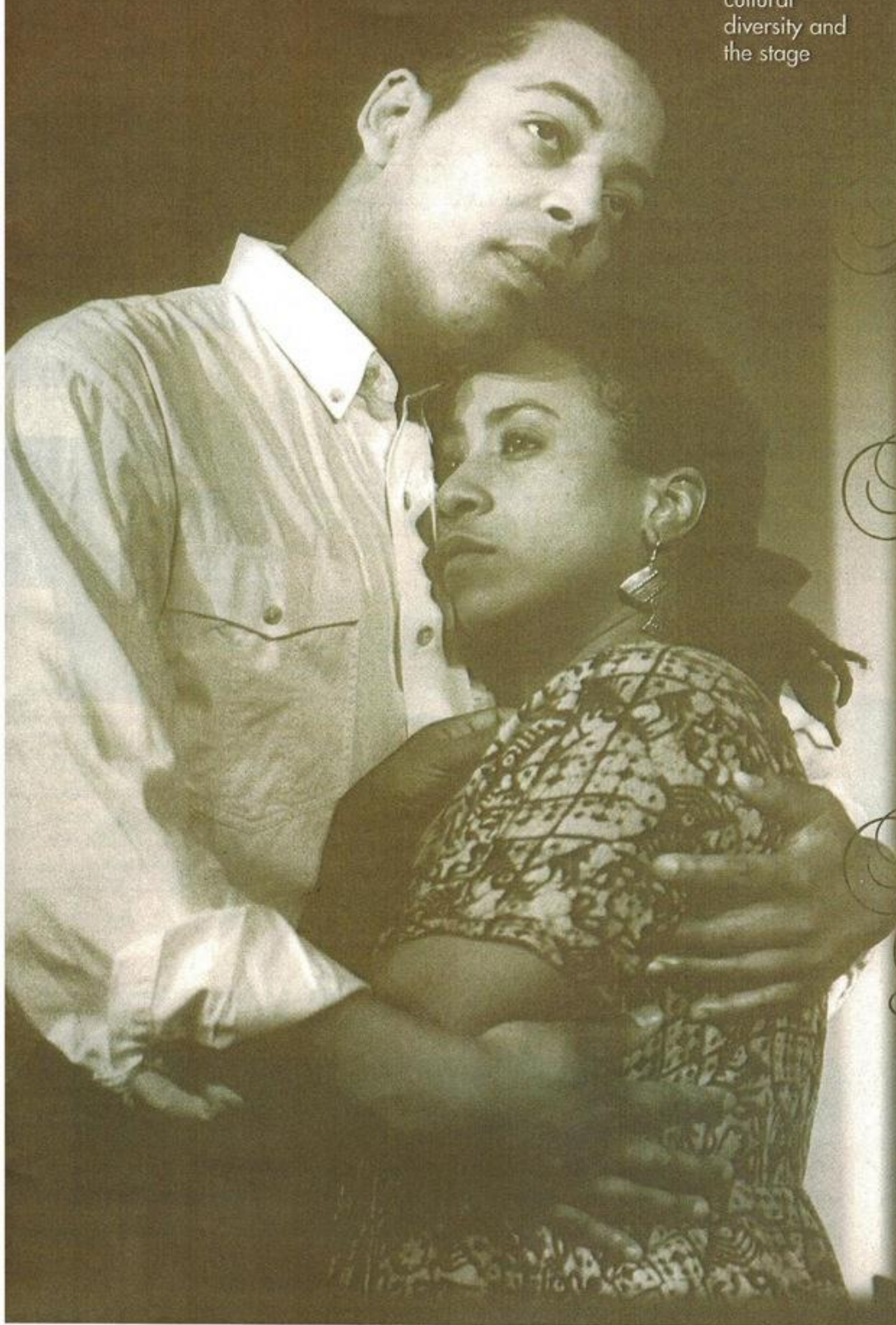


alt. theatre

vol.1, no.2 November 1998

cultural
diversity and
the stage



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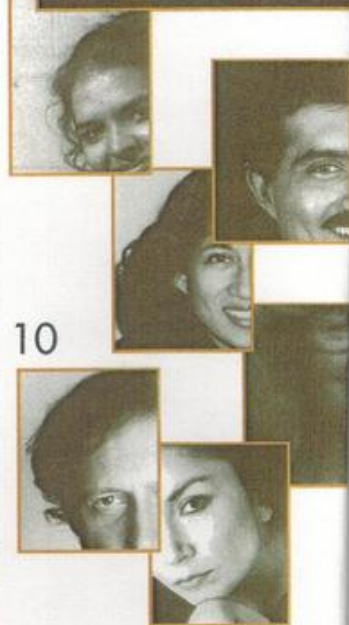
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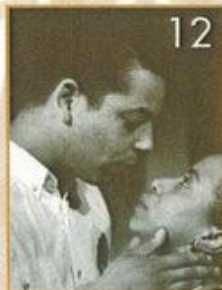
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Editorial

Culture, Change and the Community

The nation wide response to the first issue of **alt.theatre** was overwhelming. Artists, artistic directors, scholars of cultural studies and other interested readers responded enthusiastically to the publication. Many, particularly those from the artistic community, subscribed to the magazine and have recommended it to their friends. And, most heartening, many of you took time to call, e-mail or write letters with your feedback. On behalf of all of us involved in **alt.theatre**, our sincere thanks; we promise to take your suggestions very seriously.

The enthusiastic response from our readers confirmed that such a publication was long overdue. But more importantly, it affirmed that as a country we are willing to engage in a debate that attempts to renew and revise our understanding of a changing Canada. Over the last two decades we have begun to see the changing composition of our communities on our stages. Thanks mainly to the untiring efforts of minority and ethnic artists, Canadian theatre has placed issues of representation, authenticity, art-form and cultural politics at centre stage.

The very real challenge ahead is in not merely observing, but in understanding and respecting the reasons behind change. This does not mean accepting change for its own sake. To the contrary, it means to objectively analyse, criticize, and restructure our institutions to advance these changes for the collective good of our constituent communities – and their artists. Such a program is the next logical step for a country like Canada, which already acknowledges itself as a pluralistic, heterogeneous and, of late, a multicultural society. But it also challenges us to analyze and criticize our theatre scene in the face of this changing reality, in that it permits us a constructive opportunity to question as well as applaud the status quo.

We invite you to join us in our quest to reify the vision by contributing your voice to the dialogue, in the form of analytical articles addressing the critical issues facing performance production today, and in reviews of theatrical events in your community. We especially welcome your responses to the diverse opinions expressed in those articles and reviews through your Letters to the Editor.

Now, the major task before art funding bodies is in devising a system that is equitable racially, culturally and artistically; one that prevents tokenism while responding to change. Such concerns have highlighted questions of authenticity and representation to which there are no easy answers. But undeniably the starting point is in dialogue. We must discuss, as a community, from a standpoint where we neither distance ourselves from the dominant cultures nor insulate ourselves within our own cultural heritages.

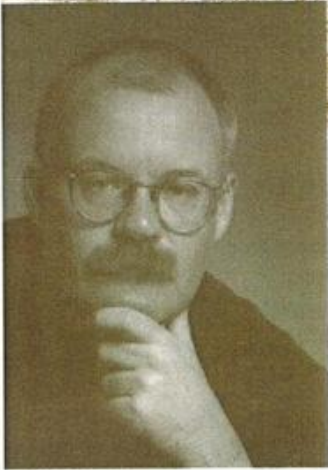
A debate from such a standpoint is not only important but inevitable if Canada is to survive undivided. The never ending constitutional crisis has revealed internal dissension within the dominant cultures. It has made us question the traditional notion of a bi-cultural, English/French division of Canada. But most importantly, it has reenforced the need to redefine our cultural fabric. By actively redefining Canadian culture through our art, we make it harder for funding institutions to accede to bi-culturalism, and make it easier to anticipate a multicultural, multiracial and multilingual vision of Canada.

Our desire, through the voices represented in the pages of **alt.theatre**, is to promote that vision. A vision that acknowledges the primacy of the First Nations peoples, their culture and their art, while embracing the diversity that centuries of immigration has ensured.

Rahul Varma

Seeing White

Robert Wallace



"Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living."

Bertholt Brecht, *On Theatre*

Riding the Toronto subway, I notice an advertising campaign for a popular radio station that features contemporary rock music. The station is called the Edge. Its campaign foregrounds dozens of photographs of famous Western rock stars in illuminated spaces running the

Although the meanings of signs are arbitrary, they never are unmotivated; indeed, they are profoundly affected by the values and beliefs that people use to make them.

length of the subway car. All are identified by names underneath their portraits – Alanis Morissette, Kurt Cobain, Sarah MacLachlan, etc. – which is necessary because, despite their celebrity, most are unrecognizable in their pictures. The cause of this ignominy is the campaign's gimmick: the photographs resemble reprints from high school year books. The subway car is sparsely occupied – allowing me to notice a young South Asian man sitting directly to my left. He also examines the pictures across the aisle, slowly moving his eyes along the black and white portraits to consider each one in turn. Suddenly, he jumps up and crosses the aisle to take a seat underneath the ads. I watch his reflection in the darkened window of the speeding train. Is he upset by the ads? By my noticing him? His expression offers me no signs. I return to the faces above his head. Yes, they share more than youth in common. All are white. A quick survey of the other passengers in the car confirms the insult of this homogeneity; further, it allows me to theorize the ideological significance of the photographs and their accompanying slogan. Of the 15 or so subway riders, only one person besides me is white. The advertising slogan reads: "Everyone has some edge in them."

In his ground-breaking studies of popular culture, Roland Barthes builds on the premise that a sign "is the external, material expression of the social conflicts to which it bears witness" (Barthes 34). Signs are always

social, he contends, for they are created and interpreted in specific cultural contexts. Although the meanings of signs are arbitrary, they never are unmotivated; indeed, they are profoundly affected by the values and beliefs that people use to make them. In his useful survey *Theory/Theatre*, Mark Fortier, a professor at the University of Winnipeg, links Barthes' theories of the sign with *gestus*, the theatrical technique developed by Bertolt Brecht for his Epic theatre during the 1930s. Fortier argues that *gestus* also is social for its meanings do not inhere in signs but, rather, depend on the cultural conventions that an audience uses to decode them. To illustrate this idea, Fortier constructs a hypothetical scene: "Imagine," he begins, "being stopped for speeding by a member of the police." Fortier suggests that both the driver and officer in this scenario facilitate meaning by employing a variety of signs – specifically, the costumes, actions and demeanours they display. The police officer "approaches your car with an emotionless expression of authority and addresses you with a reserved, dominating correctness; you smile innocently, harmlessly and, sounding befuddled, address him/her deferentially as 'Officer.'" Fortier reasons that "each of these artificial behaviours is a sign indicating

the power relations and roles at play"(Fortier 24).

Fortier does more than connect *gestus* with sign in this example; he also illustrates how life, like theatre, utilizes signs to establish and maintain meaning. In Fortier's scenario, ordinary people use signs to represent authority and innocence. This parallels theatre where actors attempt similar transformations by using signs (*gestus*, in Brecht's plays) to signify the social and psychological conditions of the characters they play.

The power of signs resides in their ability to represent something else. This idea is unremarkable only until one considers its consequence – the pervasive desire in everyday life and much contemporary theatre to determine the right sign, the perfect sign, the sign that will represent something so effectively that it will be accepted as the thing itself. This desire leads not only to the proliferation of sophisticated advertising techniques in which commodities represent lifestyles; it also elevates signs to a phenomenological level where commodities equal lifestyles. "Calvin Klein is You."

Today, signs frequently are so powerful that people regard them as reality, not representation. Madonna is perceived as her image. News bites are received as facts. In this context, representation is easily misread as a "natural" phenomenon (becoming what Barthes calls the "doxa" of consensus), instead of being understood as a cultural construct. Ironically, as the mediation of signs

proliferates through television, movies and the Internet, representation is more completely overlooked. Or is it?

Near the beginning of his essay "White," Richard Dyer points out that "the norm too is constructed." Dyer, a British film critic and cultural theorist, uses "norm" to typify anything that "[carries] on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human" (Dyer 141). Dyer's aim in this essay is to analyze how Western societies construct white as a "norm" by examining a number of films. His analysis rests on the theory that the "property of whiteness to be everything and nothing[.]"



Above: Robert Wallace talking to Teesri Duniya actors at the Quebec Drama Festival.

is the source of its representational power" (Dyer 142).

For Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, cultural critics who also hail from Britain, Dyer's essay "inaugurates a paradigmatic shift" that displaces white as an epistemological category by calling into question its universalist character. "Whiteness," they write, "has secured universal consent to its hegemony as the 'norm' by masking its coercive force with the invisibility that marks off the Other (the pathologized, the disempowered, the dehumanized) as all too visible—'coloured'." Ironically, they point out, the "invisibility" of whiteness masks it as a category. Because of this "the white subject remains the central reference point in the power plays of multicultural policy. The burden of representation thus falls on the Other . . ." (Julien and Mercer 455).

With these comments in mind, I return to the photographs of white rock stars currently displayed in the Edge campaign. What do I make of these signs which purport that "everyone" has some edge? While the campaign invites many interpretations, one strikes me as pertinent to contemporary Canadian theatre.

The Edge campaign illustrates the construction of the white "norm" that Dyer, Julien and Mercer discuss. Someone chose the photographs that the campaign displays; inadvertently or not, this person (or agency) picked white representations to the exclusion of other possibilities. This construction of white, however, does not necessarily perpetuate its "normative" status; indeed, it can lead to its diminution. Oh, I am sure that many subway passengers will fail to notice the exclusionary violence of the ads: for them, whiteness will remain invisible, "the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being

human." But for many others, the choice will be not only conspicuous but wrong.

In Toronto, like many Western cities, white is becoming a minority colour. Although signs of whiteness still dominate Western imagery, they signify differently in this changing context. "We are all ethnically located," Stuart Hall reminds us (Hall quoted in Julien and Mercer 456). For those who see white as a representational construct, whiteness becomes an ethnicity like any other — except, of course, that it retains greater privilege. As more white people see white, however, the injustice of this inequity looms larger. And, slowly but surely, the burden of representation shifts its weight onto the backs of more and more people.

Ads in a Toronto subway car may seem disconnected from the practice of theatre in Canada. Because each is a form of representation, however, each speaks to the social conflicts to which it bears witness, to paraphrase Barthes' comment. As with all representation, theatre does more than express cultural values; it constitutes them as well. In this, theatre is like every form of representation: it is a sign of life. Inevitably, signs change. Do I still see rows of white faces lining Toronto stages and theatre seats? Yes, frequently. But I notice them, now, as do many people of all colours, including white. This is important, I think. For the ideological power of whiteness to be overcome, white must be recognized as a colour like any other, and it must be seen by white people first and foremost. Only then will everyone become more visible.

Robert Wallace is Professor of English and Theatre, and holds the Roberts Chair for Canadian Studies at York University.

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5 Positions

on the Importance
of Voice, Identity
and Otherness
in Canadian Culture

1. A primary difference between Canadian culture and American culture: Our neighbour is a great beast that would happily, if permitted, occupy us, devour us and who, in effect, is well on the way to doing just that through the ongoing and insidious infiltration of our cultural universe and our electronic media; through continuous and systemic artistic bombardment with images of American homogenized identity and iconography that is moribund and based on the "melting pot" theory of blending differences to eradicate Otherness.

Canadian culture has always presented itself as a shining example of the now hackneyed and somewhat suspect "mosaic" theory of cultural diversity through preservation of heritage. While Canada has been a country since 1867, our land and its indigenous people have existed for hundreds of years. At the beginning of the 16th century, the battles over ownership of our country began with the British and French explorers who

Our art reflects the way in which a chorus of blended yet discernible voices makes up the collective culture of our country. Even when that very chorus offers nothing but cacophony.

"discovered" Canada at around the same time as the "discovery" of the rest of North America and the Caribbean by European invaders, oh . . . I mean to say explorers. Our culture and our country is, in fact, a hybrid result of several hundred years of weaving together traditions and ideologies. Into what? Well, it certainly isn't a finely edged mosaic. Perhaps more like a faded tapestry complete with holes and fraying threads.

Like many of the countries of the world, we too have a history of occupation and colonization. Even today, we are a dominion of the British Empire. We have tried, throughout our history, and to varying degrees of success, to maintain the diversity and the sense of Otherness that determines our identity: for Canadians the question of survival has always been tied to this. Our art reflects the

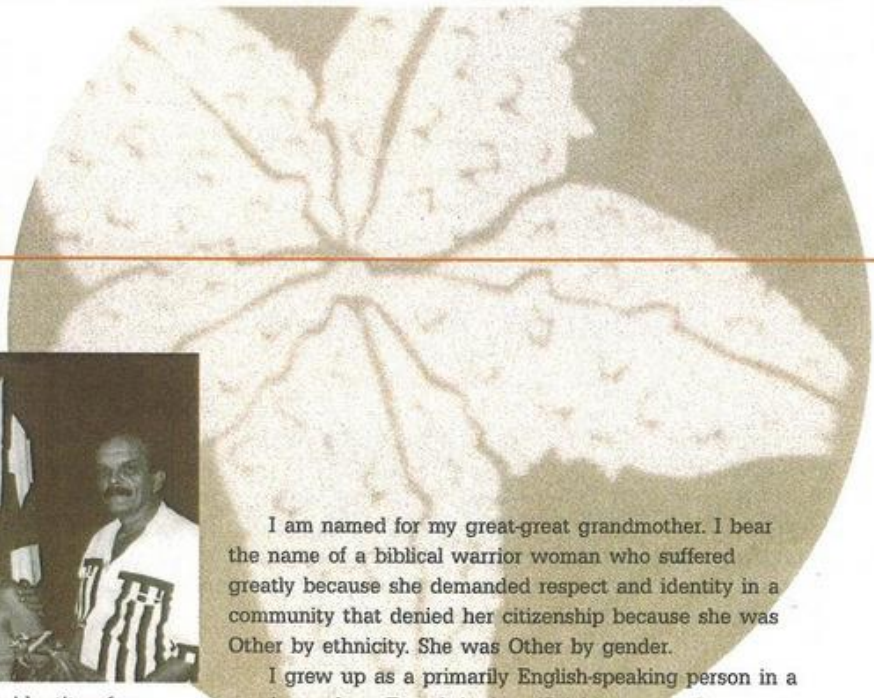


way in which a chorus of blended yet discernible voices makes up the collective culture of our country. Even when that very chorus offers nothing but cacophony.

2. Why do we continue to make theatre? Audiences continue to dwindle. Funding continues to evaporate. Because on some level we know that it is the last line of defence in the war against cultural obliteration. The battle we are fighting today in Canada (and make no mistake: it

is a battle) is one to ensure the survival of our culture and its cultural product, and that this cultural product be preserved not as a luxury, but as a fundamental human right.

3. In a conversation by the side of the National Highway in Cuba with a garlic vendor, I raised the issue of how culture exists when people are fighting to ensure their very survival, when foraging for food is a daily exercise and clothing and cleaning oneself a luxury. Without blinking, he answered, "Without culture we have nothing. Without culture, we have no face. No voice. And without those, how could we survive? It would mean nothing."



Voice is, undeniably, the core of the identity of an individual, and the basis of a national identity. Without knowing and articulating who we are, our art loses all meaning. Without our art, our identity loses all meaning. And without our art and our identity, what hope is there of survival on any level?

4. Otherness can refer to behaviour that is anti-social and sociopathic. It can also refer to non-conformists, outstanding creative thinkers, visionary philosophers; in

I learned to survive, creatively, intellectually and yet, it was only when I began to recognize my own face, to exercise my own voice, that I began to live.

short, to stars. Canadian culture is built on the need to excel in order to survive, to compete and win in order to succeed. We are often, especially in creative fields, encouraged to stand apart from the crowd, to be different. This embracing of Otherness requires two things: identifying and understanding what actually constitutes "the crowd", the majority; and identifying and exploring our position in relation to the majority. We are, even as Other, always present in a context. And context, or interactive landscape, shapes us as much as we shape it.

We are never simply "of" a community, we are the community. We are a culture by virtue of what is reflected back at us every time we look in a mirror, every time we look at each other, and every time we speak or listen.

5. My parents were born in Canada. My grandparents came from Eastern Europe in the early decades of the 20th century. One grandmother used to tell the story of how, as a young girl serving beer to soldiers in a tavern in a small village on the border of Poland and Russia, she never knew what language she would have to speak on any particular day. "Every time there was a pogrom, a border dispute," she would say, "we would have to change our nationality and language. We were Jews, so we were nothing. We had no voice, to them we had no faces. We had no identity."

I am named for my great-great grandmother. I bear the name of a biblical warrior woman who suffered greatly because she demanded respect and identity in a community that denied her citizenship because she was Other by ethnicity. She was Other by gender.

I grew up as a primarily English-speaking person in a province where French is the official language. I grew up as a Jew in a city where the majority of the population was Catholic. I grew up as a philosopher among pragmatists who valued probability above possibility. I have been The Other all my life. I learned to belong and to appear the same. I learned to survive, creatively, intellectually and yet, it was only when I began to recognize my own face, to exercise my own voice, that I began to live. Sometimes I think that Otherness is simply what we name the face that we ourselves refuse to recognize in the mirror.

Algerian writer Helene Cixous writes, "As soon as you let yourself be led beyond codes, your body filled with fear and with joys, the words diverge, you are no longer enclosed in the maps of social constructions, you no longer walk between walls . . . Now, listen to what your body hadn't dare let surface."

Judith Rudakoff is a dramaturg, playwright and theatre historian. She is Associate Professor of Theatre at York University where she coordinates the graduate and undergraduate Playwriting Programmes. Her play "Rum & Coca Cola" received a staged reading as part of Teesri Duniya Theatre's Fireworks Festival in September, 1998, directed by Eda Holmes and dramaturged by Shelley Tepperman.

Opposite Page: Judith Rudakoff and a painting by Cuban artist Julio Ferrer Guerra. Photo: Myles Warren

Above: Judith Rudakoff at a tribute event to honour her years of work with Teatro Escambray, La Macagua, Cuba, October 21, 1998. Photo: Myles Warren

La Légende du manuel sacré :

un métissage culturel fécond

Paul Levebre

Du 29 mai au 20 juin dernier, l'Espace libre a accueilli un spectacle tout à fait remarquable : *la Légende du manuel sacré*, un texte d'Olivier Choinière et Huy-Phong Doàn, mis en scène par Huy-Phong Doàn et produit par le nouveau collectif Voies obscures. Le spectacle se signalait par la richesse de sa fable, la force de sa théâtralité, mais aussi par le métissage culturel qui s'y manifestait, tant dans le processus créateur que dans le spectacle lui-même.

En fait, *la Légende du manuel sacré* est un remarquable exemple d'une œuvre d'art issue d'une culture migrante minoritaire, et qui travaille de l'intérieur la culture d'accueil majoritaire. Car ce spectacle n'était pas une reproduction ou une imitation d'un objet artistique issu de la culture d'origine, mais une création hybride, une œuvre ancrée dans l'ici et maintenant.

Pour comprendre le projet, il faut connaître un peu celui qui en est l'âme : Huy-Phong Doàn. Installé à Montréal depuis 1992, il a travaillé dans la plupart des théâtres francophones de la ville comme chorégraphe de combat. Il enseigne aussi les techniques de base des combats pour la scène à l'École nationale de théâtre, au Conservatoire d'Art dramatique et au Département de Théâtre de l'UQAM. Née au Viêt-nam, il y a vécu jusqu'à l'âge de quatorze ans ; dès l'âge de six ans, son père et ses oncles l'initient aux arts martiaux. Plus tard, à Paris, il étudie en droit et en histoire de l'art, tout en poursuivant son apprentissage des arts martiaux auprès de différents maîtres chinois résidant dans la capitale française. Il fréquente les milieux du cinéma et du théâtre où il commence à chorégrapier des combats. C'est alors qu'il rencontre la comédienne Louise Lavoie, qui l'entraîne à Montréal où, depuis six ans, il a signé les combats d'une trentaine de spectacles.

Des étudiants de l'École nationale de théâtre et du Conservatoire, passionnés par la profondeur humaine et la qualité technique de son enseignement ont commencé à travailler avec lui régulièrement après leurs études. Avec lui, ils font l'apprentissage d'une technique d'origine chinoise, le *wushu*, qui sert de base au travail physique et aux combats dans ce qu'on appelle couramment l'opéra de Pékin. Rapidement, ils se constituent en collectif et s'orientent, tout en poursuivant un entraînement régulier de *wushu*, vers la production d'un spectacle.

C'est Ariane Mnouchkine qui disait que « *le théâtre est oriental et que la dramaturgie est occidentale* » ; c'est sur cette façon de voir que s'est élaborée *la Légende du*

manuel sacré. Dans cette production, le travail corporel, le jeu, l'occupation de l'espace et la pensée scénographique ont été travaillés à partir de traditions orientales, en particulier celles originaires de Chine. Huy-Phong Doàn dit à ce propos : « *Le jeu [théâtral] est très proche du combat : c'est une intention qui part d'un point et se rend à un autre point très précisément. Au théâtre, les acteurs ont tendance à jouer avec le haut de leur corps tandis que dans les arts martiaux, il faut se connecter avec le sol, descendre le poids du corps : toute notre force vient de là.* » Étant donné l'importance accordée au corps dans le théâtre québécois, le travail de Huy-Phong Doàn tombait, tant pour les praticiens que le public, en terrain fertile. Quant à la mise en texte, elle a été confiée au jeune dramaturge Olivier Choinière (entre autres l'auteur de *le Bain des raines*, 1998, et de *les Trains*, 1998) dont la capacité à créer une parole poétique et des tensions dramatiques serrées a donné au spectacle une parole puissamment évocatrice.

C'est non seulement une théâtralité aux riches racines que Huy-Phong Doàn a apporté au théâtre québécois, mais un discours en porte-à-faux avec la pensée courante sur la violence qui, pour lui, « *fait partie de la vie* ». Car l'histoire de la pièce tourne autour d'un enchaînement de vengeances lié à la possession d'un manuel sacré qui rend invincible au combat celui qui le détient et en suit les enseignements. Huy-Phong Doàn précise : « *Le thème de la vengeance est quelque chose d'essentiel dans la culture asiatique. C'est une vertu en Asie. Si on ne venge pas nos proches, on est personne. En Occident, c'est l'inverse. Cette discordance sur les visions du monde et de la violence font qu'on a beaucoup de mal se rejoindre. Je m'intéresse de très près à la violence parce que je l'ai vécue au Viet-nam. Ici, je vois une attitude qui essaie de la nier.* » Il est vrai qu'à part Yvan

Bienvenue (en particulier dans *Joyeux Noël Julie !*), la pulsion à se venger de la mort d'un proche est peu abordée dans la dramaturgie sérieuse, laissant le champ libre sur cette question aux fictions cinématographiques américaines qui malheureusement la traitent de façon primaire. Mettant en jeu ce qui à la fois sépare et unit, d'une part, la violence et, d'autre part, l'amour, les liens du sang et la loyauté, *la Légende du manuel sacré* proposait des pistes de réflexions qui interdisaient toute conclusion simpliste.

Ce spectacle, qui alliait grâce et vigueur, ponctués de combats aussi spectaculaires que jouissifs, a remporté un beau succès critique et public. La présence, au sein de la distribution, de Jean-Pierre Ronfard (qui avec Huy-Phong Doàn avait mis en scène des contes traditionnels chinois à l'École nationale de théâtre) accentuait l'importance de la rencontre culturelle en jeu dans ce spectacle accueilli à l'Espace libre, montrant une fois de plus l'importance de ce lieu dans le développement du théâtre à Montréal.

La Légende du manuel sacré.
Texte de Huy-Phong Doàn et Olivier Choinière.
Mise en scène de Huy-Phong Doàn.
Musique : Mathieu Farhoud-Dionne.

Costumes : Vincent Lefèvre.
Éclairages et scénographie : Pierre Charbel-Massoud.
Maquillages : François Cyr.
Avec Catherine Allard, Caroline Binet, Claude Despins,
Marie-Hélène Fortin, Maxim Gaudette, Louise Lavoie,
Patricia Perez, Rodrigue Proteau, Jean-Pierre Ronfard
et Diego Thornton.
Une production du collectif les Voies Obscures
présentée à l'Espace libre du 29 mai au 20 juin 1998.

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.

La Légende du manuel sacré :

Fertile Cultural Crossing

Paul Levebre
Translation By André Loiselle

Last Spring, from 29 May to 20 June, the Espace Libre theatre presented remarkable show: "*La Légende du manuel sacré*" ("*The Legend of the Sacred Manual*"), by Olivier Choinière and Huy-Phong Doàn, directed by Huy-Phong Doàn and produced by the Voies Obscures collective. The depth of the story and the theatrical power of the performance were enriched by the cultural crossing that characterized both the creative process and the show itself.

"*La Légende*" is in fact a remarkable example of art emerging from a migrating, minority culture working within the dominant culture. This is not a production that emulates art from the original culture, but rather a hybrid creation rooted in the here and now.

To understand the project, one must know the person who gave it its soul: Huy-Phong Doàn. Living in Montreal since 1992, he worked in most Francophone theatres in town as a fight-scene choreographer. He also teaches basic fight techniques at the National Theatre School, at the Drama Conservatory and at the Drama Department of the Université du Québec à Montréal. He was born in

In this production, physical play, movement in space and stage design have been conceived in terms of Oriental, primarily Chinese, traditions.

Vietnam and lived there until the age of 14. He was only 6 when his father and uncles introduced him to the martial arts. He studied law and art history in Paris, while perfecting his martial art techniques with Chinese masters living in France. He also started working in film and theatre as a fight choreographer, and met actress Louise Lavoie, who brought him to Montréal where, over

the last 6 years, he has choreographed fights in over 30 shows.

Students from the National Theatre School and the Conservatory, inspired by his profoundly human and technically superior teaching, started working with him after graduation. With him they learned Chinese techniques such as the Wushu, the basic method behind the physical work used in the Peking Opera, and soon formed a collective troupe aimed at the production of shows.

Ariane Mnouchkine's notion that "Theatre is Oriental and drama is Occidental" is at the core of "*la Légende*". In this production, physical play, movement in space and stage design have been conceived in terms of Oriental, primarily Chinese, traditions. As Huy-Phong Doàn states: "Acting is close to fighting. It is an intention that starts at one point and goes toward another point with great precision. In the theatre, actors play only with the top of their bodies. In martial arts, one must be grounded; that's where our strength comes from." Given Québec theatre's

interest in the body, Huy-Phong Doàn's work appealed to both practitioners and the public. As for the writing of the text itself, young playwright Olivier Choinière (author of "*Bain des rains*" [1998] and "*Les Trains*" [1998]) contributed his talent for poetic language and tightly-knit dramatic conflict to create a powerfully evocative spectacle.

Huy-Phong Doan brought to Québec theatre not only a stage practice rooted in ancient traditions, but also a discourse which counterpoints contemporary ideas about violence which, for him, "is part of life." The play revolves around a web of revenge connected to the possession of the Sacred Manual which renders invincible whoever owns it. Huy-Phong Doan explains: "The revenge theme is central to Asian culture. It is a virtue in Asia to avenge your near and dear ones. Otherwise you are nobody. In the West it is the opposite. Because of these conflicting views of the world and vengeance, it is difficult to communicate. I'm interested in violence because I experienced it in Vietnam. Here, the attitude is to ignore it."

Except for Yvan Bienvenue, (especially in "*Joyeux Noël Julie!*"), few serious dramatists have dealt with the impulsion to avenge the death of a loved one, leaving this theme in the hands of American fiction filmmakers who treat in a most primitive way. Setting in motion what simultaneously unites and separates, violence on the one hand and love on the other, blood relations and loyalty, "*la Légende*" explores avenues of reflection which defy simplistic conclusions. This performance, which combined grace and vigour, interspersed with spectacular fights, enjoyed critical and popular success. The performance of Jean Pierre Ronfard (who co-directed "*Le*

Rêve du papillon" ["The Butterfly's Dream"] with Huy-Pong Doan at the National Theatre School), emphasized the theme of cross-cultural meeting on the stage of Espace Libre, this crucial space in the development of theatre in Montreal.

"*La Légende du manuel sacré*": written by Huy-Phong Doan and Olivier Choinière.

Directed by Huy-Phong Doan.

Music by Mathieu Farhoud-Dionne.

Costumes by Vincent Lefèvre.

Set design and lighting by Pierre Charbel-Massoud.

Make-up by François Cyr.

Cast: Chaterine Allard, Caroline Binet, Claude Despins, Marie-Hélène Fortin, Maxim Gaudette, Louise Lavoie, Patricia Peres, Rodrigue Proteau, Jean-Pierre Ronfard and Diego Thornton.

Produced by the Voies Obscures collective and Performed at l'Espace Libre from 29 May to 20 June 1998.

André Loiselle teaches Canadian cinema and Film Historiography at the School for Studies in Art and Culture, Carleton University. He has published numerous articles on Canadian and Québec film and drama, and is the author of a forthcoming book on Anne Claire Poirier's controversial film-essay on rape, 'Mourir a tue-tete'.

Fireworks

a Cross-cultural Creation

dipti gupta and Barbara Rockburn

In the pages of *alt.theatre*, we celebrate the progress and discuss the obstacles in the development of a truly multi-cultural theatrical community in Canada. We believe all art springs from cultural consciousness, and that such a consciousness is seminally borne of one's communal environment. Inherently, though, one's community can insulate as much as it nourishes. Thus many artists from non-white, non-European, and non-dominant cultures remain deeply rooted in their respective communities. And good intentions notwithstanding, cultural institutions until very recently had kept these artists and their communities deprived and marginalized.

Diversity, and the vital link between art, culture and the community is at last being recognised and appreciated; and the art of the "other" is beginning to be more widely available to a larger audience. But in the final

analysis, it is not the recognition of cultural diversity but the quality of the product that will determine its impact. Which, of course raises the question; who is to be the



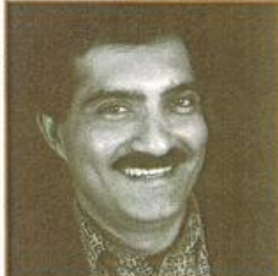
judge of quality? This presents a unique challenge to mainstream artists who traditionally have been the judges of art and value in Canada. The task before them is to judge, not through North American and European conventions, but rather, with an openness to diverse theatrical forms and innovations within the artistic parameters set by those "other" cultures.

The members of the Board of Directors of **Teesri Duniya** believe that this process must begin with the playwrights. In the face of slow institutional inclusion, some diasporic playwrights have opted for the legitimacy of the mainstream, while others have taken more solitary approaches without worrying about consequences. But perhaps the artists of those "other" cultures should avoid both traditional and insular approaches in order to address institutional failure to embrace inclusion. Some of the most profound works have been by artists who have countered cultural hegemony by going beyond the confines of their own culture(s) to write about others' (vis. George Rigas' *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*). If the theatre of the "other" is to survive and thrive, we ought to support writers who write for and about their own, as well as other communities.



of historicising experiences of culture and community through the work of art – is based on the true story of ten native women who were found dead in Vancouver's "Skid Row" with abnormally high blood alcohol levels. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* was co-produced with Playwrights' Workshop Montreal.

Teesri Duniya's cross-cultural play development program, **Fireworks**, recently presented a festival of staged readings of plays by writers from across the country whose work underlines Canada's artistic and cultural diversity. It brought together five playwrights, their directors, dramaturges, choreographers and over thirty-five actors from Native, ethnic and mainstream communities. **Fireworks** utilized the best of what the mainstream has to offer, even as all five playwrights maintained their grounding in the specifics of their communities. All plays were dramaturged by Shelley Tepperman.



Fireworks concluded with *Broken Ground* by Kapil Bawa under the direction of Paulina B. Abarca. *Broken Ground* relates the story of a young Muslim woman, a former courtesan, trying to rebuild her life in the midst of rising nationalist sentiment and religious strife between Hindus and Muslims in India.

Fireworks brought together playwrights and directors from different cultural heritages, from discreet cultural communities and from the mainstream. These alliances broke apart group insularity and replaced it with forging of creative cooperation, while providing a rare theatrical event for appreciative Montréal audiences. The success of **Fireworks** demonstrated that creative networking across cultures, communities, and organizations can cultivate critical sensibilities about each other and about the country we live in.



Fireworks kicked off with Stephen Orlov's latest play *Sperm Count*, directed by Arthur Milner. Orlov juggled humour and pathos in depicting a liberal Jewish man, who, while being treated for infertility by a Palestinian urologist must deal with the racism of his elderly father and ultimately come to acknowledge his own.



Teesri Duniya invites writers to its cross-cultural play development program.

Next was *Rum and Coca Cola* by nationally known playwright/dramaturge Judith Rudakoff and directed by Eda Holmes. In *Rum and Coca Cola*, Judith Rudakoff presents two views of Cuba: those of an American tourist and of a Cuban transvestite who must depend on the kindness of tourists to make ends meet. The play encourages us to see Cuba and the Cuban community of Canada from a perspective that is rare in North America.



Padma Vishwanathan's *House Of Sacred Cows* was directed by Svetlana Zylín. The play satirically depicts the meeting of East and West that occurs when a graduate student from India, who is frequently visited by the ghosts of his dead parents, moves into a housing co-op whose members are struggling to live according to social democratic ideals.

Fireworks showcased *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* by award winning Metis playwright and actress Marie Clements, directed by Paula Danckert with assistance from Myrna Silkerk. The play – a profound example

Opposite Page: Barbara Rockburn
Top to Bottom: dipti gupta, Kapil Bawa,
Padma Vishwanathan,
Marie Clements, Stephen Orlov

dipti gupta is the President of the Teesri Duniya Theatre and is pursuing a Doctoral degree in Communications at McGill University.

Barbara Rockburn is a Contributing Editor of *alt.theatre* and the Editor of the Film Studies Association of Canada Newsletter.

Djanet Sears:

Standing on the Shoulders of Her Ancestors

An Annotated Interview with judy mckinley

Djanet Sears - playwright, director, actor - uses her calling and role as an African-Canadian artist to bring together and participate in communities of artists; to support emerging artists; and to bring to light the artists of African heritage upon whose shoulders she stands, and of whom we know much less than we should. She does this in addition to/as part of her creation of art. Her art tells captivating stories and is beautifully crafted, and portrays within it peoples of African descent. It is her part in ensuring that present and future generations of Black people have images and resources that inspire and open possibilities to them, options she had to forge for herself. To me this speaks to the holistic role - and I would suggest responsibility - of the artist, a role that finds its roots in many of our 'multi-cultural' heritages.



This page: For left, judy mckinley, left, Djanet Sears. Photo: Hasmi Giakouris

Following Page: Scene from Harlem Duet. Photography: Cylla Van Tiedemann

"# 17: Acting is a craft I am called to by nature . . ." From *Notes From A Coloured Girl: 32 Reasons Why I Write For The Theatre* by Djanet Sears.

mckinley: You're so multi-talented (she sings, acts, directs, writes, in film and in theatre) so when people ask you what you do . . .

Sears: Write. But they don't have to be sorted out. I work as I have the urge or opportunity.

Sears: Acting makes me think.

Djanet was born in England, her family moved to Canada. She always had a bent for performing. There was no drama club at her high school, so she started one. Later on, despite her natural English accent and the club and her talent, she didn't get the lead role in *My Fair Lady*. This she didn't understand. Later she went to York for theatre school. One year, several women students were left out of the main stage production. Along came Michelle Collison (now George), fresh from Paris and working with Peter Brooks. Together they created a piece - *Shakes A Pear Tree* - all women and clown work.

Sears: It was the best piece of theatre at York that year. It was the first time I'd had some collaborative participation in the initial creative work.

She took a play writing course.

17 continued: ". . . writing is a craft that I have chosen to nurture."

On her wall, beside her desk, Langston Hughes' poem, part of # 32:

Someday, somebody'll
stand up and talk about me,
and write about me -
Black and beautiful
and sing about me,
and put plays on about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!
Yes, It'll be me.

Sears: My participation in the art form [as a black woman and artist] was so dependent on others.

And so she decided: "It'll be me." *Afrika Solo*, which she wrote and starred in was first produced in 1987, published in 1990 and won several awards. It is the journey of a young Canadian woman of African descent to Africa and to herself. It was the first published Canadian play by a writer of African descent. I first read *Afrika Solo* curled up in a tent in Algonquin, seeking to discover her, finding also me . . .

mckinley: . . . Something that can inspire an emerging artist . . . ?

Sears: Write. Writing is the first creative impulse.

She cites musicians and screenplays and scripts as examples.

Djanet Sears' influences.

Langston Hughes' poems

Toni Morrison

Terry McMillan

Douglas Adams

James Baldwin

Ntozake Shange

Lorraine Hansberry

Adrian Kennedy

Harold Pinter

Amiri Baraka

Sonia Sanchez.

Jane Cortez

sides, and I blast them out and turn them into characters.

Politics is not merely an idea for me - I can discuss it, but I can't pretend that race isn't emotional for me - it's about my personal life. I am not a woman who happens to be black, just as I am not a black who happens to be a woman. I am both - all of that and more. People who see my plays as politics have no true personal relationship or experience with the issues.

Many of these are artists are pioneers who brought the their ideas of race into the consciousness of their writing (See Influences).

mckinley: What do you think of all those awards?

Sears: I think awards are lucky. Wonderful to receive - especially the money. The real fear is that you will

take yourself as seriously as other people would take you and you think 'Oh, that means I am really good'. It means people liked the last play. I really want people to like it, I want to like it - but I don't say I'm good. I say: I'm finished, I like this,

Djanet's Reason # 12:

An old West African proverb states, that as a people, we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors.

this is to my taste - good is all relative.

When I die, I don't just want to be known by my body of work.

That's only a part

of me. Wherever my important relationships are is where most of me will be.

Before the second opening of Harlem Duet, the first play by a woman of African descent at Canadian Stage,

Djanet initiates and curates, along with ahdri zhino mandiela and Alison Sealy-Smith, an exhibition of photos in the lobby, scenes from black theatre productions in Canada. In the midst of preparations for opening and the book launch for Harlem Duet, she ensures that this happens. The sentiment is inescapable: Harlem is not the only one.



Sears: Where are we going in the next century? [Art] is a preserver and reflection of culture. When we want to find out about a time and people, we look at the painting, the writing, the pottery of that particular culture . . .

Africans were kidnapped. 400 years later, they see themselves as North Americans . . . what has survived has often been merged into the mainstream. Without [this history] there wouldn't be jazz, blues, rock . . . movement, dance, American Vaudeville . . . Outside of our natural land [we] have survived and brought a cultural context from our original home. . . .

In the weeks since this interview was originally conducted, and after the article was written, Djanet Sears was awarded the 1998 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama for *Harlem Duet*. - Ed.

black theatre in this country. I'd be one of twenty, I'm sure. There have been about four different groups over the years who've tried to erect this kind of arts centre in Toronto - well we're ready . . . And waiting for a gift, of money, of a building. If someone has a building and wants to give it to us . . .

At least in Canada we will continue to sing loudly - but [what] has changed are the voices in the choir, and [the] harmonies - we are not one monolithic point of view" I would love to be a founding member of a national

Djanet Sears is playwright and director of the multiple Dora Award winning production of her most recent stage play, *Harlem Duet*; Nightwood Theatre, producing. *Harlem Duet* won Dora Mavor Moore Awards for: Outstanding New Play, Outstanding Direction, Outstanding Production and Outstanding Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role (for Alison Sealy-Smith). Djanet is also winner of a 1998 Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award, the recipient of a Harry Jerome Award for Excellence in the Cultural Industries, and a Phenomenal Woman of the Arts Award from the XCLuSV Group.

Harlem Duet, is the sequel to *Afrika Solo*, (Sister Vision Press, 1990), Canada's first published stage play by a person of African descent. This groundbreaking work, played to critical acclaim both at Toronto's Factory Theatre Studio, and Ottawa's Great Canadian Theatre Company. *Afrika Solo* was also adapted for CBC Radio, where it took a first prize at the International Major Armstrong Awards, and a silver prize at the International Radio Festival Of New York.

A Dora Award nominated stage performer, as well as a Gemini Award nominated screen actor, Djanet is the performer of her most successful play *Afrika Solo*. She also co-starred in the Canadian feature Film, *Milk and Honey*, and starred in the Canadian motion picture, *April 01*. Djanet is also a contributing author in several published works.

Judy McKinley worked on both of the Toronto based productions of *Harlem Duet* as Production Dramaturge/Assistant to the Director. She is currently Associate Artist with Nightwood Theatre and is working on *Brown Girl in the Ring* which workshopped as part of Nightwood's Groundswell Play Development program. She is Toronto-based Jamaican born.

For Sense and Transcendence:

The Theatre of Wajdi Mouawad

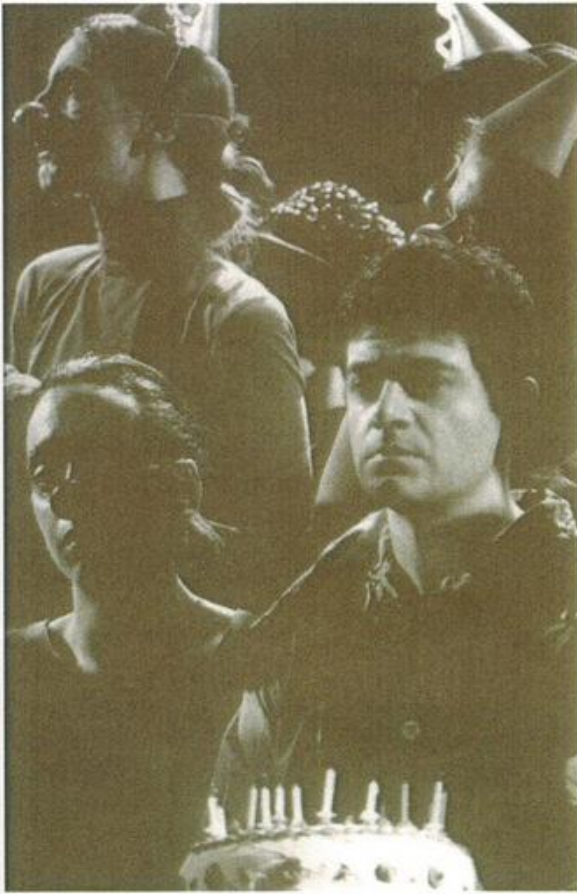
The Montreal Francophone theatre season will have been marked by the exceptional personality of playwright, director and actor Wajdi Mouawad, whose work, discovered this year by the general public, is reaching maturity. Last spring, *Littoral*, which he wrote, directed and produced, was presented as part of the Festival de théâtre des Amériques. In January, he directed *Trainspotting* at Théâtre de Quat'Sous and *Sophocle's Oedipus Roi* (*Oedipus Rex*) at Théâtre Denise Pelletier. In March, Théâtre du Nouveau Monde staged his adaptation of Cervantès' *Don Quichotte*. Finally, in May, he produced and directed his very first play, *Willy Protagoras enfermé dans les toilettes*, which he wrote while still a student. Not only were these plays acclaimed by audiences and critics

Paul Lefebvre
(translated by Ken McDonough)

alike, but their success underlined a new trend: this brand of theatre, which is highly entertaining yet the opposite extreme of entertainment, showed that audiences are eager for plays where the word plays a central role. Wajdi Mouawad was born in Lebanon in 1968. When he was eight, he and his family fled the war, taking refuge in France. He moved to Montreal at the age of 14 and graduated from the National Theatre School's acting program in 1991.

His first play, *Willy Protagoras enfermé dans les toilettes*, tells the story of a teenager who, through a radical gesture, tries to end the Homeric struggle between two families for possession of an apartment.

The first of his plays to be staged was *Partie de cache-cache entre deux Tchécoslovaques au début du siècle*, a fictional biography of Kafka. This was followed by *Journée de noces chez les Cromagnons* (1993), the story of a family that organizes a narcoleptic daughter's wedding—in spite of there being no fiancé!



the spectator accesses meaning through the integration of the various facets of a discourse.

The theatre of Wajdi Mouawad, with its underlying quest for transcendence, arranges itself very clearly on the side of meaning. It attempts to propose an alternative to intelligent irony and the deconstruction of speech. What the playwright René-Daniel Dubois calls "militant nihilism." This search for meaning is what the growing audience of Wajdi Mouawad is sensitive to. Yet, it is a dramaturgy that does not impose anything and is never manipulative.

The presentation of *Willy Protogoras enrôlé dans les toilettes*, by Wajdi Mouawad's own admission, signals the end of a first cycle. This cycle was based on refusal and, more specifically, the refusal to win at all costs. Mouawad's theatre is centered around characters who, by losing, win. His plays, by proposing this new paradigm, as opposed to the credo of neo-liberalism, are attracting audiences happy to (re)discover a demanding form of theatre that doesn't just entertain, but also makes us think.

Paul Lefebvre is a director and translator. He teaches at the National Theatre School and is Literary Director at Théâtre Denise Pellerier.

Left: A scene from *Willy Protogoras enrôlé dans les toilettes*. Pictured: Chantal Dumoulin, Mireille Naggar and Wajdi Mouawad. Photo taken by Pascal Sanchez.

In 1995, he wrote *Alphonse*, a monologue by a child who relates his experience of running away. His next work, *Les Mains d'Edwige au moment de la naissance* (1996), is about a young girl who refuses to believe her sister is dead, and, finally, *Littoral* (1997) recounts a son's quest for a place to bury his father, a subject long close to the playwright's heart.

Wajdi Mouawad's theatre is a theatre of the word. Words proliferate, resound, and are king. (Which isn't to say his theatre does not require a body—quite the opposite.) The language is devoid of realism and ranges across all levels, from the most utterly banal to the most keenly poetic. When he directs his own work, he is primarily concerned with casting these words at the audience, and the play is always acted with the audience in mind. Indeed, Mouawad isn't particularly interested in psychological realism; in spite of the way things first appear, when characters are talking, the target is as much the audience as each other. Wajdi Mouawad writes his plays such that

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