third month, already visible are powerful and singular visions, and a richness of imagery, wit and unexpected poetry that often occurs when creative minds (in)formed by the structure and concepts of one language speak through another. Writers are not only permitted but encouraged to use their mother tongue in their work; the only constraint is that the piece be accessible to an English-speaking audience.

The writers in **THE GENERATOR** form a diverse, stimulating group spanning a generation and a half and a wide range of cultural origins. All are propelled by a need to be heard. Some, professional actors in their own countries, turned to writing as a result of their frustration with the lack of roles available to them.

Isabel Dos Santos, an accomplished actress and playwright in Portugal, had hoped to continue working in the Québécois theatre community when she moved to Montreal ten years ago. She soon found that because of her accent, she would only ever be cast as "the immigrant woman" or "the maid".

Like Isabel, Salvadorean writer Alfonso Valles-Quintero has had difficulty making use of his professional training as an actor and puppeteer in Canada. He finds it ironic to be stereotyped and marginalized as a "Latino" here, when his mixed (mestizo) heritage had always set

him apart from both Native Indians and whites in his own country. His play, written in English, French and Spanish, provides a window onto the Latin American émigré community in Montreal.

Many of the writers in **THE GENERATOR** are compelled to write because of their own experiences with the politics of culture, identity and survival. Rania Arabi's need to write comes from her experience as a public health team volunteer in Iraq after the Gulf War. A Jordan-born Palestinian woman, she uses Arabic storytelling traditions to question the deeper motivations behind our incessant drive to wage war. The rich blending of history in the countries she has lived in fascinates her and feeds her own growing identity as a minority here in Quebec.

Sylvie-Anne Trudel, a métisse artist who draws on native mask and dance in her work, has always maintained a connection to other cultures and believes this has allowed her art to flourish throughout her twenty-year career. Her work, which is concerned with the preservation of the soul in contemporary urban life, borrows from the gestural vocabularies of T'ai Chi and Noh theatre. For her, writing in English in **THE GENERATOR** is an attempt to "speak white".

Gissa Israel, the lone anglophone in the group, is a native Montrealer who, in her youth, left an acting career to become a psychotherapist. Thirty years later she returned to the theatre, writing solo performance pieces. As a second-generation Jew, she too struggles with issues of culture and identity, and reflects on the paradoxical nature of being a minority and the contradictory state that this produces: fighting assimilation and wanting it at the same time.

All the members of the unit feel that they have found a writing home within the security of **THE GENERATOR**. It relieves the isolation of writing as well as that of coming from an "other" cultural background. Sylvie-Anne says, "...being of mixed heritage allows me to have no frontiers, no barriers. I am from nowhere and this, I find enriching. You think you are alone but you are not. Every time you meet someone you are changed forever."

Shelley Tepperman is Dramaturg at Teesri Duniya Theatre.

MEMBERS GET ON THE WEB

Teesri Duniya invites practicing theatre artists to become Professional Members of the company. It now offers members space on its website to post a picture and a resume. In addition, members get a complimentary subscription to **alt.theatre**, free tickets to productions, free or discounted registration for workshops, and more—all this for an annual fee of \$25 (plus taxes). For details, see our website (www.aei.ca/~tduniya) or contact Teesri Duniya Theatre (see back cover).



Teesri Duniya
T H E A T R E



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Teesri Duniya

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